

Observation, assessment and planning

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This is part 1 of a linked case study; see 'The Ranges and overlapping ovals - Seeing young children's development and progress as a continuum' (part 2)

Observation, assessment and planning is part of professional practice – What does this mean?

Part 1

Why this case study?

This case study explains why observation, assessment and planning is a professional skill for all educators, at the heart of practice with children from birth to 6+ across the EYFS.

It expands on the points that are made in Birth to Five Matters, Observation, assessment and planning (p.60-63) and supports educators to:

- Understand the importance of observation to support and extend children's development and learning
- See the difference between formative and summative assessment
- Make professionally informed 'best-fit' decisions
- Recognise the value of 'professional dialogues' as integral to good practice

Links across Birth to Five Matters

See:

- How children learn: Characteristics of Effective Learning (p 24, p 55)
- Supporting Development and Learning (p 36)
- Across early childhood – progression and continuity (p 44-52)
- Holistic development and learning (p 53-54)
- Using Birth to Five Matters to support development and learning and a Unique Child (p 64-65)

Observing Frankie's progress

Frankie's key person has been regularly observing her as she plays, she knows her well and understands how she is developing and what support she needs. Her observations are often 'in-action' as she plays with Frankie frequently making decisions about what she needs to do to extend her play or language. This is an integral part of observation, assessment and planning all of which happens in the moment. It is a skilled part of professional practice which enables educators to teach-in-action. Interestingly, educators will be making hundreds of these 'in-action' decisions each day with children as they observe, assess and decide on next steps in the midst of practice. This is one of the reasons why observation is such a professionally informed skill.

At times, Frankie's key person creates observational learning stories often about her interests which she shares with Frankie and her family. These documented short Learning Stories capture key moments in her development and learning. They also show the depth and detail of her thinking and creativity.

Here, the educator is gathering lots of information about Frankie's development, learning and progress some of which she will keep in mind whilst balancing this with some documented observations and collections of her mark making, drawing, paintings etc. This is called formative assessment or assessment for learning (p.60-61).

What formative assessment tells us is that young children's development is unique, inspiring, complex and at times unpredictable. They are constantly learning following their own developmental pathway and making progress, so it helps us to 'step back' from time to time and ask this question...Where are they now in their developmental journey?

These stopping off points are called summative assessments (p 62) where educators can pause and reflect on what they know about the child. Frankie's key person is doing just this in the short learning story observation below.

Frankie's developmental pathway.....



Aug 21 mths old



Sept 22 mths old





Oct 23 mths old

Frankie, you have been busy following your interest in the pegs, frogs, puppets and boxes. I can see how your play & thinking has grown as you are so intentional in the way you position objects, sorting the finger puppets & rabbits in lines, groups and collections.

I loved the way that you arranged the rabbits in the boxes so they all fitted in & had a space. This tells me so much about your mathematical development & understanding of sorting, matching & ordering - this is a great foundation for your later learning especially your spatial awareness of how things connect & fit together. You follow your creative thinking through exploring & investigating what happens like finding the small pools of water on the climbing frame & starting to make marks with your fingers. You are a busy bee always finding something to explore & inviting me to join in by asking "Help Me!!!!"

Development Map

She has taken a holistic overview of Frankie's development by summarising the progress she has made in a few months focussing on her interests and what they tell her about Frankie's learning. The short narrative picks out key aspects such as the way in which her interest in positioning and placing objects (a schema) is developing her mathematical and creative thinking.

So how did she make this summary and the professionally informed decisions (p.67) about Frankie's learning and progress? She will have reflected on the aspects below considering Frankie's overall development and not rely on matching statements to judge her progress.

Frankie's key person will have:

- Reflected on her development and identified the patterns in her play which showed her positioning schema. Understanding child development e.g. schema, interests and child-led play is important to know as it helps to explain HOW children are learning and thinking. It also helps the educator make connections to other aspects of learning such as mathematics

- Referenced the Characteristics of Effective Learning taking notice of Frankie's learning dispositions and recognising that playing, exploring and investigating are all part of being an active learner and critical thinker
- Considered Frankie's development and progress in the areas of learning particularly highlighting her progress in shape space and measures (spatial awareness) and number
- Will know much more about Frankie's development and learning in the areas of learning and how these aspects combine holistically (p.67, 68). She may also have looked at the developmental grids in Birth to Five Matters to affirm her decisions about Frankie's general pattern of development and to consider ways to support and extend her learning BUT there is no need to highlight or use the statements as a checklist.
- Engaged in professional dialogue (p.67) with colleagues to discuss, share and reflect on their perspectives of Frankie's development, learning and progress. These valuable, often informal, conversations help to moderate decisions about progress and build a stronger shared understanding of children's development in all aspects of learning
- Will be able to use all this rich information to make an informed decision about her progress across the Ranges and identifying where she is roughly on track or developing more slowly or quickly in other areas (p.63); or where she may benefit from extra support. (See Case Study 2)

In this way, summative assessment becomes a much more informed, robust and holistic approach to mapping children's progress along the Ranges. Importantly this bigger picture serves as recognition and celebration of a child's learning journey which can be shared with Frankie and her family so they can talk about her progress as well.

Connections to theory, research and the resources on the Birth to Five Matters website

To dig deeper into the points made in this case study have a look at...

Observing Children's Development Part One, Chilvers, D. (Ed) Early Education Journal no 84, Spring 2018.

https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EE_Journal_-Spring-2018-ONLINE-2.pdf

Observing young children, A Froebelian approach, Froebel Trust, Stella Louis

https://files.froebel.org.uk/production/documents/FT_Observing-young-children_Pamphlet_INTERACTIVE_REV-2.pdf

Professional Dialogues – Developing a shared understanding of progression (p.11) in

Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings. Education Wales

<https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/c6383417-cd62-4d66-9d53-15a955c79d6f/assessment-arrangements-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf>

Schema (p.34-36), Observation and following the interests of the child (p.64- 66) in

Realising the Ambition: Being Me (National practice guidance for early years in Scotland) 2020

<https://education.gov.scot/media/3bjpr3wa/realisingtheambition.pdf>

Reflective questions for practice

- Have you noticed how you are observing 'in-action', then making 'in-action' decisions which support and extend children's development and learning?
- Is there a shared understanding of formative and summative assessment across your team?
- When do professional dialogues and discussions about the children take place in your setting/school?
- Have you thought about having an observation buddy where you can write short narratives together to capture children's key moments, interests and ideas?
- How does your team feel about making professionally informed decisions about children's progress?

Key Points

- Observation, assessment and planning is a skilled and important part of professional practice.
- Documented short Learning Stories capture key moments development and learning. They also show the depth and detail of children's thinking and creativity and can be shared with parents.
- Professionally informed decisions involve reflecting on various aspects of a child's overall development and not relying on matching statements to judge progress.
- Professional dialogues help to moderate decisions about progress and build a stronger shared understanding of children's development and learning