

# Take notice

Observing individual children and using the information gained to support their learning are vital exercises, explains **Dr Stella Louis**, who looks at how the revised EYFS may impact practice

**I**t's so important that we debate, discuss and tease out the role of observations in early years best practice in light of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and *Development Matters* guidance. As well as some marked omissions within the documents, the terminology has also changed, so it is worth examining what impact that might have on our thinking about the practice of observation.

Neither the revised framework nor the guidance spells out how the traditional well-respected method of observation (observe, assess and plan – OAP) should underpin best practice in the early years.

The adopter version of the EYFS does still refer to practitioners' 'day-to-day observations about children's progress'; however, the importance of observation is made less explicit.

The EYFS (2017) states, '[Assessment] involves practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations.' That sentence has now been

replaced with, 'It involves practitioners knowing children's level of achievement and interests, and then to shape teaching and learning experiences for each child reflecting that knowledge.'

In the revised *Development Matters*, 'notice' is generally used, rather than 'observe', as in, 'Assessment is about noticing what children can do and what they know.'

The changes, it seems, are intended to flag up to the sector that assessment should not be an onerous data-gathering process that eats into practitioners' time supporting children's learning – which is to be welcomed. But what of the wider implications for practice?

## OBSERVING, ASSESSING AND PLANNING

At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves why we observe young children in our care. Observation enables us to:

- tune into a child's emotional needs
- tap into their current interests
- scaffold their learning appropriately
- develop a real understanding of a child's holistic development over time and assess their

## → MORE INFORMATION

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If you would like to join one of Dr Louis' webinars on 'Observations', contact Early Education, [www.early-education.org.uk](http://www.early-education.org.uk)



progress. Take, for example, four-year-old John, who loves playing with magnetic tiles. Observations of his play over 18 months reveal how it has evolved from stacking and building to exploring properties and partitioning shapes and, finally, to symbolic play – when he tells his mother, 'I'm putting up Christmas decorations.'

The importance of observation was made clear in the Nutbrown review of early years qualifications, commissioned by the Government.

## case study: noticing, recognising, responding

An example of best practice in *An Introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae/ Assessment for Learning* by the New Zealand government.

Tim is interested in vacuum cleaners. The record of this interest includes layers of noticing, recognising and responding by the teacher and by Tim himself over a number of days.

**Noticing:** Tim arrives at the early childhood centre and tells Julie, the teacher, in some excitement, 'I've seen a Dyson.' Another teacher hears the comment and explains to Julie that a 'Dyson' is a vacuum cleaner.

**Recognising:** Julie has a conversation

with Tim and discovers that vacuum cleaners are of great interest to him. She recognises that for Tim, vacuum cleaners provide many opportunities for learning.

**Responding:** Julie fetches the centre's vacuum cleaner, and they take it apart and try an experiment to find out how many plastic plates it can suck up before the warning light goes on. A number of children also become involved...

The teachers have already noted Tim's early attempts at drawing. Julie recognises this as another learning opportunity and encourages Tim to draw a picture of the vacuum cleaner. He also completes a painting.

Perhaps feeling the two-dimensional drawing and painting are not enough to portray what he wants to represent, Tim decides to make a three-dimensional model of a vacuum cleaner.

The learning environment is widened when Tim goes on a visit to a vacuum cleaner shop. Tim notices the engines at the shop and later has a conversation with the teacher about motors and electricity.

**Tim:** Some vacuum cleaners are connected to motors.

**Julie:** Can a vacuum cleaner go if it doesn't have a motor?

**Tim:** No. If the motor's out, the



Its final report, *Foundations for Quality* (2012), points to 'four issues of pedagogical process that are essential [for practitioners] to understand'. Topping the list was 'the importance of observations and assessments as a tool by which a proper understanding of a child can be reached'.

This, explains the report, 'has long been the bedrock upon which early years practitioners have built their practice and it must be a core skill that all potential early years practitioners acquire'.

vacuum cleaner might not go.

**Julie:** What do you think makes the motor go?

**Tim:** Um... don't know.

**Julie:** What about the plug?

**Tim:** You plug it into the wall, because there's lots of electricity in the wall.

**Julie:** How do you think the electricity gets into the wall?

**Tim:** Don't know. When the cord is plugged into that plug, how does the electricity attach to the plug inside the wall?

**Julie:** Um... what do you think?

Tim stood up and slowly walked towards the office, looking for clues. Julie followed behind, wondering where this would lead...

Eroding its importance brings a serious challenge to high-quality practice and the possibility of deskilling and de-professionalising the workforce. To counter this, it is important that we are able to articulate an in-depth understanding of each element of the observation process, including noticing.

## NOTICING AND OBSERVING

What is important is that practitioners see 'noticing' not as a synonym for observing, but rather

## Observation enables practitioners to build a holistic picture of a child's needs, interests and development



Tim is gaining new information about vacuum cleaners and electricity. At the same time, he is gaining skills and developing dispositions about being a learner... The teachers and Tim himself notice, recognise, and respond to opportunities to learn.

→ [www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Kei-Tua-o-te-Pae/ECEBooklet1Full.pdf](http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Kei-Tua-o-te-Pae/ECEBooklet1Full.pdf)

as a starting point for the observation process. Otherwise, less experienced practitioners may see noticing as a singular action, which does not require them to reflect on and respond to what they have seen.

'Noticing' could also be viewed as fast, quick and superficial. Arguably, this may be more likely to play into the educators' unconscious bias, as they quickly judge a child's progress, rather than taking the time to reflect on both the child's abilities and their own attitudes.

There is also the danger that practitioners might tend to focus on particular developmental skills, such as the tripod grip, which could lead to a new 'tick list' of learning outcomes.

Rather, the process of observing needs to be slower, more deliberate, reflective and analytical (see box, overleaf).

## NOTICING, RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING

To understand more about 'noticing' and the observation process, practitioners can turn to the 'notice, recognise and respond' definition of assessment that is used in the New Zealand early years practice guide *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning*. Each part of this three-step process is essential to the act of observing children and involves practitioners:

- first, seeing a 'significant moment'
- secondly, applying their professional expertise and judgements to make sense of what they have seen
- thirdly, making decisions about how to respond (see Case study).

Here, explains Manning-Morton (2018), 'Noticing is not just about absorbing information at a superficial level, noticing in effective practice is about:

- perception; how we use our senses to notice
- attention – what we focus on, and
- attunement – how we tune in and empathise.'

Nutbrown and Carter (2010) note, 'Watching children as they learn and understanding their learning moments is complex and difficult work and places the highest of demands upon their educators.' ➤

## BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

On the plus side, making 'noticing' part of our early years vocabulary reinforces the need for practitioners to be constantly alert to significant moments in a child's learning and development through the day.

Another benefit is that 'noticing' also reminds practitioners that observations need not be time-consuming and don't have to be recorded to be valid. The revised EYFS rightly acknowledges the growing trend towards educators producing observations for the sake of it. I have witnessed educators with piles of written observations that are not analysed or acted upon and, in fact, reveal very little that is meaningful about the child. Too many time-consuming observations only limits the time a practitioner spends supporting a child's learning.

'Noticing' also enables less experienced practitioners, with a weaker knowledge of child development, to contribute to discussions about a child's progress.

## In-depth observations

What concerns me is that the revised EYFS seems to imply that the act of observing creates unnecessary data when, in fact, in-depth and recorded observations should remain an essential part of the assessment process – provided they are meaningful.

Take, for example, the case of a practitioner who noticed that a baby

picked up and grasped objects only with the right hand and also crawled in a roly-poly way, something she had seen in only two other children. Soon after, the baby was identified as having cerebral palsy and given excellent specialist help.

Educators need to record what they observe children doing throughout the year so that they, and parents, can debate and assess how well children are progressing and plan ways to support each child to develop and learn. Such observations are meaningful to the child, allowing them to take strong ownership of their learning journey.

I had hoped that the revised EYFS and guidance would provide clarity on observations and recommend that educators complete a set amount of observations to reduce workload – for example, nine holistic, in-depth observations a year for children attending day nurseries or with a childminder, and six observations for children in nursery schools or Reception classes. This represents one observation of each child every six weeks, which is manageable and good practice.

The benefits of this approach are threefold:

- first, it supports the educators' understanding of individual children
- second, observations become a professional habit
- third, educators can use what they have learnt to support and inform teaching and learning.

## looking closely

Observation helps practitioners to understand the holistic needs of a child. Part of this process should involve practitioners actively checking their unconscious bias to ensure they are acting in the best interest of the child.

For example, observing a child complete a task from start to finish can provide the practitioner with the time and space to ponder and challenge their bias or the basis of the evidence they are presented with – though this also most likely depends on a culture of reflection within the setting.

While it may seem like just semantics, the difference in language in the newly reformed EYFS has the potential to result

in intangible differences in outcomes for children.

Take, for example, four-year-old Lila, who on finding a seed observes, describes and then plants it. Days later, she sees a shoot, which she describes. It is the role of the educator to act on Lila's interests and actions.

An educator who is concerned only with 'noticing' may note only the planting of the seed. However, an educator who is 'observing' would build on the observation, perhaps by reading her a gardening story, and reflect on previous observations – for example, connecting Lila's description of the purple seed with a conversation a week earlier about her purple trousers.



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## Observing and teaching

Also missing from the revised framework is an explanation of how observation links to effective teaching and learning (as can be seen in the New Zealand example).

Moylett (2018) describes these complexities as tuning in, noticing, being attentive, being curious, asking questions and knowing when to be quiet. Observing children allows us to see what we should and should not do so that we can provide appropriate support.

This kind of observation is extremely important if we are to offer children challenges and a quality curriculum that meets each child's individual needs. Educators need to build on children's strengths through observations of them, beginning with where the child is now. It also highlights the vital connections between observation and effective teaching and learning.

## TRAINING MATTERS

What the revised framework and guidance cannot solve is the longstanding problem, raised in the *Nutbrown Review* (2012), that many educators are not skilled in undertaking observations.

The observation process can only be effective when the practitioner recognises what are 'significant moments' and knows how to respond. This hinges on the educator having a sound knowledge of child development and how to support learning. Without it, significant moments are missed, observations become superficial and educators rely on crude developmental checklists that fail to provide a full and rich picture of a child's progress.

The Department for Education (DfE) is to be congratulated for wanting to reduce the workload so that educators focus on understanding the uniqueness of every child's capacity, holistic development and learning. But educators need to be skilled at observing children for this ambition to be realised. We can only develop observation practice if we cultivate the central place given to observing children, building it into initial and continuing professional training and qualifications, and if we proactively encourage educators to think about what they see and to act on their observations. ■

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