

# Early Education Journal

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DAFFODILS WERE PLACED ON THE PAINTING TABLE.



A LOT OF CHILDREN WANTED TO PAINT THEM. EVERY CHILD APPROACHED THE TASK IN A DIFFERENT WAY.



SPENCER LOOKED VERY CAREFULLY AT THE DAFFODILS BUT DECIDED THEY NEEDED LEAVES.



JOB NOTICED THERE WAS MORE THAN ONE SO HE PAINTED A NUMBER OF DAFFODILS IN A LINE.



JAYDEN DECIDED TO USE THE COLOURS TO COVER HIS WHOLE PIECE OF PAPER.



ALEXANDER LOOKED AT EACH DAFFODIL INDIVIDUALLY.



THE GIRLS DECIDED THEIR PAINTINGS SHOULD HAVE GRASS AND A SUN.



LOOK AT MINE!

NOELL WAS VERY PROUD OF HER FINAL PAINTING.



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Leader.

# Editorial

## Observing Children's Development – Part 1

Di Chilvers

Observation of children as they play and engage in all manner of activities has always been at the core of pedagogy and practice in early childhood, it is not a new process in the world of educating young children. In 1929, Susan Isaacs - teacher, psychoanalyst, psychologist, prolific observer of children - said of the child's world:

*It cannot, of course, be very easy for us to gain a clear idea of what the world is like to a very young child, just because it must be so different from our own. But by patient listening to the talk of children, and watching what they do, with the one purpose of understanding them, we can imaginatively feel their fears and angers, their bewilderments and triumphs; we can wish their wishes, see their pictures and think their thoughts. (Isaacs, 1929: 15)*

Nearly 90 years after Isaacs' pioneering work in child development, it is timely to stop and think about why the process of observation is the most appropriate and effective way of recognising the development, learning and thinking of young children. As parents, practitioners and teachers, it is important to step back and take the time to watch our children and listen to their thoughts, ideas and interests as they play, talk and engage with others. This is our window into their world; we can learn so much by watching children and use what we see to be more effective teachers, tuning into their thinking and extending their understanding.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is at a moment in time when good observation is being marginalised in favour of something "less time consuming"; narrower and based on simple binary systems. All of which lead to a reductionist, managerial approach to understanding children's development and progress, as opposed to an informed pedagogical approach based on years of research (nationally and internationally), which respects and values the child as a thinker and learner from birth; acknowledges

the voice of the child (and family); and sees those who work with children as being professionally skilled in child development, learning and teaching.

The Celebrating Children's Learning Project (Grenier et al, 2017) has placed "keen observation of the child's exploration, play and thinking" at the core of practice, identifying three other features in observation and assessment as:

- ▶ "hearing" the child's voice or "getting a feel" for their play
- ▶ the practitioner noticing the child's learning a new skill, or is making new links between aspects of knowledge
- ▶ seeing examples of Sustained Shared Thinking, or a response from the child showing their feeling of awe and wonder.

The Spring Early Education Journal is a strong contribution to the current debate, focusing on the fundamental principles of why observation is an essential, skilled and professional strand of practice in the early years.

**Kathryn Solly** reminds us of the strong legacy of Susan Isaacs' observational practice and thinking and the influence it continues to have on practice today.

**Linda Pound** looks at the inspiring work of Vivian Gussin Paley and how she embedded observation in her daily work with the children through watching and listening to their imaginative play.

**Debi Keyte-Hartland** shares her thinking on observation and the world of children's ideas through her work as an artist educator.

**Helen Moylett** describes observations made by skilled adults who have the "pedagogic power" to look beyond the superficial into the multifaceted nature of child development including self-regulation.

**Di Chilvers** explains the need for teachers and practitioners to build their Observation Toolkit and see themselves as specialist professionals in children's development, thinking and learning.

We hope the Journal will be a provocation for dialogue and deeper thinking about the place of observation in understanding and interpreting children's development and progress; as well as acknowledging the privilege and joy of being an observer of young children's creative and inspiring thoughts, ideas and actions.

**Di Chilvers is an advisory consultant in early childhood education and an Early Education Associate.**

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Grenier, J., Finch, S., & Vollans, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Celebrating Children's Learning: Assessment Beyond Levels in the Early Years*. London: Routledge.

See also East London Early Years and Schools Partnership Celebrating Children's Learning Project, available at [www.eleyp.co.uk/celebrating-childrens-learning](http://www.eleyp.co.uk/celebrating-childrens-learning)

# The wisdom of Dr Susan Isaacs on observational practice and child development

Kathryn Solly

Susan Isaacs was a pioneer of early childhood education who is regarded by some as having the “greatest influence on British Education in the twentieth century” (Pines, 2004). She was seen as the pre-eminent authority on the play-based education of young children in Britain long before many other countries recognised its importance and relevance to training teachers. She was a realist with a systematic mind focusing on the “whole child” learning through play. Her observational descriptions of her experiences with children remain as relevant today as when they were originally written in the 1920–40s.

Isaacs had a profound understanding of children and their thinking processes. She proposed that children learn in very similar ways to adults despite their immense differences in knowledge, experience and behaviour. Her uniqueness was that she was both an educationalist and a psychoanalyst exploring how children convey their development needs through their play. She had a profound respect for teachers and taught that observation of the whole learning situation was crucial rather than extracting conclusions from a single observation.

Isaacs revealed that the very important pedagogical practices of child-centred education, linked to child development and psychology, were nurturing children’s thinking from the simple to the complex. Generous play provision allowed children to go further in their discovery and learning. She gave teachers confidence that play was not trivial but indispensable in children’s emotional, social, physical and intellectual development. This she demonstrated by teaching through an accord of all the child’s interests via the appeal of books, make-believe, fairy and animal stories, art and craft, woodwork, science, singing, dancing, drama and dressing up, demonstrating her understanding of the need to feed their curiosity like Vivian Gussin Paley after her. The importance of providing opportunities for imaginative creativity and rehearsing life-skills also helped to develop children’s independence and social skills through fantasy play as less experienced learners.

By considering the inter-relationships within all aspects of their development in children’s everyday lives, Isaacs also emphasised the importance of seeing things from the child’s perspective whilst linking to a rich understanding of child development rather than recording observations under selected headings. She was very critical of so called “research” which did not take this precaution, as she saw the process of maturation as being firmly based in experience rather than chronological age. Children were encouraged to link information gained in the past to deal with a problem in the present. Thus, as children aged they improved their competencies as their worldly experience grew both in breadth and depth through their exploration.

Throughout her life Isaacs was particularly interested in how children learn about the basic biological facts of life: birth, death, reproduction and excretion. Adults, she suggested should follow the child’s curiosity and questioning by providing experiences that would help provide answers. At the Malting House School in Cambridge, and Chelsea Open Air Nursery in London, Isaacs was able to put into practice her beliefs that children should develop their own minds through their own endeavours using curiosity and the desire to learn in these exceptional settings. Here she reiterated the pedagogy of Froebel, Robert Owen and Montessori by stating that children learn largely through play as scientists. She did not plan projects for children, being aware that groups of children would not feel the same enthusiasm for one topic but encouraged them to investigate what were their own interests or issues and then helped them follow them up and find solutions.

She stressed the particular value of play, for children who had not had opportunities to play with others, in developing language, communication and social skills. She also emphasised the value of learning from mistakes and the importance of a physically appropriate developmental approach describing how the whole-body movements of arms, hands and legs come before the finer skills using fingers. Isaacs suggested

that observation was the means for meeting children’s interests as things arise through their growth in understanding the world and events around them; through physical movement and their delight in make-believe. The child she states “must know and master the world to feel safe” (1932:114). Later she explained that if we overstretch their minds by teaching the things we think they should be interested in, their minds lose their elasticity and hence the direct way into their hearts and minds.

In her book *The Children We Teach* (1932) Isaacs aptly describes her aim of education, one which is still a guiding example today:

The aim of modern education is to create people who are not only self-disciplined and free in spirit, gifted in work and in enjoyment, worthy and desirable as persons, but also responsible and generous in social life, able to give and take freely from others, willing to serve social ends and to lose themselves in social purposes greater than themselves. (Gardner 1969:171)

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# Observing children's development: the work of Vivian Gussin Paley

Linda Pound

For centuries, the close observation of young children has been a vital part of understanding children's learning and development. From Comenius in the sixteenth and seventeenth century right through to today, theory and effective early childhood practice have developed from listening to and watching all aspects of children's activity but especially their play. Pioneers of early childhood care and education did not set out with tick boxes to find out how much of the prescribed list of competencies could be marked off as achieved, but looked for the things that surprised them. They looked for the things they didn't know children could do or the ideas and concepts which raised questions about their thinking.

Vivian Gussin Paley describes herself as a teacher who writes books. Now in her late eighties, she is probably best known for her story-telling/story-acting approach to curriculum (see for example Lee, 2015 or Creminet al, 2016). The powerful pedagogy which emerges from her approach is described in her numerous books. Although they contain no overt theory, they sing out the philosophy which has evolved over decades of practice. Story-telling/story-acting draws attention to children's understanding and use of narrative but Paley's writing also shows us how this is reflected in their play and conversation, their interactions and observations.

Paley's writing began in the 1970s when as a young teacher working in an integrated school, she began to confront the issues which black parents drew to her attention. Their experiences chimed with her own experience as a Jewish immigrant. She embarked on a voyage of self-discovery which has permeated her career. Through observation and discussion, she came to understand the ways in which children feel excluded when differences which teachers feel unable to comment on "spontaneously, casually, naturally and uncritically... can become a cause for anxiety and an obstacle for learning"

(Paley 2000:xix). In her book *White Teacher* (2000), Paley focuses on educators who describe themselves as "colour blind". She suggests that adults who are unable to acknowledge differences cause children to feel that differences such as skin colour are in some way unmentionable or shameful. For her, children's learning depends on their use of what she calls "original learning tools" – fantasy play and story-making.



**Vivian Gussin Paley,**  
courtesy of Make  
Believe Arts

Paley sought to prepare children for formal education – not through what she terms "academics" but by supporting children in developing logical thinking and a clear means of self-expression. To achieve this, she searched for each child's point of view, for topics that they wanted to discuss and dramatise. Paley describes the role of the teacher as being that of the chorus in Greek drama: drawing connections and summarising events and ideas to facilitate thinking and discussion. Lee (2011) maintains that Paley's search was driven by her curiosity; her belief in the wisdom of children; and her concern to be non-judgmental in all her dealings with children.

The questions she continues to try to answer through her observation include issues of inclusion but also focus on children's key concerns: fantasy, friendship and fairness.

Throughout her pre-digital career, she used a tape recorder describing it as an "an essential tool for capturing the sudden insight, the misunderstood concept, the puzzling juxtaposition of words and ideas" (Paley 1981: 218). The material recorded was transcribed each day, enabling her to capture what she had missed in her discussions with children. Paley states that she owned "only one cassette which force(d)me to transcribe material the same day it (wa)s produced" (Paley 1981:218). She claims that demanding daily recording and transcribing trained her to listen and become more skilled at asking effective questions. She also learnt to repeat any of the children's utterances that had not been fully heard or understood, in



Susan Isaacs, courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

order to gain further clarification or explanation. She writes of her inner pact with children in these words:

“if you will keep trying to explain yourselves, I will keep showing you how to think about the problems you need to solve” (Paley 1981: 223).

She looked for what she describes as invisible lines of connection between children and their communities. She documented what she saw and heard, analysed and interrogated her own thinking and action, as well as that of the children she worked with.

### Lines of connection drawn through observation

Despite her distinguished career, Paley applies no particular labels to her work or theories. It is however possible to see close links both to psychoanalytical thinking and to postmodernism. Her work links to post modern theories popular in the second half of the twentieth century and into this century.

The approach to early childhood care and education most commonly linked to postmodernism is probably that found in Reggio Emilia and written about by Peter Moss and

Gunilla Dahlberg (see for example Dahlberg et al, 2007). In seeking social equity, she shares with postmodernists the importance of seeing children the way they actually are. Paley’s focus on the many “little narratives” detailed in her books parallels the documentation of Reggio Emilia practice. Both try to see through the eyes or lens of each child, creating authentic interactions, and seeking to co-construct meanings with them.

Psychoanalysts, in common with Paley, are concerned with “how young children learn the language of the social world” (Mayes et al, 2007:3). While it is unlikely that Paley would describe herself as psychoanalytical in her approach, she is driven to make classrooms psychologically safe for all children and to support them in building secure social and emotional foundations. Throughout her books, her drive for containment and attunement are clear. Jason, (*The boy who would be a helicopter*, 1990) is described as:

“the quintessential outsider, beyond race, place, or age. It is his self-defining image that separates him from us; he is the one we must learn to include in our school culture if it is to be an island of safety and sensibility for everyone” (ibid:xi).

Susan Isaacs wrote that “play is the child’s means of living and of understanding life” (Isaacs 2013: 8); but for both her and Paley, observing and engaging with children’s play is the means by which we come to understand and nurture children’s lives.

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# Helping young children become great learners: observing and supporting self-regulation

Helen Moylett

When young children are left to their own devices in a stimulating learning environment most will learn through playing and exploring - but this is not enough. Skilled adults have a key role to play. Early years practitioners across the world recognise the pedagogic power of being partners with children, enjoying with them the power of their curiosity and the “skill, will and thrill” of finding out what they can do.

These aspects of learning are represented in the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as the “Characteristics of Effective Early Learning” (DfE, 2017 para 1.9)

- ▶ playing and exploring – the **skill** to get engaged
- ▶ active learning – the **will** to keep going
- ▶ creating and thinking critically – the **thrill** of discovery.

Such ideas about how children learn are not new or specifically English, but were influenced by research and practice from many places including Reggio Emilia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, America and the rest of the UK.

What may be newer for some are the concepts of self-regulation and executive function which lie at the heart of the emphasis on the characteristics in the EYFS. It is well established in research (Bronson, 2000; Whitebread, 2014) and practice that a major determinant of children’s success as learners is their ability to self-regulate – to move from having others scaffold their learning and behaviour to be able to do it themselves.

This is a long process and it can be helpful to think about two main forms of self-regulation. **Emotional self-regulation** concerns having positive feelings about oneself as a learner, a sense of wellbeing, and the ability to manage one’s feelings and behaviour. **Cognitive self-regulation** is built on positive dispositions to learning, plus awareness and control of one’s own thinking.

**Executive function** is how the brain deals with the constant onslaught of perceptions and thoughts. It is like a control centre based in the frontal cerebral cortex of the brain and develops throughout childhood and does not reach maturity until late adolescence. Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions,

prioritise tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses. It is described as having three main elements:

- ▶ working memory which governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time
- ▶ mental flexibility which helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings
- ▶ self-control which enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

According to a recent research review, “It is suggested that the brain’s capacity to organise this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses, lies at the heart of all learning” (BERA-TACTYC 2017). We are much more likely to be able to regulate our own learning and behaviour if we have good executive function skills.

We can teach children these skills and the need to teach them early is actually far more pressing than the need to teach phonics or counting skills to very young children. This is particularly true for children living in adverse conditions which can impair the development of executive function skills as a result of the disruptive effects of toxic stress on the developing brain (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2017).

A meta-analysis of outcomes of early childhood education approaches found that for all children “the short-term effects of more academic programmes wore off after a few years in primary school”, while with programmes based on “cognitive-developmental approaches emphasising children’s choice, autonomy and self-regulation... longitudinal effects on educational and social adjustment outcomes were found” (Chambers, 2010). These findings are supported by McClelland et al (2013) who compared the long term effects of early persistence with the long term effects of reading and maths ability. The study followed 430 children from preschool age to adulthood. Contrary to researchers’ expectations they found that maths and reading ability did not have a significant effect on whether or not students gained a university degree. But those who could concentrate and persist at the age of four were almost 50 per cent more likely to have completed a degree course by the age of 25.

## So what can adults do to support young children's self-regulation and executive function skills?

Goswami (2015) reviewed evidence of how children learn and concluded that children possess and demonstrate all the main types of learning (statistical learning, learning by imitation, learning by analogy and causal learning) even as babies. She points out that:

Children think and reason largely in the same ways as adults. However, they lack experience, and they are still developing important metacognitive and executive function skills. Learning in classrooms can be enhanced if children are given diverse experiences and are helped to develop self-reflective and self-regulatory skills via teacher modelling, conversation and guidance around social situations like play, sharing and conflict resolutions (ibid:25).

The first and most important thing adults can do is to be fascinated by how children learn, pay attention, support and note important learning. Here is an example of an adult paying attention to learning through play and helping a child to follow his interests, not by leading the activity but by providing resources, being there and interacting sensitively.

Jacob, you were playing in the sandpit, you were using a watering can to pour water down a pipe into the sand pit. You said "Look, I made a super flood. I need to try it from the other side". You found a piece of pipe. Then you poured water down the pipe and watched it flow into the second pipe. You had to readjust the position of the guttering a few times until the water flowed straight into it. Then you found a piece of guttering and added that onto the pipe and tested whether the water would flow into the guttering as well, it did and you were pleased, saying "Look, look". Next you found a piece of pipe and put this at the end of the guttering leaning up against the edge of the sand pit. Then you poured the water down the pipe and watched it flow along the pipe, gutter and then up the pipe leaning against the side of the sand pit. We both watched it flow back down again. Then you collected some sand and put it in the guttering – I asked you what you thought might happen, you told me "It will block the water, maybe make another flood". You watched the water flowing down and saw it backing up behind the sand and flowing over. You let other children help with putting water down the pipes.

Water, sand and guttering and a child playing and exploring are a common sight in many early years settings. What marks this observation out from many others is that the experience observed was not recorded by sticking a photo in a portfolio with a statement such as "Jacob really enjoyed playing with the water and pipes". Nor was it "matched" with a *Development Matters* statement in an online tracking tool. It is a rich observation which reflects the four key features of best practice outlined in the Celebrating Children's Learning project:

- ▶ **You can "hear" the child's voice or "get a feel" for their play** – we almost feel we are there, hearing

Jacob's own thoughts and following his play.

- ▶ **There is keen observation of the child's exploration, play and thinking** – it is a detailed account of their actions, including glimpses of their thinking through what they say.
- ▶ **The practitioner has noticed that the child is learning a new skill, or is making new links between aspects of knowledge** – Jacob is building on his ideas about floods, making predictions and representing what he knows.
- ▶ **There are examples of sustained shared thinking, or a response from the child showing their feeling of awe and wonder** – we can see learning: Jacob is aware of his ability to test his ideas, is excited about his discoveries, and discusses his predictions. You can find out more about this project at [www.eleyp.co.uk/celebrating-childrenslearning/](http://www.eleyp.co.uk/celebrating-childrenslearning/) and in Grenier, Finch and Vollans (2017).

## What do we make of detailed observations like these?

Practitioners eager to identify learning often keep in mind areas of learning and development. They might, for example, consider what Jacob has shown us he knows about the action of sand and water or about floods in the wider world (Understanding the World), or about how he handles the large equipment (Physical Development), how he expresses himself (Communication and Language), or how he shares his experience with his peers (Personal, Social and Emotional Development). But this analysis might miss the first and critically important part of Jacob's learning story. Without the learning behaviours and attitudes Jacob employs to drive his actions – described in the EYFS as the Characteristics of Effective Learning – he would be standing still in his learning and development.

High levels of motivation are displayed by Jacob in his exploration of the pipes, guttering, water and sand. We can see that he is deeply involved with high levels of energy and fascination. He pays attention to detail and persists with solving the problem of getting the water flowing as he wants it to. The practitioner notes that he is pleased with the result and he is clearly enjoying meeting this self-generated challenge for its own sake. Although he is keen for the practitioner to look, he is not asking for praise or a sticker – he is sharing his pride in his own achievement. He is also demonstrating his ability to create and think critically. Jacob announces that he has made a "super flood". This is his own idea and he wants to extend his learning by trying it "from the other side". The practitioner pays close attention as he finds new ways to do things, makes links with previous experience, predicts what will happen and tests his ideas, monitoring how well different approaches work and changing strategy as needed. He is being both a creative and critical thinker. The practitioner has seen his learning power in action because she is not focusing on the areas of learning but on the child.

Jacob's story is told by the practitioner. The observation is designed to be a tool for sustained shared thinking in that he can review his own learning process thanks to the very detailed account. She is talking on paper about what Jacob planned to do, what he did and what worked

well. Having that conversation with Jacob himself, possibly illustrated with photographs, could be an important next step in taking his thinking forward (Stewart and Moylett, 2018:52).

Sometimes adults observe and move learning forward in the moment by clarifying and modelling next steps in thinking. The teacher in this next example does not correct the children but challenges them to think more clearly. She is also prepared to follow up the process by asking them what they can do next to find out more about this interesting phenomenon.

Four children were playing together. Three were wearing trainers but the shoes of one child lit up occasionally.

**Teacher:** Wow! Look at your shoes! That is so cool.

They light up when you step down.

**Child 1:** Yes, they do this. [Jumps up and down several times]

**Teacher:** How does that happen? How does it light up?

**Child 1:** Because they are new.

**Teacher:** Um. Mine are new too but they don't light up.

**Child 2:** No, because they light up when you step down on them. [Steps down hard several times]

**Teacher:** [Steps down hard several times] That's funny.

Mine don't light up when I step down.

**Child 3:** No, no, no, you have to have these holes [points to the holes]

**Teacher:** [Pointing to the holes in her own shoe] But I have holes and mine still don't light up, and Josh has holes in his trainers too and his do not light up either. I wonder why?

**Child 4:** I think you need batteries. Kids, you need batteries.

**Child 1:** Yeah, you need batteries to make them work. [Thinks for a while]. But I did not see batteries when I put my toes in.

**Child 4:** I think they are under the toes.

**Child 2:** I can't feel the batteries under my toes.

**Teacher:** I wonder how we can find out about this? (Sylva 2013)

It is through the active intervention, guidance and support of a skilled adult that children make the most progress in their learning.

This does not mean pushing children too far or too fast, but instead meeting children where they are, showing them the next open door, and helping them to walk through it. It means being a partner with children, enjoying with them the power of their curiosity and the thrill of finding out what they can do DCSF (2009:22)

Children's experiences in the early years lay the foundations for how they learn, with far-reaching effects through their school years and beyond. Rather than observation and reflection on how children learn being an afterthought in early years observation, assessment and planning practice, we need first and foremost to celebrate and support children as learners through recognising the importance of their play, active learning and creative and critical thinking.

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# Observation and the world of children's ideas

Debi Keyte-Hartland

When I began working with young children as an artist in residence just over twenty years ago, it was a process of observation that enabled me to key into the strategies and ways of working with materials and media together with young children. It was a strange, joyful, yet unfamiliar world, to suddenly find myself in the busy and fast paced world of the thoughts and actions of 1- to 6-year-olds. I was not, if I am honest, always sure of what I was doing. Was I trying to teach the children something new? Was I trying to help them in their own enquiries? Was I there just to make sure everything was safe and that the children were engaged in doing something?

In my keenness to try to understand more about what children were doing with clay, paint, drawing media, photography or any other visual media they encountered, I began to read about the schools in Reggio Emilia. Loris Malaguzzi, is famously quoted as saying;

*“Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before.”* (Malaguzzi, quoted in Edwards et al, 2011)

Here, Malaguzzi speaks of the task of educators to notice what is happening, look carefully at what the children are doing, speaking about, and learning. He suggests that by standing aside we leave space for children to learn, that children do not learn through a process of instruction by the educator; nor do they learn just by being watched closely - the act of observing should affect what we choose to do next in our role as educator. This could be to ask a question, or to sustain the interest of the children or group of children, or to offer something else as a provocation to learning that challenges the children in their thinking and doing. Malaguzzi often referred to this skilful and co-constructed interaction using the metaphor of a game of ping pong, saying that it is our job as educators to keep the ball in the air. So as the children pass us the ball of learning we bat it back to keep the ball (or the process of learning) in play.

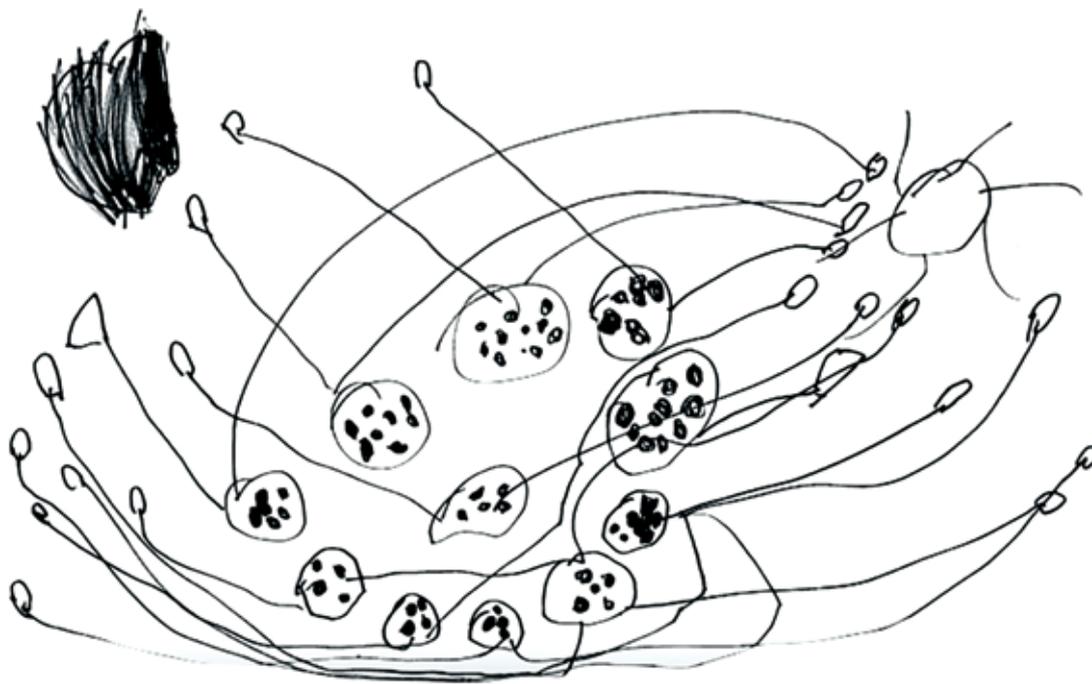
My interest in how I could use observation to help me understand children's enquiries in the visual arts began as I tried to make sense of what young children were doing. They worked fast, often taking minutes to complete a painting or to express a gesture through drawing. Observation was a way of researching what the children were doing, expressing and thinking. I wanted to understand so that my actions and interventions were better attuned with the strategies, techniques and methods of the children involved.

Observation requires us not just to see the details of what children do but to see the ideas and thinking that is going on beneath their actions. When children act, make, describe, represent anything at all, they are working in the world of ideas, so observation is a method of recognising, valuing and working with children's thinking. If we can connect with their thinking we can begin to co-construct and sustain this in a process of observing, listening, interpreting and responding. It makes learning and teaching a reciprocal act that is more meaningful for the child, which values sustained shared thinking and encourages the child to elaborate upon their ideas. Again, it is Malaguzzi's metaphor of the ping pong game that underpins our interactions.

I try to embody this approach using the visual arts as both media and a language of expression, where the latter is a way of describing children's own meaning-making, as often their graphics, constructions and modelling describe not just events or memories of occasion but illustrate their provisional theories of the way in which the world around them works and functions.

In the drawing “Sun and Moon”, Mia aged 4 has drawn a complex theory of how she thinks the night transforms into day. As she drew, the educator observed and recorded what she said about her picture.

Mia said; “This is the moon and this is the sun and these are all the planets. When it is night time all the planets turn to face the moon and when it is day, all the planets turn again to face the sun”.



“Sun and Moon”  
United World  
College South  
East Asia,  
Singapore

The drawing expresses her provisional theory of how the sun, moon and the planets interact, and reveals how it is possible for a 4-year-old to think about science and physics. The drawing was used as a provocation with other children to think about planet Earth and its relationship with the sky. This created a shared and collaborative context for other children to communicate through drawing their own theories in a context of creative and critical thinking, where the act of drawing expressed visual ideas that they “held in mind”. This in turn, formulated and enabled the verbal expression of their ideas and thinking.

Often, children’s drawing goes unobserved as it can be seen as an independent activity that children can get on with by themselves, but we can miss so much if we do not choose to observe where children’s graphicacy happens

In “Shadow Dancers” a group of 4- to 5-year-olds had been inspired by seeing dancers who danced in backlit situations, where you could not see their bodies, only their projected shadows. This idea to make their own dance was re-offered to the children as an invitation and they readily took up the opportunity. A wooden baton was suspended from the ceiling with a sheet attached to it and an overhead projector was placed behind the sheet. A space for the audience was created in front of the suspended sheet.

In the beginning, the children were excited and what appeared to happen behind the curtain seemed fun yet chaotic, perhaps even disorganised and without thinking to the untrained eye. Yet it was playful and full of laughter, and highly engaging. They were experimenting with what was possible with their bodies, alone and in small groupings. As the children moved between the role of the audience and the shadow maker comments were heard, “Put your arms up high”, “Come closer” and “Keep still for me”.

These initial comments were the beginnings of children’s transformation into the role of director and producer, a role that involved using the information gleaned from their

experiments into one that now explored the possibility of communicating ideas and concepts. Anna Craft (2002) called this “Possibility Thinking”, a movement between finding out “What is it?” to “What is it that this material/medium can do?”; to a realm where that new knowledge is used to construct meaning in a situation of “What might be?” for example, how can this material/medium communicate an idea or thought that I have?

The “What might be?” became translated and demonstrated through the children’s different ideas such as: singular still poses that communicated ideas of power and strength; paired and group still poses representing the concept of friendship; and multi-person body/shadow compositions that represented thoughts of monsters. The educators reflected upon their observations, recognising the energy required to play with materials and to find out what they can do and the shift in thinking when the children used this new information to construct and make meaning. The educators acted on their observations by continuing to provide a context for this type of visual meaning-making to be sustained as well as challenging it further by inviting the children to find ways to document and keep a memory of the different poses they created. This was taken up by the children who became photographers and film makers of the action and dance seen through the suspended sheet.

These two, short examples, show how close observation has played a role in making thinking visible and has identified what is happening beneath the action. Observation, rather than being a way to tick off a list of fixed and isolated standards of knowledge, is a process of looking closely and acknowledging what you see, thinking and reflecting upon what you have seen, and then acting upon this.

Observation such as this requires us to think about what we value in terms of children’s learning. In the last example, it would have been easy to have stopped the play when the children were experimenting in a loud and fast-paced way. An educator could have shut this down if they had not valued that children require time, space and



“Shadow Dancers”  
International  
School of Beijing,  
China

energy in which to find out about materials and media and what they can do in group and sociable contexts of play. We have to remember that children do not act or do things in the way that adults might do; we have to be patient at listening to their energetic talk and action so that we can begin to understand their strategies, motivations and methods of playing and learning.

This action research where observation informs our pedagogy and professional knowledge is a priceless opportunity. As Rinaldi describes here:

The teachers, for example, would be promoted from being simply practitioners to being authors of pedagogical paths and processes. They would be able to contribute to overcoming, at least in the field of education, the arrogant ideas of continuing separation between theory, culture and technique. Teachers would be able to stop seeing themselves and being seen by others as those who simply apply theories and decisions developed somewhere else.” (2006:77)

We therefore begin by starting always from the child, from their own ways of being with materials and ideas of the world. We do not look at the child as if they were a tick list of set markers and indicators; instead we welcome the child as a maker of their own meaning, in a constant process of encountering, hypothesising, expressing and communicating their thoughts and action in a cycle that enables them to constantly re-elaborate that which they are thinking about. It gives back to us the artfulness of

teaching, where educators no longer deliver from the “handbook” but co-construct learning together with, and for, children.

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# Professionalising the process of observation and understanding children's development

Di Chilvers

In 1978, as part of my NNEB training I wrote about Aiden who was at Nursery School. He would have been about 54 months old and was the focus of my observational child study. This is what I observed about him:

Aiden has developed an interest in woodwork and is very good at it; he can hammer nails in very well without any assistance. Aiden tries to do things before he will ask anyone to help him and he found that he didn't really need any help doing woodwork.

I was also fascinated by the way he wrote his name:

I asked him to write his name for me recently and he did it without any assistance which he couldn't do before, but for some reason he wrote it backwards which is quite unusual. He is left handed and he started from the left-hand side of the paper and worked inwards.



Aiden was showing me what a competent, capable and independent thinker and learner he was; following his ideas and interests as he persisted and deepened his skills in woodwork and writing. I was involved in what we would now call "Responsible Pedagogy" (DfE, 2017b: 11) observing Aiden in a context where he is able to "demonstrate his understanding, learning and development". These are the observations we need to undertake as they are "the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of children's development and learning" (DfE, 2017b:11).

Reflecting back on these observations from 40 years ago I still get excited by observing children and seeing their development, thinking and learning unfolding in front of

me. I did not realise at the time just how important it was to tune into children's ideas and interests and question why and how they did certain things in their play and activities. I was learning to become an **observer** of children and an **understander** of child development as that was at the root of my role working with young children in schools and nurseries. I was using "observational assessment to understand children's learning" (DfE, 2017b:11).

In 2018 observation is still fundamental to those who work with young children (0-7 years). Effective teachers and practitioners tune into children's development, language and thinking through their observations and then use this to extend their understanding and learning. The EYFS Statutory Framework states observation is an "integral part of learning and development (ibid:13) and the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook, "Good" grade descriptor for teaching, learning and assessment, describes the process, as adults:

Observe carefully, question skilfully and listen perceptively to children during activities in order to re-shape activities and give children explanations that improve their learning. (Ofsted, 2015:39)

## Observation is a statutory duty

Despite becoming a Statutory Duty, the use of skilled observation as part of the assessment process in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has become politicised and misunderstood by many including teachers, head teachers and policy makers who seek to reduce a critical professional and pedagogical approach to quick, superficial binary tests which tell us little about young children's deeper levels of thinking and learning (Whitebread, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). Not only does this undervalue the potential of children's development; it lowers adults' aspirations for children and depresses the progress and achievement children can potentially make.

The Tickell Review of the EYFS recognised the value of observation and its fundamental role in exemplary early years practice:

Observational assessment is integral to effective early years provision. The evidence clearly shows this type of assessment lies at the heart of providing a supporting and stimulating environment for every child. (2010:30)

And made a recommendation that:

...guidance simply sets out that assessment should be based primarily on the observation of daily activities that illustrate children's embedded learning (ibid:35)

A photograph of the name 'Aiden' written in black ink on a white surface. The name is written from right to left, starting with 'n' and ending with 'A'. The letters are simple and childlike in style.

Aiden's name

At the same time Tickell (2010) made a strong recommendation for initial training and continuing professional development to ensure an “up to date knowledge of child development” and a “defining standard and status for expert practitioners” with an “emphasis on practical application, theoretical understanding and reflective practice” (ibid: 46). Since then several other reviews (Nutbrown, 2012; DfE, 2017; Callanan et al, 2017) have expressed similar research-based views.

The Study of Early Education and Development: Good Practice in Early Education (Callanan et al 2017), a study commissioned by the Department for Education, identified observational approaches as central to exemplary early years practice in all sectors (including schools) and as an indicator of high quality which has underpinned children’s progress.

Other indicators include:

- ▶ trained staff with a good knowledge and understanding of child development
- ▶ knowledge of the development of early language and communication including high quality adult/child interactions leading to sustained shared thinking
- ▶ having the time to carry out “effective assessments”
- ▶ awareness of the different ways in which children learn including the Characteristics of Effective Learning, self-regulation and independence; social development and wellbeing and cognitive development through a child-led approach
- ▶ an understanding of the *Development Matters* cycle of Observation (Describing); Assessment (Deciding) and Planning (What next?) (Early Education, 2012:4)
- ▶ regular opportunities for reflection on practice

### Observation – A professional approach

Observation, knowing when to observe and describing what we see (verbally and in documentation) and then interpreting what we have seen, is a professional skill which is fundamental to teaching and learning. Just as doctors need to diagnose their patients, teachers/practitioners need to look at the evidence and make decisions about how to support children’s development. Mary Jane Drummond articulates this in a respectful child-centred way in the following:

When we work with young children, when we play and talk with them, when we watch them and everything they do, we are witnessing a fascinating and inspiring process: we are seeing young children learn. As we think about what we see, and try to understand it, we have embarked on the process that I call “assessment”. I am using the term to describe the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children’s learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use. (Drummond, 1993:13)

It was from Drummond’s description of the observation process that the exceptional assessment practices in New Zealand were developed, using narrative Learning Stories and looking deeply into children’s development and how they learn. I saw this first hand during a study visit to New Zealand early years centres in 2014 and wrote in my blog:

What strikes me is the level of knowledge and understanding of the practitioners – they know their child development and can articulate what they see children doing very well (Chilvers, 2014).

Grenier (2018) talks about “keen observation” as practitioners get to know their children and “notice what is important about **their** development and learning”. He also makes a crucial point about ensuring that there is a “rich learning environment and a rich curriculum” to ensure that there is much for practitioners to notice about “what children know and can do, how they think and develop their ideas, and what sort of misconceptions and barriers to learning they may have” (ibid:14).

The National Strategies (2004-2011) saw observation as being at the heart of professional practice and documented this in many of their publications including *Progress Matters – Reviewing and enhancing young children’s development* where they stated that:

Observation is an integral part of professional interactions with children and is identified in the EYFS as a key to effective practice. Early years practitioners need to know their children well and record, where appropriate, their observations in quick notes or lively narratives. (DCSF, 2009:6)

Alison Peacock, Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, at a conference in January 2018 spoke about “Professional learning without Limits” and the importance of teachers and practitioners having “pedagogical conversations” about their children.

Peacock called this “research-based pedagogy” where teachers/practitioners make opportunities to “really deeply” look at what is “going on” in their settings including “observation of children and talking about their thinking”. The observation process or cycle actually follows a research-based approach through gathering the **qualitative evidence** of children’s engagement in their play and activities, **interpreting or analysing** the evidence and then **drawing conclusions** about what might happen as a result. This is research that is grounded in practice with the whole experience of observation actually deepening teacher/practitioner knowledge and skills in a cycle of continual professional development. Observing children is one of the best ways to fine tune your knowledge of child development and how they think and learn.

### A professional approach – the challenges

Observation is not without its challenges, which have been many, including a reductionist view of children’s development through simplistic and superficial proposals for baseline assessment at the start of the Reception year. These types of assessment, which do not involve observing children in the context they are most familiar with and acknowledging them as experts in their own field of play, are often quick fixes for Government accountability and are increasingly taking over from professionally informed insights of what young children are actually capable of thinking about and learning.

Ofsted have also contributed to the undermining of professional observation practices in their recent *Bold Beginnings* report (Ofsted, 2017) by contradicting the Standards and Testing Agency’s Early Years Foundation Stage Profile handbook (STA, 2017) which states, “Practitioners need to observe learning which children have initiated rather than only focusing on what children do when prompted” (ibid:17). Ofsted has suggested that:

The majority of teachers did not agree that observational assessment was the

most reliable form of assessment as stated in the EYFSP handbook. They felt that statements such as the one above lessened the importance of assessment as part of teaching (Ofsted, 2017: 26)

This statement also contradicts the EYFS Statutory Framework (para 2.1) and findings from major reviews and research quoted at the beginning of this paper.

Interestingly the *Bold Beginnings* report also states, “Many teachers commented that assessment, undertaken as they were teaching, allowed them to adjust their activity in the moment” (Ofsted 2017:26), however, in order to do this “adjusting in the moment” teachers/practitioners will be intuitively “observing in the moment” and making informed decisions about how to support and extend children’s development and learning. This is what we would call good teaching and is responding to child-led thinking and learning which frequently leads to episodes of sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). This is sophisticated observation at a skilled professional level – it is hard to teach effectively without it. It develops with experience, practice and a good knowledge of child development which forms part of teachers and practitioner’s observation tool kits.

### The Observation Tool Kit

The Observation Tool Kit developed by the author as a virtual representation of the knowledge, skills and experience needed to make accurate, objective and insightful observations of children. It is a metaphor for all the inherent professional skills that are used when we observe children, strive to understand what we see and put that understanding to good use. It is a crucial part of early years professional practice and should begin in initial training on the complex development of young children and **how** they learn. It develops further through observing children and documenting what you see; supported by reflective practice, opportunities to share and discuss what has been seen and keeping an open-mind; it strengthens (triangulates) the judgements you make about children’s progress.

The Tool Kit includes building up a good understanding of:

- ▶ child development.
- ▶ the characteristics of effective learning.
- ▶ development of speech, language and communication.
- ▶ levels of involvement and wellbeing.
- ▶ sustained shared thinking
- ▶ children’s schema; threads of thinking
- ▶ childled play: knowing children’s interests and fascinations
- ▶ special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- ▶ working together with parents and other partners.

Using the Observation Tool Kit means that practitioners/teachers draw on and think about many other aspects of children’s development, not just *Development Matters*, which only gives the thinnest slice of children’s developmental potential. As Nancy Stewart (2016) points out, “The statements in *Development Matters* are common **examples** of how children might develop and give a general picture of progression, but they are by no means the whole story”. She goes on to say, “We need to be thinking for ourselves as we decide what is important in a situation, and in deciding what comes next. It requires both judgement and creativity, and is not as simple as following a set of instructions”.

Building a professional toolkit takes time but the more practitioners/teachers know about children’s development and learning the stronger their practice will become. In developing these observation and assessment skills they will be more informed, confident and accurate in articulating the holistic developmental progress of young children. Above all we need to make assessment for learning work for children and bring the joy back into observing them as they play, talk, think and learn.

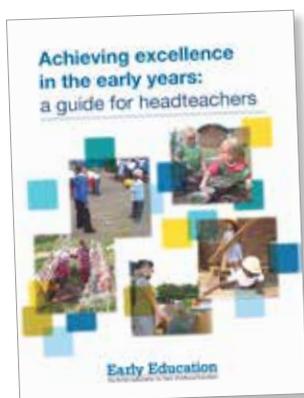
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The Observation and Assessment Tool Kit© self-assessment is being developed by Di Chilvers as part of the Development Map. More information can be found at <http://watchmegrow.uk/2016/07/decide-progress-child-made>

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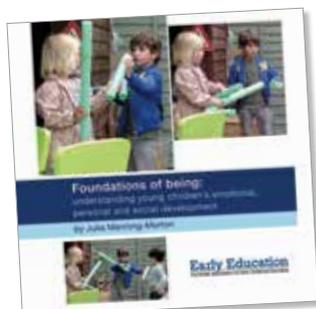
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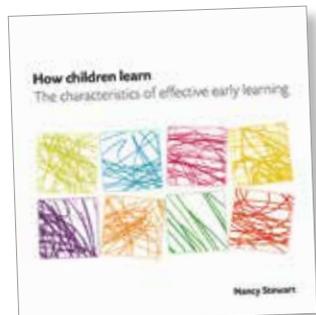


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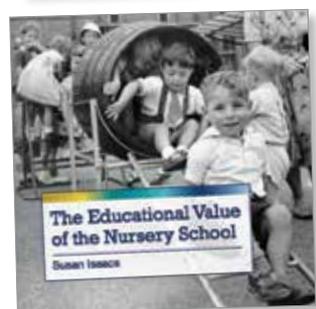


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