The Power of Observation

Presented by:
Dr. Aimee Wolanski
Peel District School Board
Current Climate in Education

- Era of assessment and accountability
  - EQAO
  - No Child Left Behind ("No Child Left Untested")

- “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has been responsible for a virtual explosion of testing in public schools. Although the law as originally written only required testing of children beginning in third grade, more testing of younger children is taking place than ever before …”
  (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2005, p. 1)
Use of Standardized Tests

• standardized tests – banned in certain states for use with preschool children

• highly contentious; children’s development is uneven; test anxiety; often used in making high-stakes decisions

• LaParo & Pianta (2000) – preschool cognitive assessments only explained 25% of variance of later school outcomes
Developmentally Appropriate Assessment Practices

• "Observation is the most effective strategy for getting to know young children" (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, p. 49)

• "Observation should be the primary assessment strategy used in Kindergarten" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 9)
Developmentally Appropriate Assessment Practices

“Because formal assessment of children younger than five using standardized instruments is expensive, difficult because the children often cannot articulate their own answers, and often inaccurate (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998), it is vitally important to their well-being that we become accomplished observers so that we can determine that each child is developing and learning at optimal levels.”

(Billman & Sherman, 2003, p. 3)
Disconnect between teachers' DAP beliefs and actual practice

Copple & Bredekamp (2009)
NAEYC – www.naeyc.org
Reggio Emilia

- Documentation of children’s work; observation, photos, displays, transcriptions of children’s discussions at work - basis for further exploration

- Diaries or memory books are prepared by teachers, to document their experiences

"Zebra." Drawing by 5-year-old child at Diana School.
Reggio Emilia Information

- http://zerosei.comune.re.it/ (Official Reggio Emilia site)

- www.reggioalliance.org (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance – NAREA)
Why Observe?

1. Identify children’s interests
2. Chart the developmental level of each child
3. Assist in planning an appropriate curriculum based on individual needs
4. Find out how children are progressing
5. Appraise teachers’ own practices
6. Provide a general overview of the program and help analyze specific classroom management problems
7. Written observations can be shared with teams, parents, and administrators

(Billman & Sherman, 2003, pp. 5 – 6)
"Every scrap of observed behavior becomes important when it is finally collated into a pattern."

(Cohen, Stern, & Balaban, 1997, p. 176)
A Focus on Observation

- **What is an anecdotal record?** “a short, written narrative which describes both student behaviour and the context in which it has occurred” (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2005, p. 313)

- “Observation is the process through which data are gathered about a child’s overall development, learning styles, interests, attitudes, and behaviours” (Vaclavik, Wolanski, & Wannamaker, 2001, p. 10)
A Focus on Observation

• **Where?** observe in gym, hallways, outdoors, in small and large groups in the classroom, at centres, with peers, with adults, during circle time, during transitions, snack time, in the library, on field trips, etc.

• **When?** daily; throughout all parts of the day

• **Who?** focus on 2 – 4 children per day
A Focus on Observation

How?

• steno note pads
• clipboard
• laminated file folder and recipe cards
• binders with sheets colour-coded according to area
• sticky notes and at-a-glance sheets
• mailing labels
A Focus on Observation

• Spontaneous vs. planned observation

• Can observe by:
  – domain (e.g., physical, language, social/emotional)
  – centre (e.g., blocks, paint, sand table)
  – Kindergarten learning area (e.g., math, science and technology, the arts)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample At-A-Glance Observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: Asha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 9, 2009 10:40 – 10:50 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approached group of 2 children (Latoya, Tyler) to join them at the sand centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asked &quot;Can I play?&quot; 3 times and was turned down each time; Latoya said &quot;Go away&quot; and Asha left the centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wandered over to the small block centre; emptied the wooden unit blocks on the carpet; tiled a small area with the blocks; played alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips for Effective Observation

• observe daily; target 2 – 4 children per day to observe

• date each entry; write down the exact time

• write down exact comments

• record during an event or shortly after it

• "good job" – meaningful?
Tips for Effective Observation

• importance of regular reflection on the data gathered – often a missing piece

• assumption vs. observation: Is this an observable behaviour? Document factually

• ask the child directly to clarify any questions you may have

• keep stages and theories of child development in mind as you observe
Tips for Effective Observation

- While observing, think about …
  - What kind of speech or language am I hearing? (e.g., playing with language, rich vocabulary, speech impairment)
  - What is the child’s level of engagement in the activity?
  - How does the child interact with his or her peers? With other adults?
Tips for Effective Observation

- How does the child solve problems that arise?
- Does the child easily enter and remain in play groups?
- How does the child hold a pencil or paint brush?
- What do the child’s paintings, writing samples, block structures .... look like?
ETFO observation resource

4 parts:
- Observation framework
- Observation questions
- Teacher reflection
- Ministry expectations
Observation Framework

Researchers have reported that the duration of the play activity reflects some degree of underlying complexity. Sylva, Roy, & Painter, (1980). Therefore, large blocks of free choice play are necessary in order to see more advanced levels of play develop. Often, you will find that dramatic play begins after the block construction has been completed.

Unit blocks were invented by Caroline Pratt in 1914. After observing children’s block play, Harriet Johnson (1966/1933) in E. Hirsch (1984, adapted by Maja Apelman) developed the following stages of block play. It is noted that repetition is evident throughout most of the stages.

Stage 1
- Children carry blocks without building with them.

Stage 2
- Horizontal towers or vertical rows.
- Tilting on flat surfaces such as floors and walls.

Stage 3
- Bridging.

Stage 4
- Enclosures.

Stage 5
- Symmetry, patterns for decoration.

Stage 6
- Representation.
- Structures named in relation to their function.

Stage 7
- Representation.
- Pre-planning of structures evident.
- Used in dramatic play.
- Reproduction of known structures.

Observation Questions

Social - Emotional Development
- What social skills are developing? Does the child lead or follow, adapt to the ideas of others, voice ideas, show respect for others, use language to express needs, and follow block routines?

Language Development
- Does the child name, label, describe or tell a story about the construction?
- What types of themes emerge during pretend play?
- What mathematical and scientific language is used?

Cognitive Development
- How does the child organize block play?
- Does the child combine other props with blocks?
- How is problem-solving demonstrated? Talks about a problem, uses trial and error, experiments, predicts outcomes, offers solutions?
- Does the child extend the play with originality, creativity, and imagination?
- What mathematical and scientific concepts does the child demonstrate: shape, patterning, symmetry, size, colour, shape, weight, height, length, depth, area, width, sorting, matching, comparing, classifying, counting, measuring, ordering, balance, gravity, and stability etc.?
- Does the child generate ideas or copy others? What types of structures does the child build?

Physical Development
- Exhibits increasing gross motor skills.
- Shows fine motor skill and hand-eye coordination.
- Shows awareness of physical space by moving safely around other children.
- What is the energy level and pace of play?
- Does the child choose small or large blocks?
Teacher Reflection

- Have I made the block center inviting by locating it near props at the home centre to promote more opportunities for co-operative play?

- Is the block centre located in the carpeted area of the classroom to deaden the noise level?

- Is the block building space too small? A large, open area will allow tall and wide structures.

- Is one gender dominating block play? Do we need to discuss this problem as a group?

- Have I encouraged each child to visually record their structure in a painting, a drawing, an oral or written story? Have I provided books and writing materials to enhance the children’s building?

- Am I demonstrating the use of mathematical and science language through my questioning?

- Have I photographed children’s constructions to add to their individual portfolios? Have I recorded their conversations on paper?

- How do I provide more time for extended projects so they can carry-over from one day to the next? Do I leave the children’s constructions standing for a few days before they are dismantled?

- What props do I need to add such as construction helmets, tools, small figurines?

- Have I provided a variety of different sizes, shapes, and kinds of blocks for the children to use?

- Are the routines for safety and clean-up firmly established? Blocks should not be piled higher than the child’s shoulder.

Ministry Expectations

Social - Emotional Development

- Identify people who work in the community and talk about what they do.

- Recognize personal interests, strengths, and accomplishments.

Language - Cognitive Development

- Use language to talk about their thinking, to reflect, and to solve problems.

- Respond to a variety of materials read aloud to them.

- Identify and describe, using common geometric terms, two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional figures through investigations with concrete materials.

- Build three-dimensional structures using a variety of materials and begin to recognize the three-dimensional figures that the structure contains.

Physical Development

- Begin to demonstrate control of small muscles in activities at a variety of learning centres and when using a variety of materials or equipment.
Benefits of Observation

• rich data
• valid
• natural setting; authentic
• unobtrusive – children are often unaware that they are being observed
• can cover all areas of development – physical, language, social/emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, personal/character
**Benefits of Observation**

- can determine strengths and weaknesses, interests, habits, pace, problem-solving skills, attention level, learning styles
- ongoing – can see patterns develop over time
- particularly useful for reporting to parents
- useful for early identification and intervention
Factors Affecting Observation

- time of day (i.e., hungry, tired)
- weather (e.g., first snow fall, rain – indoors)
- special events (e.g., birthday, holidays)
- relationship with adults, peers
- program structure and goals
- personalities of teacher and learner
Factors Affecting Observation

• classroom environment
  – type, novelty, and availability of toys
  – room arrangement
  – traffic patterns
  – routines
  – number and variety of centres open
  – number of children at each centre

• illness/health/physical disabilities, etc.

• own biases
Knowledge of Child Development

• Early Learning Framework (ELF)/Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) (2006)
  - social; emotional; cognitive; physical; communication/language/literacy development

Available at:
http://www.gov.on.ca/children/graphics/stel02_183342.pdf
Knowledge of Child Development

- Child development – continuum; children develop at different rates
- Resources to help with understanding of child development milestones:
  - Invest in Kids: www.investinkids.ca (Ages and Stages tab)
  - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/actearly
    - milestones from 3 mos. to 5 years
A Few More Websites

- [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org) (National Association for the Education of Young Children)
- [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) (American Academy of Pediatrics)
- [www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca) (Canadian Paediatric Society)
- [www.smartbrief.com/ascd](http://www.smartbrief.com/ascd)
- [www.childcarecanada.org](http://www.childcarecanada.org)
- [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)
- [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) (Health Canada)
Need for Multiple Sources of Data

- portfolios
- checklists
- questioning
- rating scales – continuum
- counts/tallies
- time sampling (e.g., every 30 seconds)
- event sampling (e.g., observations during snack time)
- video/audio taping
- self-assessment
- peer assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Need for Multiple Sources of Data

- case study
- interviews with children, parents
- teacher-designed recording tools
- check-brics, rubrics (older students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cooperation Check-bric</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listens to ideas of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares and discusses ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praises others' work and ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mapping

10-Minute Mapping of Kindergarten Student’s Movements During Centre Time
What do you notice in this writing sample?
Resources

- Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children
  - Dorothy H. Cohen
  - Virginia Stern
  - Nancy Balaban
  - (1997)

- An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement
  - Marie M. Clay
  - (2002)
Resources

(2003) Observation and Participation in Early Childhood Settings by Jean Billman and Janice Sherman

(2005) Focused Observations: How to Observe Children for Assessment and Curriculum Planning by Gaye Gronlund and Marlyn James
NAEYC Resources

Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment for Young Children
Sue Bredekamp and Teresa Rosegrant, Editors
Volume 1
(1992)

Spotlight on Assessment
young children
(2004)
NAEYC Resources

**Basics of Assessment**
A Primer for Early Childhood Educators
Oralie McAfee, Deborah J. Leong, and Elena Bodrova

(2004)

**The Power of Observation for Birth Through Eight**
Judy R. Jablon, Amy Laura Dombro, Margo L. Dichtelmiller

(2007)
Networks

• The Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Promotion Network
  - www.beststart.org (link is on 1st page once you enter the site)

• Early Years Education Ontario Network
Kindergarten

Parent Observation Guide

Peel DSB Parent Observation Guide
Parent Observation Guide

• Feedback on the Parent Observation Guide?

• What are some of the benefits of this or a similar guide?

• Are your staff members currently using observation as their primary assessment tool?
Small Group Discussion:

Observation Plan
Video Clip
Questions and Comments

- Any additional questions or comments?
- Contact information:
  Dr. Aimee Wolanski
  Research Department
  Peel District School Board
  5650 Hurontario Street
  Mississauga, ON    L5R 1C6
  phone:  (905) 890-1010 ext. 2613
  email:  aimee.wolanski@peelsb.com