
Training Teachers to Observe

When We Really See the Child

by Sally Cartwright

When we really see the child, our teaching improves. Child response improves as well, for when a teacher keenly watches young children with a mix of gentle caring and professional objectivity, when, in fact, she truly learns from the children, they sense her marked regard and feel good about themselves. As their self-esteem rises, they turn to their work with greater involvement and deeper reward.

Really seeing means sensitive observation, keen listening, and simultaneous note-taking. It's not easy to master and it takes much practice, but the results are remarkable. The very process of learning skilled observation keeps teacher concern primarily with the children (where it should be!).

When I taught a University of Maine evening class to teachers on creativity in the classroom, they at first looked not so much to the child as to their own creative approach to teaching. In essence, they were not really seeing the children. We then made a rule: no one could attend our weekly seminar without bringing anecdotal notes on 3 x 5 cards from their own recent classroom observations. For my part as instructor, I promptly read and returned the cards with written comments. Selected anecdotes were shared in class and discussed in terms of descriptive quality and usefulness.

At term's end, teacher remarks relevant to this training method ranged from, "I know each child so much better now" and "I never dreamed I'd have time for note-taking, but I do. It's great!" to "When I use anecdotes to describe their child in school, parents really hear me" and "I found that — you wouldn't believe! — just sitting and writing what I see and hear actually supports the kids in their building and play."

Keeping notes of one's observations is important. Not only is it a valuable training technique as indicated above, where critical review sharpens the teacher's observational skills, but it also builds a record of the children over time. Note-taking on each child, particularly in creative activities, gives an immediate, specific picture of that child for staff understanding of individual needs and goals, periodic evaluation, and discussion about the child with supporting personnel and parents. While generalizations are sometimes vague and unconvincing, spot records supply precise and graphic examples of the child's learning behavior.

In our usual creative work/dramatic play period, Sam, aged three years, two months (3-2), is on his knees and waving his lithe body and arms slowly, gracefully. "I'm a tree. The wind is blowing me." He arches over backwards until his head rests on the carpet. "Everyone is upside down," he gasps. Then he shouts, "You're all upside down!" Todd, Jason, and Emily leave their elaborate family picnic — "the beer's finished anyhow" — and come over, skeptical but curious.

"You're silly," they say, but they copy his posture and discover his view. "Wow!" They remain in their arched over backwards positions, discussing how this could be. Finally Jason says, "Really it's me who's upside down," and this conclusion is met with reluctant agreement. I sense their comradeship in discovery and their appreciation of Sam.

Usually a teacher must be a *participant* observer. Should a child need more than a frown of caution or nod of encouragement, she may have to pocket her notes at once. But, because she's the teacher, her observation and recording support the children, not only as mentioned above, but in another way, too. It is particularly her note-taking which demonstrates to the children her keen,

active interest. With that support, and since the writing keeps the teacher fully occupied and fairly near — watching, listening, but not interacting with — the children, they can develop their own initiative and negotiate their difficulties with minimum adult interference.

Anne (3-4) arrived in a black mood this morning. Now she's painting, jabbing her brush on the paper. She makes red, sharp angled scribbles and heavy blue blobs. Her friend Julie (4-1) comes to watch. Julie says, "Oh, what a lovely house!" "It's not a house; it's daddy," snaps the artist, incensed. Hostile glares. Dead silence. I'm still at my notes. "Daddy," who is a deck hand on a tanker, has been away at sea. Is this the source of Anne's anger? Painting is a valuable vent, but she also might explode. What she couldn't do with that drippy brush! But wait. Look, she's smiling. She peeks at Julie and says, "My daddy's in the house." The tension fades. Glad I didn't intervene, but am still blinking at their fantasy and rapport.

No one, especially a participant observer, can see and record (let alone understand!) everything. Note-taking becomes a matter of selection. To guard against observer bias and choose what's important about a particular child or situation requires, besides the teacher's inner security and balance, a considerable grounding in developmental psychology. To this end, observer training can be a useful part of an ongoing, perhaps weekly, staff seminar in child development.

Sharing appropriate anecdotal notes can relate developmental theory to daily practice. For example, one staff member, Tom, aptly linked an anecdote to the developmental concepts that threes and fours are more physical than verbal, and in these "pre-operational" youngsters, as Piaget would say, the quality of

experience and thinking is still largely dependent on self-reference.

Tom helps a three year old with her snowsuit. The zipper is stuck, the child impatient. "Hold still!" Finally Tom works the thing loose, zips up the suit, and says, "There! At last you're free." The child twirls away, but pauses at the door. "No," she calls back with pride, "I'm free and a half."

Can we substitute audio or videotaping for teacher observing and recording? There are serious problems. The mechanics involved are often invasive and distracting. What if only built-in, hidden equipment is used? Aside from the cost, we must guard against any feelings of deceit around hidden equipment, feelings which might erode classroom integrity. Using *high tech* with children needs caution. Mechanical methods of recording tend to displace the sensitive qualities of an informed and caring teacher.

The emotional aspects of child behavior, the intuitive and reflective choice of what to record, the warmth, humor, and insight of the teacher are often beyond the indiscriminate, machine capacities of unedited video. And it is next to impossible to edit videotape — a skilled, expensive, and time-consuming process — without in some way twisting the original reality of both learning situation and child. Even worse, as cautioned above, the teacher who lets a machine do her observing and recording loses that vital, human, teacher-to-child contact of caring insight so essential to good education.

What recording methods tend to enhance good teacher observation? Individual teacher preference is important, but the following may be helpful.

- Some teachers prefer the 3 x 5 cards which they can keep in their pockets to use at a moment's notice. The cards are later box-filed under appropriate headings. Unfortunately, things may become confusing, for many an anecdote fits under multiple headings. I've tried talking to a micro-recorder while watching the children, and later transcribing my verbal notes. Among other drawbacks, I found that, while speaking, I couldn't hear the children's conversation, and they in turn were distracted by my voice.

Eventually, both for immediate ease and long-term needs, I chose a 6 x 9 inch, fine-lined, spiral-bound notebook, which folds flat for swift notation. All my raw, daily records are in this little book. When not in use, my pen slips safely into the spiral binding. I've a central place to keep this small, teacher's journal so that it's handy at all times. Although my assistant also records her observations in this book, confidentiality is important; no one else may read it.

- In the little book, each school day starts with the date and day of the week, names of absent children, and mention of any other circumstance that might affect the children's experience. (Visitors' names, parent conference appointments, tuition checks received, etc. are also noted here.) Daily observation records, sometimes with relevant comments, come next.

- Individual entries include the child's name and age, the setting (when not implicit), the action, feelings, words, timing, whatever seems important. See the examples suggested in this article and the many excellent observation records in each of the references.

- It is good to use accurately descriptive words. For example, Cohen and Stern suggest that for the verb *run*

we might choose one of the following to describe the movement of a given child: stampede, whirl, dash, dart, gallop, speed, shoot across, bolt, fly, hippety-hop, etc. Baby waddles, Johnny lopes, Susie minces. For the adjective *happy*, we might more accurately use: jubilant, joyous, gay, bubbling, bouncy, sparkling, effervescent, delighted, cheerful, contented, etc. For *sadness*; mournful, wistful, depressed, downhearted, gloomy, heavy hearted, melancholy, downcast, sullen, dejected, discouraged, etc. A thesaurus can help. Not only does an accurate choice of words lend precision to the anecdote, but making a list of such alternatives and attempting to use them wisely will help a teacher to observe with increasing perception.

Training teachers to really see children is manifestly important to the quality of early childhood education. If teachers are to help children learn at their best, they must see and understand them in all their diversity with caring wisdom. A good teacher will delight in keen observation and recording, sense in a second the knowledge to be gained, and soon realize its value to child, parent, and staff.

As suggested in this writing, training teachers to observe children is perhaps best done in conjunction with a seminar or ongoing staff discussion, however informal, on child development. The two go hand in hand. Above all, training in observation requires daily practice, initially guided where possible by an experienced instructor and/or critical peer review.

References

Here, related to *really seeing the child*, are six "classics" which, in our urge to update, we sometimes miss.

Axline, Virginia M. **Dibs in Search of Self**. New York: Ballantine, 1974. (An inspiring example of observation, insight, and integrity to the child.)

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