

This position statement provides educators of young children with important assessment guidelines. It also highlights some of the pitfalls educators need to avoid in their own assessment practices.

It was reporting time and Nancy found she did not have enough information about most children in the area of data management. She decided to use the same scenario for each child. Previously, the class had made a chart of the number of boys and girls in the class. Each child put a dot under the correct category. Nancy decided to use this chart as a basis for gathering information about their understanding of data. During learning centre time, she called each child to look at the chart and asked the same questions: How many boys? How many girls? Which has more? She recorded the children's responses on her class list.

In this scenario, the assessment practice places children in a test-like situation and fails to capture their breadth of knowledge about data management. The children were given one chance to tell or demonstrate what they knew. The information was not reliable or valid as responses would vary, based on the child's focus, comfort, interest in the task, understanding of the task, and what was expected. English Language Learners may have been disadvantaged because the task was language dependent. (i.e., Which has more?). Some children may have been disadvantaged by the abstract nature of a task that uses dots to represent a person. The educator's questions were 'closed', and demanded a right or wrong answer. Lastly, in this example, the purpose of the assessment does not support children's learning.



their highest level when engaged in play-based activities that are meaningful to them.⁶

Authentic assessment provides a more accurate and reflective picture of a child's true abilities.

As a form of authentic assessment, play assessment has received considerable attention over the years. The use of play assessment stems from the belief that play provides a unique window into a child's developmental abilities. The National Association for the Education of Young Children endorses the use of play assessment and states, "For younger children, assessment is primarily incorporated with their play."⁷ Furthermore, they suggest that play assessment is appropriate for children with special needs, noting that children with disabilities benefit from in-depth and ongoing assessment, including play-based assessment, to ensure that their individual needs are being met.⁸

The Power of Observation

Observation provides information that teachers need to build relationships with individual children and enable those children to be successful.^{9, 10}

Observation as an assessment strategy is a form of authentic or play assessment. With a focus on observation in the kindergarten classroom, educators can gain insights into all areas of a child's development: physical, cognitive, language and literacy, social, and emotional. For years, leaders in early childhood education have recommended observation of young children in early childhood settings. In 1992, Bredekamp and Rosegrant noted that, "Observation is the most effective strategy for getting to know young children."¹¹ The Ontario Ministry of Education

has also endorsed the use of observation, stating that, "***Observation should be the primary assessment strategy used in kindergarten.***"¹²



Adapting the Program

Observation of English Language Learners engaged in learning experiences is the key to their assessment. Asking probing questions that demand an understanding of language may not be appropriate at this time.

Observation is a powerful and cyclical learning process. Educators begin with careful observation of the children, followed by thoughtful reflection of the gathered information. Finally, educators implement any necessary modifications or changes in their programming or classroom environment. Indeed, Jablon et al.¹³ describe observation as "an ongoing cycle of asking questions; watching, listening, and taking notes; reflecting; and responding".

Observation allows educators to:

- gather information for instructional planning;
- identify the resources that will be required to meet developmental needs;
- identify and plan for individual student needs and interests;
- extend professional understanding about play as a valuable learning process for students and for the educator as researcher;
- identify whether program goals are being met; and
- assist in communicating with parents and students.¹⁴

When teaching young children our observations inform our daily actions.¹⁵

When planning in relation to overall expectations, educators consider:

- what needs to be in place in the environment (organization, materials, resources...);
- which strategies/explicit teaching experiences to use to support the learning; and
- which assessment tools or strategies to use to document learning toward meeting the overall expectation.

The specific expectations are more than a checklist for meeting the overall expectations. They are evidence indicating how children are progressing in meeting the overall expectations. The anecdotal evidence from work samples, as well as from other sources, shows what the children know and can do, and what they need to learn next. The documentation provides a rich context for making judgments and developing comments, written or verbal, for children, parents, and others.



Adapting the Program

Take into account children's stage of English language development in evaluating progress. For children with special needs, take into account any necessary modifications when evaluating progress.

As educators observe, they ask themselves some generic questions that are not necessarily related to a formal expectation. As educators become effective observers, these questions become second nature. *(See Appendix 2 for example)*

As educators observe incidentally or in planned ways across learning areas, they look for:

- children's knowledge and understanding (of materials and their properties, of language, of number, of books...);



- children’s ways of constructing and expressing their knowledge;
- the skills or strategies they are using (problem-solving, inquiry skills, higher level thinking, strategies for reading and writing...); and
- their attitudes (confidence, interest, perseverance...)

Educators keep in mind that the process a child goes through to solve a problem, organize a play sequence, or create a complex block structure is just as important as the final product. Observing the process can provide valuable insight into a child’s thinking, his or her ability to sustain an interest, and to problem-solve. Sometimes, too much emphasis is placed on the finished work and not enough on the process behind its evolution.



Where to Observe

Opportunities for observation exist throughout the teaching day. For example, educators can observe a child’s cognitive or language skills in small groups, at specific learning centres, or during a large group session. Observations can be focused on children’s physical development in the gym or outdoors on the playground equipment. Social and emotional development can be observed as children interact with their peers and with other adults while in the library, on field trips, during free play, or at snack time. The ability to follow routines can be easily observed during transition times, such as cleanup and dismissal. Educators can observe their children in virtually every daily school activity.

The classroom’s organization can help or hinder the ‘where to observe’. If educators have clear sight lines in the classroom, they can sit at one centre and observe children playing at another. It is important to be unobtrusive; sitting too close may disrupt the natural flow of the play. Knowing the children enables educators to decide where to position themselves to watch and listen effectively. That being said, at times educators sit with the children to understand what they are observing and to gain further information.

When to Observe

Ideally, children should be observed daily and throughout the day. Observation is not an ‘add on’ or ‘one more thing to do’. It is an integral part of the planning and the schedule. Observations can take place at different times throughout the day, and during both regular and unusual activities in the classroom, for example, during a special guest’s visit or during assembly.

Observations begin at the start of the school year. These early observations indicate how the child is adjusting to school and transitioning into kindergarten. These early observations are the beginning of baseline data that shows progress

over time. When observations are kept continually in all learning areas there is no pressure to gather information all at once for reporting.

How to Observe

Daily observations of children will be either *incidental* or *planned*. **Incidental observations** occur spontaneously and may not have a predetermined focus. Incidental observation may include, for example, observing children upon entry, as they discover a spider in the corner, and as they discover a new way to use material at the water table. Incidental observations may be the stimulus for more planned observations, such as when there is demonstration of a new skill, atypical behaviour, problems, or lack of information. These observations may lead to a more in-depth assessment and analysis of particular areas.

Alternatively, **planned observations** occur when educators select:

- a particular curriculum expectation (demonstrate an awareness of themselves as artists ...);
- a developmental skill (control of small muscles);
- a child to observe (either because there is a lack of information in an area or a need for more information); or
- a learning centre (the introduction of new materials, a need to see how children are applying strategies, or an observed problem).
(See Appendix 2 for examples of observation questions at learning centres)

Planned observations consider the recognized stages of play or child development identified by educators and researchers. For example, one of the children at the small block centre regularly



tiles a small carpeted area using small blocks. This type of block play pattern would correspond to Harriet Johnson’s²⁰ stage two of block play. (See Appendix 4 for more information.) Sometimes, children skip some behaviours of a developmental

stage and sometimes they engage in behaviours across different stages. To guide observations, think about, “What does this child do more often than not?”²¹

Incidental Observations could occur:	Planned Observations could occur:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as children enter and depart; • as they play outdoors; • as you circulate and interact; • during a new experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at a specific centre; • at a specific activity; • with specific children; • at a specific time; • for a specific purpose.

Thinking It Through

Do you have ...

- more information in one area of development than another?
- more information on some children and less on others?
- information from all areas of the classroom or areas of the program?

Plan to observe to address the inconsistencies.

The method of recording observations is a personal choice. Some educators try out different systems before finding one that works for them. Some of the tools educators use to record their daily written observations of children include:

- steno notebooks or note pads;
- class observation sheets (see Appendix 7 for *At-A-Glance sheets – both blank and completed examples*);
- mailing labels – jot down notes on a sheet of white mailing labels; once filled in, peel them off and stick them in the child’s individual file folder;²²
- sticky notes for brief observations applied to At-A-Glance sheets;

- binders with sheets that are colour-coded according to area (e.g., green sheets for physical development observations, blue sheets for language development observations);
- index cards for each child taped to a laminated file folder; once filled with comments, the cards are easily removed and placed in the child’s file folder. Using a different colour card each term helps educators organize their index card information;²³
- electronic tablets that use touch screens with styluses or digital pens linked to mobile computers or laptops where notes are stored. This is a more mobile way to interact with computers.

Educators experiment with a variety of these methods, or create their own. Whatever method is chosen, it’s important to keep an organized set of observation records. Records must be readily accessible for future report card writing, parent-educator interviews, student case conferences and meetings.²⁴ Written observations of children are highly confidential and should never be left out for others to view.