



Observation and Early Childhood Teaching Evolving Fundamentals

Stuart Reifel

Let them observe, lead their pupils to observe, and render themselves and their pupils conscious of their observations.

— Friedrich Froebel



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Observation of children has a long history in early childhood teaching. Early nineteenth-century German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) wanted kindergarten teachers to be observers of children (Froebel [1826] 1902) so they could learn how children think and learn, build on their interests, and understand the importance of their play to growth and development. He believed that children learn to solve problems and think about life, science, and art as they manipulate objects and observe the results of their actions. Teachers were also seen as learners, about their students: they needed to observe to understand how children were developing.

To this day there is a continuous emphasis on classroom observation of young children in education texts and professional preparation. To understand each developmentally unique child (compared to other children) requires teachers to use observation and interpretation skills. Standardized school assessments fail to provide this kind of information about children. In the past decade of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, with US society placing more emphasis on testing and academic curriculum, many teachers are expected to give more attention to children's written work than to things that teachers can actually see children do. It is worth our while to reconsider the importance of teacher observation and how our thinking about observation has evolved over the years.

Stuart Reifel, EdD, is professor of early childhood education at the University of Texas at Austin. He teaches undergraduate courses on childhood play and curriculum and works with graduate students on research related to play, teaching, and curriculum. Stuart's major focus is play theory and practice.

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From the past to the present

When Froebel encouraged teachers to observe and make themselves conscious of their observations, he had in mind something very different from how we think about observation in the twenty-first century. Teachers then were to think about how children with Froebel's gifts and occupations were

playing their way to an understanding of nature, beauty, and divine unity.

Froebel wanted teachers to see how children developed as they manipulated specific objects (gifts and occupations he designed for their education), such as blocks for design construction, parquetry shapes for picture creation, paper strips for weaving, and drawing forms (Brosterman 1997).

Teachers knew what to look for as the child manipulated these objects from simpler forms (such as stacked block piles) to more complicated configurations (such as symmetrical configurations of blocks that resembled flowers). They used their observations to nurture children toward the next developmental object manipulation, assuming that children were acquiring the knowledge that Froebel built into his play objects. Today's teachers have a broader range of

developmental and learning concerns than those identified by Froebel.

The Child Study Movement.

Through his Child Study Movement, G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924) and the many graduate students who followed him asked teachers to observe and interview children to understand their developmental stages and ultimate readiness for school learning. Using direct observation and systematic verbal interviews with children, teachers could learn about children's interests and thinking.

Hall's *recapitulation* theory described how children re-create the evolutionary history of our species. Through play they outgrow their "primitive" origins on the way to the civilizing benefits of education. Observation allowed teachers to recognize the signs that children were still playing in ways that made them too immature to benefit from academics.

Research into practice. Hall and many who followed him wanted scientific research to serve as a basis for teachers to think about children's education, including the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of human development.

John Dewey (1859–1952) encouraged educators to see the seeds of democratic social relationships in the classroom play of young children. Arthur Jersild (1902–1994) wanted teachers to observe and have conversations with children to understand more about their interests, as well as their motor, language, social, emotional, cognitive, and imaginative learning. Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Jean Piaget (1896–1980) focused on their theories of what we know about children's thinking; they also showed us how to observe the ways children make sense of their worlds.

For nearly two centuries, researchers used their observations and conversations with children to identify new aspects of how children behave in classroom activity and, perhaps more

Why Observation? How Teachers Benefit

To build relationships with children

- Get to know each child
- Respect and appreciate children
- Connect with children
- Foster children's competence and success

To become a skilled observer

- What do I want to find out?
- When and where should I observe?
- How do I record what I observe?
- How do I organize the information I collect?

To observe and document effectively

- Observe over time
- Watch children in varied situations
- Record what you observe
- Organize the information you collect

Adapted from J.R. Jablon, A.L. Dombro, and M.L. Dichtelmiller, *The Power of Observation from Birth through Eight*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies & NAEYC, 2007), iii. © The authors. Used with permission.

important, to provide new ways educators could reflect on or become conscious of what those activities mean for children's education. Interestingly, while play is defined differently throughout the changing eras, it continues to be a major focus of observation (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel 2008).

Teacher preparation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textbooks for teachers of young children were prescriptive, explaining how to get children to march to music and how to lead counting drills. Frequent descriptions of children's activities reflected teachers' use of observation (for examples, see McMillan 1921).



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With increased research on social relationships, emotional needs, and children's interests for teachers to draw on, early childhood texts began to explicitly call on teachers to observe and interview children so they could begin to nurture all dimensions of the "whole" child. Suggestions of what to look for when observing varied, depending on the findings of new research about children. Teachers might look for motor, social, and emotional skills and understandings about aesthetics and nature and the physical world (for examples, see Landreth 1942). They could observe children as scientists, mathematicians, and players (Gans, Stendler, & Almy 1952) or see how children socially adjust and deal with feelings (for examples, see Read 1960).

Observation as a new asset

Eventually, observation itself became an explicit topic in texts, including how teachers might use

informal notes and keep running records on each child (Read & Patterson 1980) and develop different data collection techniques for recording individual, group, and student progress (Almy & Genishi 1979). Vivian Paley (2004) illustrates the contributive value of observation and other documentation of children for the teacher. Jablon, Dombro, and Dichtelmiller (2007) further cement the power of observation.

Whether providing explicit guidance for teachers about how to observe or suggesting specific aspects of children's behavior to observe and interpret, all of these resources appear to help teachers understand more about the children they teach. Some authors (for example, Paley 2004) provide wonderfully rich descriptions of children and, by example, demonstrate the power of observation for improving classroom practice.

Increasingly, new research focuses as much on teacher consciousness or awareness as on the play teachers are to observe. Sherwood and

Reifel (2010) report their findings that today's preservice teachers bring with them beliefs and understandings that influence how they see children's play.

Reflective teaching. Observation is necessary for teachers' understanding of children, but developing the skills to think about what teachers observe and to integrate their reflections in their teaching are what lead to the planning that supports children's learning. Teachers then begin to see all the aspects of development and learning that researchers tell us are there to be seen.

There are many conceptual lenses to help us all understand children. The need is to learn which lens to use when we watch what children do (Frost, Wortham & Reifel 2008). When we look at group play, do we see only the formation of social relationships, or do we also consider how children's play reflects their growing understanding of events in the real world? When we watch children build with blocks, do we see only construction and collaboration, or do we also look for evidence of spatial thinking in the construction and the story narrative the children are thinking about as they build?

Observation as a part of documentation. An observation can lead to many understandings about children, all of which merit documentation and reflection (see Carter & Curtis 2011). What we see can help us plan further lessons about world events, spatial thinking, narrative development, and many other worthy topics that children are ready to explore.

Looking to the future

Educators no longer watch children for signs of Froebel's version of play nor do they look for Hall's play stages. But we do want to see how children are developing and learning, whether they are solving social problems, internalizing self-control, or making

sense of classification (Copple & Bredekamp 2009).

Building on a long heritage of observation, teachers will discover new things to see and new ways to understand children. With these in mind, they can know more, for example, about children's friendships, their depth of thinking (especially when children cannot say all that they know), the social influences on classroom learning, how children are constructing their gender notions of what it means to be a girl or a boy, and what motivates children to do what they do.

All of children's classroom play requires sensitive observation and constant reflection to see how play contributes to children in the present and over time. These are aspects of children's performance that can transcend what tests help us to know, and they all build on observation.

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Additional resource

Jablon, J. 2010/2011. "Taking It All In: Observation in the Classroom." *Teaching Young Children* 4 (2): 24-27.

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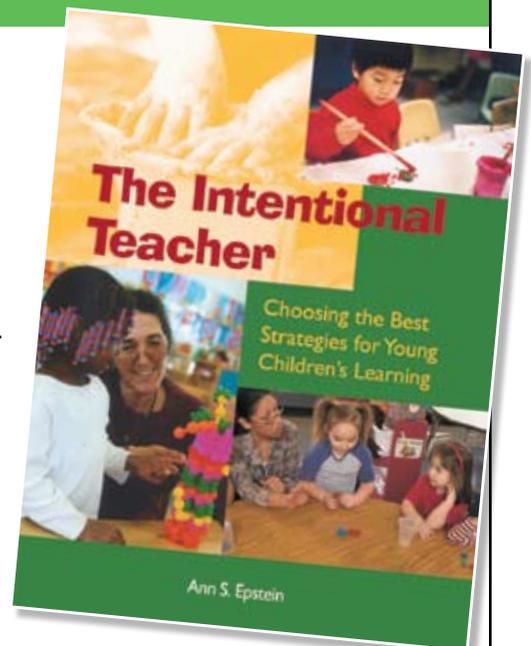
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