



Meaningful observations: Examples of documented observations

Moving from description to analysis

To move beyond description to detailed analysis and interpretation of observation takes time and practice. It also involves developing a strong understanding of the influences that have an impact on teachers' ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding children's actions.

Rich and effective observations are built on careful attention to both the practical skills involved in recording and the skills of critical self-reflection.

Developing the practical recording skills of specificity, directness, mood and completeness helps teachers produce clear and easily understood observations. The quality and clarity of the observation is particularly important because teachers' capacity to engage in critical self-reflection depends on effective observation with rich detail. Through critical self-reflection, teachers review their ways of observing and create new possibilities for seeing, interpreting and understanding children's learning.

Every teacher analyses and interprets what is observed in different ways based on their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, the influence of their teaching experiences and the strong influences of their own childhoods. For example, some teachers may record an observation by describing what they see in a photograph or while observing children, focusing primarily on the physical elements. Others may attend to the social relationships between children, examine how children relate to objects, or use language that reflects their own feelings as they observe children's interactions.

There is no one way of observing that is 'true' or objective, as every individual observes through the lens of their beliefs, experiences and perceptions. However, while observation is never a neutral process, it is essential to critically examine those influences that shape teachers' ways of seeing and recognise the filters that limit what is seen and how it is interpreted.

Annotated examples

To illustrate the process of moving from description to analysis, three examples are provided of a teacher observation based on one experience in a kindergarten setting. The three examples demonstrate the difference between:

- a simple description of what happened (Example 1)
- a minimal attempt to interpret events (Example 2)
- a detailed description of events with interpretation and analysis (Example 3).

Example 3 clearly links observation, interpretation and analysis to future learning possibilities for children. Each example is shown first as a simple observation, with comments on its strengths and weaknesses; then as an observation with interpretation and analysis, again, with comments; then once more, as a basis for informed planning. This clearly demonstrates the value of having a rich observation to draw on.

Focus questions

As you read the examples, the following set of questions will help you to examine their quality. The questions will also assist teachers when developing their own observation records. Please consider the attention to detail, the depth of interpretation and the degree of critical reflection that is reflected in the examples.

Observation

- How clear is the observation?
- Does it focus on significant learning?
- Does the observation clearly identify the learning?
- Does the observation provide specific details such as the date, time of day and length of time spent on the learning experience, the learning context in which the observation was made, the number of children and adults involved, and the type of materials and resources used?
- Does it provide information about the non-verbal actions, expressions and gestures?

Interpretation and analysis

- Is it clear how the teacher arrived at this interpretation from the information in the observation?
- Are clear links made to the kindergarten learning and development areas?
- Has the teacher identified whether the learning is in a familiar or new situation and the level of support the child required?

Learning possibilities

- Do the learning possibilities relate to the observation and significant aspects of learning identified?
- Will the learning possibilities help promote further learning in the targeted area and are they relevant to the child?
- After exploring the questions above, consider the critical questions in terms of your own observations.

Critical questions

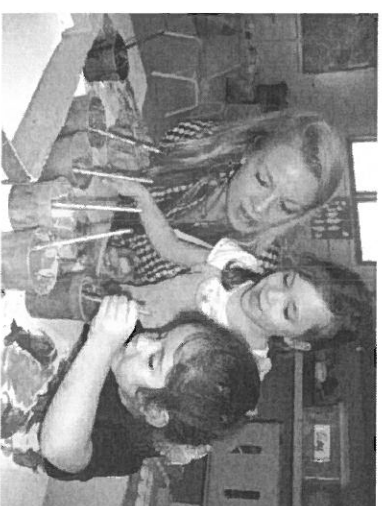
- What is it about this scenario that drew my interest and why?
- How do my assumptions about children's social and cultural backgrounds shape what I observe or focus on, as well as how I interpret and record actions?
- How does my social and cultural background influence what I see or don't see?
- What influences the ways that I prioritise and shape learning opportunities?

Observation and documentation

When you have photographs or artefacts of children's work, you have a glimpse of the learning that may have taken place. When you include children's voices and anecdotes you have the beginnings of a valuable observation. When you add interpretation and analysis of the learning taking place, you have substance.

Observation with documentation is about substance.

Early years teacher



Examples: Observation

<p>1</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, April</p> <p>Lily and Sue sat together, with Sue watching Lily as she tried to copy the postcard of flowers. Annabelle walked past and was interested, so stopped to watch Lily.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>This observation lacks depth. It does not provide a context about why Lily is looking at art postcards with the assistant, the conversation that developed, or an analysis of the learning that was taking place.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Sue, Lily and Annabelle sit and talk together while Lily paints her picture of flowers from the postcard. Lily talks with Annabelle and Sue about the colours she is using.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>This observation lacks detail that provides a context about how the learning opportunity evolved and was developed.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Lily, Sue and Annabelle — Indoor play</p> <p>Lily has been experimenting with paint combinations over several days. In discussion with Sue (assistant) we decided to introduce small pots of paints and a mixing palette (off screen) so that Lily could create her own colour combinations.</p> <p>Sue introduced a postcard of flowers, as Lily has been talking about the flowers in her own garden at home. As Lily painted, she looked at the postcard very carefully, using the colours in the postcard on her paper. As she painted, she said to Annabelle, 'I'm using gold first 'cause that's my favourite, then the green'. Annabelle then passed the red paint and laughed 'red's last!' Lily laughed and took the pot, stirring vigorously.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>This observation provides background information that creates a context for the information recorded. It describes some of the intentional teaching responses used by staff to support Lily's interest prior to the observation. It also details the language used by the children and provides a sense of their dispositions towards the experience.</p>

Examples: Observation, interpretation and analysis

<p>1</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, April</p> <p>Lily and Sue sat together with Sue watching Lily as she tried to copy the postcard of flowers. Annabelle walked past and was interested, so stopped to watch Lily.</p>	<p>Interpretation and analysis</p> <p>Lily was keen to mix and stir the paints herself. She was happy</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>The interpretation is framed as a description, not an analysis. How do we know that Lily is happy? What led to this interpretation — is it related to body language? If so, say so.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Sue, Lily and Annabelle sit and talk together while Lily paints her picture of flowers from the postcard. Lily talks with Annabelle and Sue about the colours she is using.</p>	<p>Interpretation and analysis</p> <p>Lily seems very interested in painting using the postcard flowers as a reference point. She smiles and talks with Sue and Annabelle and is keen to mix the paints with Annabelle watching.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>The interpretation lacks specificity about Lily's learning. It attempts to introduce some information about dispositions and relationships between the group members but without analysis. The interpretation appears as a description, not an analysis.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Lily, Sue and Annabelle — Indoor play</p> <p>Lily has been experimenting with paint combinations over several days. In discussion with Sue (assistant) we decided to introduce small pots of paints and a mixing palette (off screen) so that Lily could create her own colour combinations.</p> <p>Sue introduced a postcard of flowers, as Lily has been talking about the flowers in her own garden at home.</p> <p>As Lily painted she looked at the postcard very carefully, using the colours in the postcard on her paper. As she painted, she said to Annabelle, 'I'm using gold first 'cause that's my favourite, then the green'. Annabelle then passed the red paint and laughed 'red's last!' Lily laughed and took the pot, stirring vigorously.</p>	<p>Interpretation and analysis</p> <p>Working at the table gave Lily more stability to mix the paints and appeared to invite more possibilities for conversation with others than at the easels. Lily's attention to detail (through action and conversation), seems to signal her interest in the experience.</p> <p>Lily was particularly interested in this experience, and represented the colours of the postcard flowers in the same relative location on her paper. She is attempting to represent the flowers through close observation and attention to placement of colours. Link to QKLG: Active learning — ways to represent ideas creatively through art, showing confidence and involvement in learning.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>The analysis moves from the previously general descriptions to interpretation and analysis. It ends with a link to specific aspects of learning and development identified in the <i>Queensland kindergarten learning guideline</i>.</p>

Informed planning: Learning possibilities and intentional teaching

<p>1</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, April</p> <p>Lily and Sue sat together with Sue watching Lily as she tried to copy the postcard of flowers. Annabelle walked past and was interested, so stopped to watch Lily.</p>	<p>Interpretation and analysis</p> <p>Lily was keen to mix and stir the paints herself. She was happy with her painting and smiled while painting.</p>	<p>Learning possibilities and intentional teaching</p> <p>Change the paints available for Lily and Annabelle and add long-handled brushes.</p> <p>Bring in some books about flowers.</p> <p>Have Sue work with a small group each day this week and keep the sample for Mother's Day.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>Why change the paints and for what purpose? What is the purpose of this learning possibility? The learning possibilities are not linked with the children's interests; they are introduced on the basis of one child's interest with the expectation that all children will become involved.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Sue, Lily and Annabelle sit and talk together while Lily paints her picture of flowers from the postcard. Lily talks with Annabelle and Sue about the colours she is using.</p>	<p>Interpretation and analysis</p> <p>Lily seems very interested in painting using the postcard flowers as a reference point.</p> <p>She smiles and talks with Sue and Annabelle and is keen to mix the paints with Annabelle watching.</p>	<p>Learning possibilities and intentional teaching</p> <p>Add some new colours to the paints tomorrow and use some new postcards.</p> <p>Get Sue to model wiping the brushes down rather than wiping them for Lily – helps with independence.</p> <p>See if Annabelle wants to join in tomorrow.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>It is not clear why the teacher is making these choices and decisions.</p> <p>No connections are made to learning and development areas.</p>

<p>3</p> <p>Observation: Lily's Flowers, 21 April</p> <p>Lily, Sue and Annabelle — Indoor play</p> <p>Lily has been experimenting with paint combinations over several days. In discussion with Sue (assistant), we decided to introduce small pots of paints and a mixing palette (off screen) so that Lily could create her own colour combinations.</p> <p>Sue introduced a postcard of flowers as Lily has been talking about the flowers in her own garden at home. As Lily painted she looked at the postcard very carefully, used the same colours on her paper and attempted to represent the flowers in the same way as the postcard. As she painted she said to Annabelle 'I'm using gold first 'cause that's my favourite, then the green.' Annabelle then passed the red paint and laughed 'red's last!' Lily laughed and took the pot, stirring vigorously.</p>	<p>Interpretation/analysis</p> <p>Working at the table appeared to invite more possibilities for Lily to share conversation with others than at the easels.</p> <p>Lily's attention to detail (through action and conversation), signal her interest in the experience.</p> <p>Lily was particularly interested in this experience and represented the colours of the postcard flowers in the same relative location on her paper. She is attempting to represent the flowers through close observation and attention to placement of colours.</p> <p>Link to <i>QKLG: Active learning</i> — ways to represent ideas creatively through art, showing confidence and involvement in learning.</p>	<p>Learning possibilities & intentional teaching</p> <p>Learning opportunities for Lily</p> <p>Encourage Lily to bring in some of her flowers to share.</p> <p>Introduce more postcards of artworks.</p> <p>Model observational drawing and talk through the steps as we draw/paint.</p> <p>Opportunities for other children</p> <p>Introduce small pump bottles of paint and mixing palettes so Lily can experiment independently at any time.</p> <p>Share this paint pump idea with all the children and move materials to a larger table space so that children can work alongside one another.</p> <p>Create a painting space next to shelving. Use the shelves to store a range of art materials to provide opportunities for all the children to engage creatively (promoting independence and choice).</p> <p>Encourage children to suggest materials they would like to access.</p>	<p>Comment</p> <p>The learning possibilities highlight the development of independence, decision-making and creativity which link to the learning and development area of Active learning.</p> <p>The detailed list of possibilities for extending the learning provide intentional teaching responses related to the individual child and group, resources and room layout. The intentional teaching strategies also include modelling of drawing skills.</p> <p>Note: An experienced teacher might note significant intended interactions with children. Practical and organisational changes are likely to happen as part of the teacher's thinking rather than be recorded.</p>
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Reflection questions

What aspects of your practice need further development so that:

- observations are clear and focus on significant learning
- interpretation and analysis align with the observation and make links to the kindergarten learning and development areas
- there is evidence about whether learning occurred in a familiar or new situation, and what degree of support the child required
- learning possibilities relate to the observation and significant aspects of learning
- learning possibilities are relevant to the child and the related learning and development areas.