Exploring observation

Why observe?

Purposeful observation that systematically records significant information about children’s learning enables teachers to build knowledge of the children with whom they work. Observation and documentation of children’s learning provides evidence of children’s knowledge, skills and dispositions for learning.

Observation is a key feature in the decision-making process of monitoring and documenting learning. It is one of the most important features of daily professional practice. Effective observation requires time and practice, since it involves both systematic gathering of significant information and reflection. The information gathered helps teachers to increase their knowledge of children as individuals, and to plan effectively for children’s learning and development.

Observation for assessment

As teachers build knowledge of children’s interests, strengths and needs, they also make links to the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline learning and development areas. These links will help inform directions for new learning experiences and support their understanding of children’s learning progress.

Teachers record information regularly to plan daily learning experiences that will support and challenge children’s thinking, excite their interests and extend their learning. Teachers analyse and interpret their observations to determine what was significant about the learning, whether the experience was new or familiar and to identify the degree of support that was needed to facilitate the child’s learning. Gathering a body of evidence about each child’s learning is an ongoing process. It helps teachers to make point-in-time judgments about children’s learning progress, to identify barriers to success and to differentiate the program in ways that support individual children’s learning strengths and needs.

Using observations to guide the assessment of children’s learning involves reviewing a collection of evidence of learning gathered over time. This collection provides a rich picture of children’s learning and development and helps teachers to make informed judgments about learning progress (see Queensland kindergarten learning guideline Figure 2, Informed decision making, p.18.)

The focus for observation

The most effective observations are those that:

- help build an increasing bank of knowledge and understanding of a child
- clearly describe a child’s learning experiences and can be used to inform planning.
Teachers adopt a purposeful approach to observation to help them:

- systematically gather information that supports and enriches their understanding of children, their strengths, abilities and prior knowledge
- identify significant learning and ensure they have gathered evidence of each child’s learning
- recognise any potential gaps in the learning and development areas they have explored with children
- see each child as an individual and as a member of a social community, helping them to plan ways to support developing friendships and to promote positive social relationships
- identify children’s responses to different situations and learning contexts (play, real-life engagements, routines and transitions), and to new experiences and people
- identify potential barriers to learning and plan ways to address them
- form point-in-time ‘snapshots’ of each child’s learning that informs their ongoing work with the child. (Teachers’ snapshots of children are constantly evolving and changing in response to new information that is gathered and interpreted)
- share information about children, and strengthen partnerships that support children’s learning in the kindergarten setting
- build a body of evidence to enable them to identify children’s learning progress on the continua of learning and development (based on multiple observational samples)
- build a body of knowledge about each child that can be used to inform discussions about children’s learning progress with parents and carers
- develop knowledge of individual children that can be used to assist teacher thinking when writing transition statements at the end of the kindergarten year.

### A purposeful approach to observation

It is important that gathering observations is neither random nor overly structured. Teachers need to develop ways to keep an eye on the possibilities for observation in the daily learning that is taking place. An overly structured system of observation — such as one based on gathering a specific number of observations on a given day for a pre-determined group of children, or about a very specific aspect of learning — can distract teachers from observing what is most important to, or significant for, a child. Keeping an eye on the possibilities for observation in daily learning may mean, for example, making an observation about the ways that children explore a new resource, resolve a problem or establish a new play partnership. Using a system to track which children teachers have gathered observations about, enables them to see the spaces in their documentation, to recognise patterns and gaps, and to address these in a systematic and coherent way.

*Early years teacher*
Characteristics of effective observation

When observing children, teachers make choices about what to observe. They identify the significant learning, analyse the documented observation and plan ways to respond and extend learning. This process is influenced by their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, observational skills, knowledge of curriculum content, and ethical considerations.

Beliefs and assumptions

- Teachers need to consider their image of ‘the child’ and the influence this has on the ways they view children and interpret their learning. Working from a strengths-based perspective enables teachers to focus on and build learning experiences based on children’s strengths and interests. Teachers also need to consider and question their beliefs and assumptions about individual children.

Knowledge

- Teachers require strong knowledge and understanding of the kindergarten learning and development areas. This will help identify what to observe when gathering information about children’s learning.

Skills

- **Listening:** Teachers pay careful attention to the conversations and interactions, negotiation and discussion that occurs as children interact with different adults and with other children.

- **Questioning:** Teachers ask questions of children, colleagues and parents to clarify, confirm, expand or reconsider their thoughts and interpretations of observations. Sharing observations with children also provides an invaluable opportunity to celebrate children’s experiences and successes, to gather additional information and to discuss future plans.

- **Recording:** Teachers record important details including the time, date, context in which the observation occurred, and the child or children involved in the observation selected for documentation. They also note the influence of the learning context and numbers of children involved in an experience when observing children’s interactions. Typically, observations also include details of children’s responses, behaviours, ideas and comments.

- **Interpreting and analysing:** Teachers consider the information contained in their observations and what it tells them about children’s learning, their interests, and the connections they are making with others and to prior learning. Analysis of this information is used to shape plans for future learning experiences for the child or children. It also helps teachers build up a body of evidence that enables them to make point-in-time judgments about children’s learning. When analysing observations, teachers draw on the understanding and knowledge of children held by other partners working in the Kindergarten setting.

Ethics

- Teachers ensure that observation and documentation of children is undertaken in an ethical manner with informed consent from children and families, and with confidentiality assured. In practice, this means that children and parents have the right to decline public documentation of a child’s work, ideas and commentary.
Documenting observations

The type of observation formats used will depend on teacher preferences, the resources that are available, the aspects of learning and development that the teacher wants to record and the intended audience. They are also influenced by practical considerations, such as the time available to record an observation. For example, an observation may be developed as a general learning story about a current interest in the kindergarten room with accompanying photographs and transcripts of children's comments. The same learning story may be used to document an individual child’s learning if additional information is added that relates specifically to that child, including interpretation and analysis of the learning. When teachers display observational documentation, they consider carefully children’s rights to privacy and the appropriateness of what is shared with a broader audience of children, parents and families.

Teachers also document observations in a variety of ways depending on what is happening while they are observing. In the kindergarten setting, it is likely that many observations will occur while teachers are playing and interacting with children. Sometimes an observation may be a quick note of things that are happening in the play, which seem significant and need to be recorded. These short ‘jottings’ may be developed more fully at a time that is convenient to the teacher.

When taking observations, it is not necessary to produce these electronically or with accompanying photographs every time.

Teachers draw on formats and combinations of formats to suit their needs. These may include:

- learning stories (narratives)
- series of annotated images (photographs)
- records of children’s conversations
- children’s pictorial journalling in their own daily diaries
- teachers’ daily diaries
- anecdotal records
- annotated samples of children’s learning, and objects and artefacts that result from learning
- communication books
- personalised checklists, e.g. of physical skills
- video recordings
- concept webs
- notes from discussions
- personal reflections by children, family members and other partners.

The information contained in the document Observation templates overview provides a comprehensive guide to the features of commonly used ways to document observations. It examines each of the methods for gathering observations and contains advice about the potential value of each observation format, the practical and ethical considerations associated with each format, the intended audience and completion time information. These observation tools are commonly used by teachers in early years education.