

OBSERVATION...

A WINDOW INTO CHILDREN'S THINKING



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OVERVIEW

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario created this video based on feedback from our members - teachers and Designated Early Childhood Educators, who were grappling with what it meant to observe their children. The video and accompanying guide are intended to support our members professional learning and answer the many questions asked by educators about the observation of children such as, "What does observation look like?" and "How do I create an environment where I can make effective observations?".

This video will help you to frame and extend your thinking, and will provide further information to consider as you explore observation and its impact on you and your children.

The video explores the following big ideas:

- The influence of the views you bring to your role as an observer (e.g., of the child, of the role of the program);
- The creation of the learning environment and its impact on observing children;
- Organizational strategies in the classroom that support observation;
- Resources available to enhance educators' observations.

CONTEXT FOR THE VIEWER

This video was filmed in many classrooms over several years by ETFO, beginning before the implementation of full-day Kindergarten in Ontario and continuing into its implementation. The educators and their children who you will meet in the video opened their doors, so what you will see are classrooms in action dealing with the realities you face everyday. You will see Kindergarten teachers, Designated Early Childhood Educators, student teachers, educational assistants, and parent volunteers learning alongside children.

As educators we are able to watch our children and listen to them as they experience their day-to-day learning in our classrooms. This ability to watch and listen provides windows into their thinking, windows into their wonderings, windows into the learning that they are actually grappling with, as well as potential misconceptions.

Being open to children's thinking often provides surprises and extraordinary responses, and we realize through thoughtful observation that children are often capable of deep thinking that we can miss if we bring too many preconceived expectations to our observations. Through observing our children we can gain a better sense of what it is that we as educators

need to do in order to plan opportunities we know are going to help move them forward in their learning. In the video you will see educators who are thoughtful observers and you will encounter ideas to consider as you develop your understanding and practice.

Each section of this document corresponds to a brief video segment in the series. Use this document to guide your viewing of the videos **“What to Look for?”**, your discussions and reflections **“Think about and Discuss”**, and your future programming decisions and professional learning **“Actions and Next Steps to Try”**.

IMPORTANCE OF OBSERVATION



What to Look For?

We have recently deepened our understanding of observation to incorporate a more interactive role between adult and child. In order to truly understand how children are making sense of the world around them, we have to engage them in conversation as well as observe them.

(Dr. Pat Dickinson, Early Childhood Studies Program, Charles Sturt University)

- How might this idea impact your role as an observer?
- How does your view of the child and the program influence the way you plan your program and your observations?



Think About and Discuss ...

- Consider the components of observation; for example, careful listening and responding which may be enhanced with various forms of documentation including pictures, videos, collections of children’s drawings and creations.
- What is the potential of revisiting documentation with children to deepen the understanding of both the child and the educator.
- Reflect on observation as a tool for planning next steps.
- How does working from children’s interests in a play-based environment provide an authentic window into children’s learning?
- Discuss the different purposes for observation; i.e., Assessment AS, Assessment FOR, and Assessment OF Learning. Where should the emphasis be in a play-based learning Kindergarten?



Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- Reflect on your program and consider how the viewpoints expressed about the nature and purpose of observation might begin to influence your practice.

CO-CREATING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



What to Look For?

- How might an educator's view of the child and the goals of the program influence the creation of the learning environment?
- How does this more open environment change the role of observation? The role of the educator? The role of the learner?



Think About and Discuss ...

- What is the difference between observing in the context of pre-planned learning experiences (e.g., containers in the water centre) and observing child-centred discoveries?
- How does co-creating the learning environment change the traditional role of the educator as the classroom 'engineer' who structures the classroom according to curriculum expectations in order to observe specific skills?
- How would co-creation, based on children's interests, broaden what might be observed?
- What educator qualities are necessary when co-creating the learning environment; for example: being a sensitive listener, being reflective, allowing the children's intentions to unfold, etc.?
- Reflect on the educators' interpretation of the expectations/big ideas for a two-year Kindergarten program? How do you and/or your team interpret these expectations. Are some JK children more advanced than SK children, and vice versa? How does this influence your observations?
- Discuss this quote:

... two critical tools for co-inquiry are "listening" and "dialogue" ... collaboration requires a commitment to "listening" in a way that is "open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to" ... true collaboration means "letting go of the outcome" in the collaborative search for meaning and a willingness on the part of individuals in the group to contemplate new ideas and never-before-thought-of directions.

(Rinaldi, 2002)



Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- If this is a new idea for you, try co-constructing one centre with the children in your classroom. See if, and how, this changes children's engagement with the learning. Think about how it changes your interactions with, and observations of, the children.

- Watch the section about co-constructing the learning environment on the Ministry of Education’s video: *Making thinking and learning visible through the learning environment, Segment 12*. In what ways did these full-day Kindergarten educators foster the children’s sense of ‘ownership’?

SELF-REGULATION AND EMPOWERING CHILDREN AS LEARNERS



What to Look For?

- What is the relationship between self-regulation and play-based learning?
- How does giving children choice impact their ability to self-regulate?



Think About and Discuss ...

- In what ways did the educator in this video provide children with choice?
- What has your experience been with providing children with the opportunity to solve their own conflicts during play?
- According to child development specialists, children who have the most difficulty self-regulating during play benefit most from being provided with choice, followed by positive adult support if needed to problem-solve and learn conflict resolution strategies. Adult intervention that is responsive to ‘in the moment’ issues is the most likely to result in positive gains for children. How do these statements help educators realize that the extra time required for these kinds of experiences is time well spent?
- Consider how self-regulation is more effective than compliance in encouraging socially responsible children who are fully engaged in learning.



Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- Consider in what areas, and in what part of the instructional day, you might provide more choice and decision-making opportunities for the children in your classroom.
- Read the chapter from which the following quote is taken:

Rich opportunities for make-believe, sensitively nurtured by parents, caregivers, and teachers, are among the best ways to ensure that young children acquire the self-regulatory skills essential for succeeding in school, academically and socially.

(Berk et al., 2006, p. 93)

- Think about how your view of the value of make-believe play might be altered when looked at through the lens of self-regulation. In what ways might it encourage you to provide more opportunities for make-believe play?
- Consider how you could support children in regulating their own behavior before intervening.
- Many educators are changing their views about the relationship between motivation and control. Many educators now believe that:

... children have both the competence and the need to make significant decisions about their own learning. They think that children are more likely to learn to control their own behaviors and to be effective problem-solvers if they are given a considerable amount of choice and control over their learning activities and goals.

(Bronson, 2000, p.32)

- Consider how this altered view of children's competence and the role of motivation might influence how you structure choice-making opportunities in your program.
- For further learning check out the Ministry video, *Making thinking and learning visible through self-regulation*, to explore the relationship between motivation, choice, and self-regulation and for ways of providing more choice for children in a play-based program.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING



What to Look For?

- How and why authentic, play-based learning based on children's interests is more effective than a teacher-directed approach (e.g., worksheets)?
- In what ways did these educators integrate purposeful writing into the children's day?



Think About and Discuss ...

- In the video, worksheets were discussed as a teacher-directed activity, which minimizes children's engagement and learning. Are there other types of teacher-directed activities that might minimize authentic learning?
- Consider how mathematics can be integrated effectively throughout the day in an authentic learning context.
- Lewin-Benham (2011) suggest that educators need to learn the skill of having "meaning-full" conversations with children. Joanne