

Observing Children's Play

by Margaret Cooney

Diane, an early childhood education teacher, wonders why some children in her inclusive prekindergarten classroom can enter ongoing play and why others have such difficulty. She thinks the children who receive special education services have more problems with this than the other children. Diane hypothesizes to her director that if she could help all the children with their play entry skills, the social skills level of the entire group would improve. Diane further speculates that more advanced social skills would positively impact the children's cognitive, language, affective, and physical development. (Oglietti, 1997)

In order for Diane to help the children in her classroom with their play entry skills, she will first have to spend some time observing their play. She needs to know where they are developmentally, what play entry strategies they are using, and which ones result in successful bids. Then she can reinforce the successful strategies and teach them directly or indirectly to the children in her classroom.

This entire process depends upon Diane's ability to collect useful observation records of the children at play. She will need guidance and support from her director to master observation and recording skills.

Observing and Recording Play Benefits Children

Communicating the value of observing and recording children's play in order to benefit the children themselves is an important contribution her director can make to Diane's plan. According to our profession, observation is the early childhood teacher's most effective means of assessment (NAEYC, 1988; NAEYC/



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NAECS, 1991). Teachers can use it in the following ways.

■ **Informing the curriculum.** Using observation to inform the curriculum is a developmentally appropriate practice. It tells the teacher where the children are developmentally, both as a group and as individuals. It builds teacher understandings about how the children themselves see their world. It provides the teacher with valuable information about the children's interest and becomes fuel for the emergent curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Recalling the vignette describing Diane's goal, let's examine how she used observation to inform the curriculum.

Diane videotaped the children playing in order to make wise decisions about curricular activities to meet her social development goal. She viewed the videotapes and identified successful play entry behaviors. Diane discovered that the children who watched play before entering were more successful. She also observed that the children who were more persistent, that is, tried more than one time with more than one strategy, were most successful. Diane confessed her surprise that children responded more favorably to nonverbal strategies than the "use your words and ask if you can play" strategy typically recommended by teachers! Diane planned some puppetry curriculum activities for her circle time. She based these activities on what she learned about successful social skills during play. Diane also facilitated children's entry into play groups when they needed help. (Oglietti, 1997)

As a result of observing, the teacher can make wise decisions about curriculum activities to effectively meet her goals. She learns how to facilitate the children's development during play and during the other daily activities.

■ **Communicating with parents.** Using observations as a basis for talking with parents creates opportunities for both parents and teachers to share what the child can do at home and at school. As they take turns sharing stories based on their observations, a more realistic picture of the child is painted. Thus, the parent-teacher partnership, designed to benefit the child's growth and development, is born. The outcome solves an age-old problem of discrepancy between parent and teacher perspectives regarding what the child can and cannot do. When the competency is grounded in a specific context, it is better understood. Both informal and formal conferences between parents and teachers based upon observation benefit the child by providing uniformity in his life.

■ **Identifying children with special needs.** Observation and recording

techniques used routinely by the teacher can provide important and specific data to support the teacher's impression of a child's needs. Through observation of children at play, the experienced observer gains insights into all areas of child development. For example, Diane's videotaped observations allowed her to watch specific children at play to determine their skill at entering play groups. During this process, Diane noticed that two of the children consistently utilized two play entry strategies that were unsuccessful. They disrupted the ongoing play and seemed unaware of peer emotions. These observations provided important information to Diane about how to help the two children learn successful play entry strategies.

Because children's play tends to reveal their highest levels of development, observing them during play gives their teacher a more accurate view of their competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers have reported surprise upon watching videotaped clips of children in their program identified with special needs who were successfully demonstrating skills from their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) during play (A. Sullivan, personal communication, August 10, 1997). For example, a male child with an identified delay in personal-social skill development demonstrated social skills while playing with a female play partner that were considered beyond his competence level by the team who diagnosed him. When given the freedom to play in a natural setting with a self-chosen play partner, he performed "above his head."

Effective observation techniques are powerful tools available to early childhood teachers for purposes of curriculum planning, communicating with parents, and identifying children with special needs. The power of observation lies in the positive impact it can have on children.

How to Observe and Record

There are many strategies for recording children at play. For example, Diane chose to do a running record of children entering play twice a week at playtime using videotaped recordings. Another teacher may use anecdotal records as a form of recording his observations of children's object substitution during dramatic play. Before choosing the best observation and recording strategy, it is necessary to take the following steps:

■ **Choose a naturalistic, familiar, and informal setting.** One reason observation is so effective is that it allows children to be assessed during their natural play activities rather than in a contrived environment. The chil-



Strategies for Observing and Recording Children at Play.

Strategies

Narratives — diary description, anecdotal record, running record, specimen description, log/journal

Time Sampling

Event Sampling

Modified Child Study — checklist, rating scale, shadow study

Definitions

record of what is happening within the observation's focus

record of what happens within a given period of time, using tallies or codes to monitor frequency of specific behaviors

record of an event and what happens before and after, recorded while it is taking place

variety of techniques originally used by researchers and adapted by teachers for classroom use

dren are doing what they would normally be doing. Furthermore, they are being observed by a familiar adult, rather than an outside person without an established relationship. The teacher, therefore, is in an ideal position to get an accurate view of children's competence, needs, and interests.

■ **Define the purpose.** Diane's purpose in observing was to design a curriculum that would build upon children's social skills. There are other purposes for observing children at play. Perhaps the teacher wants to find out the children's interests in order to plan meaningful projects or units. It is important to have a purpose in mind, even though the observation records can be used in multiple ways. Having a focus helps the teacher know what to record and when to record.

■ **Plan the time.** Deciding upon the times to observe and record is the teacher's next task. What are the best times to observe in light of the purpose? When can the teacher have some time to observe without too many interruptions? Times during the day or week when the children are engaged in child initiated activities often work best. Perhaps there is a teacher's assistant or parent available at certain times during the week.

■ **Choose a strategy.** Observations require a recording strategy; simply relying on memory of observations is not effective. Additionally, there must be a clean separation of objective (the details of activity and context) and subjective data (observer's interpretations). Strategies can be divided into four main types (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1992). Each strategy has advantages and disadvantages and is utilized for its effectiveness in meeting the purpose of observing. The

table above contains the strategies and their definitions. Although these strategies are divided into four types, I believe they overlap one another when applied in the classroom setting. The teacher learns to trust herself to adapt the chosen strategy to meet her particular purposes. For example, I favor anecdotal records for several reasons. First, they yield specific information, yet are opened-ended and flexible. This open-ended attribute allows for unexpected findings to emerge. And second, anecdotal records are a realistic strategy for a busy and overextended teacher.

Imagine that you are a teacher of a five year old group of children. You are collecting data on their interests in order to select a class project responsive to the children (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). After recording anecdotal records for two weeks, you and your aide both read over the data and find that the children as a group have an interest in cats, both domestic and wild. You decide to launch a project that explores cat characteristics and habitats. The following anecdotal record is a sample:

Mark arrives at school about 8:00 am with his father. He runs up to Dan at the puzzle table and says, "Look, Dan! My dad brought me a tiger shirt from the San Diego Zoo." Dan replies, "So... I have a cheetah poster in my bedroom." (10/02/97)

Each anecdotal record is dated and contains the specific information surrounding the incident in which an interest is expressed or explored. Additional information beyond the children's interests, such as special friendships, is revealed through the anecdotal record approach.



Observing and Recording Play Promotes the Teacher-As-Researcher Role

Observations of children have the potential to contribute to the field by affirming or calling established practice into question. For example, Diane's play entry study affirmed the notion that play entry skills were linked to social competence. Her finding that the successful bids resulted from nonverbal observing and modeling strategies called into question the "ask if you can play" practice recommended in the literature.

Observing can be thought of as a form of data collection for the teacher who is engaging in research. Literally thousands of questions about young children's play remain unanswered. Just as Diane posed her question about play entry strategies, other teachers can pursue answers to their research questions by observing and recording children at play. With time and practice, Diane grew to see herself as a teacher researcher. In fact, she found a new question emerged from her play entry study. Now she wants to look at how children sustain play. The teacher-as-researcher cycle involves asking the question, observing and recording to find the answer, reflecting on the findings, and then generating a new question to explore.

Vivian Paley, a kindergarten teacher in the Chicago Lab School for many years, is an excellent model for the teacher-as-researcher concept in preschool and kindergarten. She has written nine books about young children at play. Each book answers a different question but all are aimed at documenting the child's way of thinking or the child's perspective. Paley recognized that through careful observation of children, her curriculum could become more child centered. Her book, *You can't say you can't play* (1992) is the story of her approach to the phenomenon of peer rejection in play.

Teacher researchers have the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge about young children's play. They have access to the children who are playing in a naturalistic setting and who are constantly demonstrating the process of learning through play. All we need to do as teacher researchers is learn to ask the right questions and make a plan for observing and recording as a way to find the answers.

References and Recommended Resources

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