

CHAPTER 4

Observing with Intention

In the many hours that teachers spend observing children, they are inspired and informed by children's wisdom and curiosity. They seek ways to support and strengthen children's inquisitive nature. This interest in children's own inquiry is what leads teachers toward an emergent curriculum. They want to plan for engaging, meaningful short- and long-term projects that are generated from observations of children's play (Forman & Hall 2005; Gandini & Goldhaber 2001). The question of how to design curriculum that influences the forward movement of children's play and learning is huge for teachers who are expected to match their observations to developmental competencies and incremental progressions for learning content, checking to be sure children are developing according to developmental milestones. This chapter focuses on observing children with the intention of designing emergent inquiry curriculum. It offers you a first step for planning from your observations of children's natural play.



A teacher pays close attention to and documents the details of the children's play she observes.

Observing to Interpret the Meaning in Children's Play

In your emergent inquiry classroom, the forward movement of your curriculum depends on the ways you organize—the environment, spaces, time, materials, and interactions—to be responsive to children's thinking. A first step in being responsive to children is to observe through play's natural twists and turns, probing for children's interests, needs, and thinking and looking for significant moments (e.g., conflicts, questions, misconceptions) that will help you interpret what the play means to the children. Any shift in the provision or preparation of materials, questions posed, or teacher–child interactions intended to guide children's inquiry and be responsive to children's purposes must be in relation to an understanding of the children's perspectives and intentions—their thinking. Yet thinking cannot be observed. It can only be inferred through interpretation, a subjective process that draws on your thinking and your ideas about the meaning of children's behaviors. To plan in relation to children's thinking, you will develop interpretations from your intentional observation records.

Working with observations in a subjective manner may be new to you. Many teacher-training programs teach students to observe as a way of objectively assessing for developmental milestones using a variety of checklists and anecdotes and discourage subjectively interpreting children's play.

Taking the perspective of active children who do not often state what they think or the reasons behind their actions is complex (Carter 2018). It involves the development of empathy and being open to the child's experiences. Interpreting the thinking behind

children’s play relies on precise observation records for revisiting and interpreting, as discussed in this chapter. Teachers new to emergent inquiry often say they feel awkward with interpreting the meaning of children’s play because they have been told to not be subjective. Learning to interpret children’s thinking feels foreign. According to Meg, a teacher,

“ We learn about these standardized measures for why we held expectations for children and then we make documentation fit that. We don’t capture what children are doing and then learn about standardized tools that will explain what we’re seeing. It’s completely backwards.

A detailed observation record completed for emergent inquiry planning can be assessed for children’s development in addition to children’s thinking. Consider the following brief example taken from a longer observation record of a group of four children playing outdoors and pretending to be dinosaurs.

Darren runs around and around, following a teacher. When the teacher helps another student, Darren goes over to the fence and begins to shake it. The teacher asks him, “Do you want to go over to play with your friends?” Darren looks at the teacher, then goes over to where Jon is playing. He picks up some mulch, puts it on a tree stump, and pretends to eat it. Then he begins yelling. Jon yells back unclearly. Darren grabs Jon’s hand. Jon grabs back.

The teacher could assess that Darren’s gross motor skills are on target for his age, that he demonstrates cognitive skills by following the teacher’s suggestion, and that he is yelling around other children, which might reveal a need to further observe his social interaction skills. With guidance on how to interpret the meaning of the children’s play, however, this teacher may discover that Darren intentionally follows the teacher, perhaps to engage her attention at some point, and that he successfully enters play with peers by yelling like a dinosaur, an act that the other children embrace because he fills a role in their dramatic play scenario in which they are pretending to be dinosaurs.

She may also decide to observe both children for longer periods of time to see if their interest is truly tied to dinosaur enactments or the idea of being strong and powerful, among many other possibilities she may discover from observing their play.

We recommend that you decide where to observe and record based on play that appears meaningful, where children are focused and engaged. Initially, interpret for the meaning to children and then review at a later time to document how the play addresses development. Chapter 8 discusses recording the ways emergent inquiry meets early learning standards.

The Significance of Teachers’ Thinking to Emergent Curriculum Planning

Teachers can only observe what children do and say, noticing the details surrounding a child’s actions and words. What children are doing, noticing, or saying provides insight into the children’s goals, their strategies, and their theories about the phenomena that are capturing their attention at the moment (Carter 2018; Curtis 2017; Forman & Hall 2005). You cannot see what children are thinking. Your interpretations are *your* ideas. They are *your* thinking about children’s thinking. They are working hypotheses. Emergent inquiry curriculum values your thinking because it is up to you to determine just what to observe, record, and interpret as the basis for planning for simple adjustments to the environment to challenge the children to new levels of learning in the context of the play and inquiry they are pursuing.

Consider focusing your observations on the children who stay involved within an activity over a long period of time, when the processes engage their interests, their intellect, and their social needs. You will want to observe these children to learn more about the meaning of their play, because they do not necessarily talk about their decisions about their play pursuits, and they may not be aware of how to communicate the reasoning behind the actions of their play.