Anecdotal Records

Practical Strategies for Taking Meaningful Notes

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For many teachers, the word *assessment* conjures up negative feelings. High-stakes, *summative assessments* are used to gauge student learning against a standard or a benchmark (Afflerbach 2016; Ferguson 2017) and are sometimes used to make significant educational decisions about children. Largely because of this pressure, school districts across the country now require benchmark assessments two or more times during the school year to track students' progress. With so many mandated assessments, teachers often feel they have no time to teach.

Although these fall and winter benchmark tests are intended to be *formative assessments* that help guide instruction, many teachers don't find them to be very helpful. For example, in a recent conversation, a first-grade teacher lamented that six weeks into the school year she had yet to begin working with small groups in her classroom. While she recognized that some of the delay related to

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 40 1/18/24 4:20 PM

getting classroom routines and procedures under way, she also clearly stated, "All I ever seem to do is assess my children, and the information doesn't even help me plan instruction." Though this may seem a little extreme, her feelings are shared by teachers nationwide (Saeki et al. 2018).

Benchmark assessments often have a narrow focus and rigid procedures and, as a result, do not capture children's true knowledge and skills. In contrast, formative assessments monitor children's learning and provide ongoing checks of student progress that allow teachers to "plan and adapt curriculum to meet each child's developmental and learning needs" (Copple & Bredekamp 2009, 321).

Formative assessment is theoretically intended to bring together three fundamental processes: (1) determining where children are in their learning; (2) understanding the developmental continuum and educational expectations; and (3) charting a course to support children's progress (Black & Wiliam 2009; Hattie & Timperley 2007). Formative assessments are often embedded in the daily activities "undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black & Wiliam 1998, 7).

For teachers, the most useful formative assessments tend to be authentic in nature and look at children's performances on specific, real-life tasks (Wiggins 1990). The information gleaned from this type of assessment supports teachers in planning responsive and intentional instruction. For example, a teacher may review a child's journal entry as a form of authentic assessment to determine the child's current knowledge of capitalization and punctuation. The assessment could be used in formative (instructional planning) or summative (outcome-focused) ways, but teachers usually tend to emphasize the formative uses since their goals are to create lessons and activities that meet children's needs. In addition to examining children's journals and other products, another type of authentic assessment that is often used for formative purposes is teachers' anecdotal notes recorded during close observations of children.

Many teachers see the value of detailed anecdotal notes but have a hard time simultaneously being the teacher and the note taker. This article provides practical strategies for the use of anecdotal notes as one type of authentic assessment. The article discusses what constitutes anecdotal records and offers suggestions for taking notes efficiently; defines the notion of close observation; and examines the use of notes as part of reflective practice. Ideas for implementing and managing an anecdotal record-keeping system are also provided.

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records are brief notes grounded in the close observations of children (Clay 2001). The notes record a range of student behaviors in areas such as literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, the arts, social and emotional development, and physical development. When recording observations, it is important to document a behavior in terms that provide a concrete description and enough details to inform future instruction. Statements such as "the student was on task" provide no information about the task or the behavior.

To avoid vague notes, list the associated learning center or subject area, and include specific information describing what the child is doing. For example, "Landon—Reading Center—selected two books from his personal book basket. Matched one-to-one, voice to print on two lines of text." The details in this note provide information about the child's independent behavior in the reading center. By stating

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 41 1/18/24 4:20 PM

that Landon controlled voice-to-print match, it shows that he also controls left-to-right directional movement across a line of text. Additionally, by recording that there were two lines of print, the note also indicates that Landon understands the concept of return sweep and the top-to-bottom progression of text.

To make note taking more efficient, consider using abbreviated language. Without developing a lot of complicated shorthand, the teacher could write the note above as "Landon—RC—selected 2 books from his personal book basket. Matched 1-1/V to P on 2 lines of text." Time is always a concern, and children move quickly from one task to the next. Abbreviations assist in capturing detailed observations in an efficient manner and in keeping up with the children.

In addition to using abbreviations, it is powerful to ground an observation in evidence. Instead of stating "Leah uses inventive spelling," the anecdotal note should include evidence of her inventive spelling: "Leah—DP [Dramatic Play]—Wrote grocery list: BACN, aGS, sreL." The evidence provides insight into the consonants and vowels Leah is learning and the letter forms she can produce. Additionally, the evidence aids the teacher in better understanding Leah's progress on the learning trajectory toward standard spelling and the teacher is more informed about how to support her instructionally.

Capturing evidence in the form of an anecdotal note can sometimes be difficult. It may be easier to collect and copy a child's artifact or work sample and save it alongside the anecdotal record. Another option is to take a photograph of the artifact and embed it and the accompanying anecdotal record in the child's portfolio (Bates 2014).

Finally, when taking anecdotal records, it is important for teachers to consider their word choices and the ways in which the use of certain language may inadvertently position students in teachers' minds. Statements that begin with words like *can't* or *doesn't* promote a deficit view and do not assist with future instructional planning. For example, making the statement "Logan doesn't identify all his letters" is very different from saying "Logan identifies the letters A, B, G, N, L, T, Z." Writing what children *can* do ensures the teacher's instructional decisions are grounded in students' strengths.

Close Observation

To take meaningful and useful anecdotal notes, teachers must first adopt the role of observer. Teachers are in a unique position to closely observe children's behaviors and conversations and to capture these observations in writing (Boyd-Batstone 2004). The quality of anecdotal notes depends on a teacher's ability to be a neutral observer in order to record behaviors that "inform a teacher's . . . understanding of cognitive processes" (232). Subconscious assumptions and biases must be checked at the door.

It is easy to draw conclusions about a child, especially when a teacher has a history with the family, such as previously teaching a sibling. No two children are exactly alike, even if they share the same family, community, and/or culture. Familiarity with children and families may assist in developing the home-school connection, but it should not predetermine the way a child is viewed. Similarly, familiarity with a child's community or culture may provide informative context, but it should not lead to making assumptions—positive or negative.

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 42 1/18/24 4:20 PM

Anecdotal records are intended to be neutral observations of a child's behaviors and interactions. The observations may be simple, such as the way the child handles a book, distinguishing the front from the back, or complex, such as the way a child works through a disagreement with a peer on the playground. Regardless, it is imperative to remain impartial when describing and recording what is observed. While this may seem obvious, it is important to guard against assumptions and biases that can creep into written observations.

Periodically, teachers should review their notes to look for examples of bias. They may reflect on ways the notes have been written to see if they are objective and provide details about the child's actions and demonstrated behaviors. Teachers may also look for patterns in their notes to see if subjective comments are linked to any one child or to a group of children. Identifying these patterns can help reveal unconscious assumptions and support teachers' objectivity in future observations. Finally, teachers may also ask a trusted colleague to review their notes for the same purposes.

Organizing and Managing Anecdotal Records

One of the biggest challenges for educators is managing the many demands on their time (Sparapani & Perez 2015). Therefore, it is incredibly important to establish a system for taking and using anecdotal records that is easy to implement and stick to. For the system to become a seamlessly integrated part of the day, organization is key. With a clear approach, teachers can take and use daily anecdotal notes as a means of formative assessment to guide instruction. The thought of doing one more thing might seem overwhelming to some teachers, but it does not have to be.

Daily anecdotal notes can be quick to write and easy to file and organize and should serve as the basis for reflective practice. By monitoring each child's development with daily anecdotal notes and adjusting instructional support accordingly, teachers' perceptions of assessment often shift from assessment for assessment's sake to assessment for the sake of children's learning and growth.

When taking anecdotal records, it is important to be selective about the behaviors being observed. Depending on the needs of a particular class, a teacher may choose to focus only on reading and writing behaviors (instead of on an array of behaviors). Having a specific focus helps teachers attend to the most important details during observations, making anecdotal records more meaningful and actionable for planning or individualizing future instruction. In addition, it removes the unreasonable expectation of documenting everything for every student, every day.

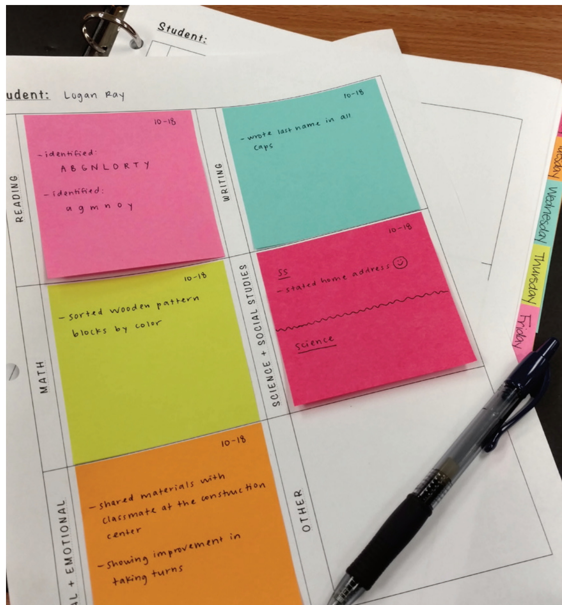
One suggestion for getting started is to divide the class into small groups of approximately five students. Once the groups are established, assign each group a day of the week, and then concentrate on observing just those five students on their day. These *daily focus groups* are a good way to organize and manage record keeping—and they prevent children from slipping through the cracks. The following are three examples of anecdotal record-keeping systems that use daily focus groups.

Post-It Notebook

A Post-it notebook uses a form for each student that has six boxes. Teachers often choose to label the boxes *Reading*, *Writing*, *Math*, *Science/Social Studies*, *Social/Emotional*, and *Other*, but the form can be tailored to highlight any content areas or learning domains that a teacher chooses. As observations

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 43 1/18/24 4:20 PM

are made, they are recorded on a Post-it Note, or sticky note, and placed on a clipboard. At the end of the day, the notes are transferred to the child's form and are placed in the appropriate category. The forms are kept in a three-ring binder with dividers separating each daily focus group.



Student:

READING		WRITING	
MATH		SCIENCE + SOCIAL STUDIES	
SOCIAL + EMOTIONAL		OTHER	

Index Cards

The index card system uses individual index cards, color coded by daily focus group (Monday's group is assigned green index cards, and Tuesday's group is yellow). A binder clip is used to keep each group's index cards together. The cards are used throughout the day as the teacher captures and records observations on the group members' individual cards. At the end of the day, the cards are filed in a box, and then the cards for the next day are pulled.

Teachers may choose to record literacy behaviors (or any other content area they are emphasizing) on one side of the card and math behaviors (or another content area) on the other side. Additional cards can be used to capture behaviors in other areas, or the card can be subdivided. Once a child's card is completely full of anecdotal observations, a new card is issued. In addition to using the cards in the classroom, teachers can easily take them outdoors when observing and recording students' social interactions on the playground.

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 44 1/18/24 4:20 PM

Bookmarks

Bookmarks are a variation of anecdotal notes used specifically when conferencing with children about literacy. Anecdotal observations made by the teacher are integrated into the conference in the form of goals for a student's reading, and student and teacher together then discuss strategies for achieving those goals. For example, the anecdotal observation on the teacher's part may be "Sophia—reads one word at a time while pointing to each word." As a result of this observation, the goal for Sophia would be fluent reading with appropriate pauses, and the strategy would be to have her practice reading without pointing to the words.

Name:	Name:	Name:
Goals:	Goals:	Goals:
Strategies:	Strategies:	Strategies:

The bookmark displays actionable items discussed with the child that result from the teacher's close observation. For convenience, the back of the bookmark can be used to house the anecdotal records that are linked to the student's goals and the suggested strategies. Each time the teacher and child have a conference, the bookmark is used to check on the child's progress, to record additional observations, and to modify and adjust the child's goals and strategies, as needed.

Reflecting and Using Anecdotal Notes

Once a manageable system is in place, teachers have the information they need to reflect about what the children are learning. Reflection and anecdotal notes should be inextricably linked and serve as the foundation for instructional planning, helping teachers think more deeply about their students' growth and learning. Furthermore, reflecting on these records allows teachers to generate questions and hypotheses that fuel additional observations and anecdotal records, making this type of formative assessment "ongoing, strategic, and purposeful" (Copple & Bredekamp 2009, 22).

Reflection on formative assessments allows teachers to ensure that important, in-the-moment observations not only get recorded but are used to understand children's individual accomplishments (Afflerbach 2016). Adopting a child-centered approach to assessment ensures students are viewed from a strengths-based perspective and teaching is matched to individuals' needs. As a result, children receive more tailored instruction as teachers are better informed about each child's progress. Reflecting on anecdotal notes can also assist with grouping decisions. Small groups within the classroom should be flexible; using observational data assists teachers in re-forming groups to mirror children's changing needs.

A daily habit of reflection can be hard to develop, but as teachers organize and manage the notes they take during the day, they can review them and draw conclusions that support instructional decisions. If finding time daily is difficult, setting aside a portion of a planning period at the end of the week is another way to intentionally reflect on children's progress.

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 45 1/18/24 4:20 PM

Many teachers find it useful to write out their reflections and add them to the collection of anecdotal records on a child; as months go by, being able to review both anecdotal notes and timely reflections can be very informative. Additionally, the information gleaned from the anecdotal records can be transferred to more formal assessments, like developmental checklists. When a challenging situation arises, such as a child not making progress as expected, it may be helpful for the teacher to share notes and reflections with colleagues to generate new ideas about lessons and activities to try. And if a comprehensive or diagnostic assessment seems called for, the teacher has a rich set of records to share with families and specialists.

Communication about a child's progress is important, and anecdotal notes are a rich source of information when meeting with a family. During a parent conference, anecdotal notes can be used to provide the family with concrete examples of their child's learning and development and give them insight into the child's school day. The information can also help the teacher relay to the parents ways to support the child at home. Instead of using a broad, sweeping statement to describe a child, sharing anecdotal notes during a conference and in other communications can provide a detailed description of the child's cognitive and social behaviors. These detailed descriptions, in turn, help the parents better understand their child's learning trajectory.

Conclusion

Early childhood classrooms are busy places. Capturing and deriving meaning from the behaviors of more than a handful of children can be tricky. If observations are not recorded in the moment, important details may be forgotten by the end of the day.

Developing a manageable system for taking and using anecdotal notes in the early childhood classroom is key for intentional instruction. A well-organized system frees the teacher to focus attention on the children instead of thinking about the "how to" aspects of record keeping. Notes with clear language, abbreviations, and evidence provide concrete documentation of children's emerging behaviors, knowledge, and skills, and they also ground teachers' reflective practices. It is this type of assessment, both intentional and supportive, that contributes to children's learning and development.

Reflection Questions

1. What types of formative assessments do you use to determine where children are in their learning and development? How do these formative assessments inform your planning and instruction?
2. Think about the data you collect in your classroom. Do you collect anecdotal records in addition to children's artifacts and work samples? If not, how could you integrate the process of recording anecdotal notes?
3. This article discusses several ideas for recording useful anecdotal notes, including using abbreviations and focusing on specific tasks that children perform. With a colleague or partner, brainstorm other strategies that could help you take quick but informative notes.
4. What type of organizational system do you use for compiling your notes? Are there any strategies discussed in this article that could make your system more efficient?

SpotlightObservationAssessment_2e.indb 46 1/18/24 4:20 PM

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