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# Observation, Assessment and Planning Practices in a Children's Centre

Patricia Giardiello, Joanne McNulty & Babs Anderson

*This paper reports on the research process and findings of a commissioned study of a Sure Start Children's Centre based in the North West of England. The study focused specifically on how child observations were being carried out in the Children's Centre to inform assessment and planning. It was imperative that the research process should not be perceived as something being "done" to staff of the Children's Centre but as one in which there was a willing engagement with a view to making use of the research findings to build on their own practice. The led to the practitioners starting a cycle of action research themselves that informed the implementation of new approaches in the carrying out of child observations. It was useful for the research team to relate this course of action both to a personal and practical dimension so that practitioners could be supported in their own research-informed practice. This study identified that the practitioners are open to new ideas and are willing and eager to explore new procedures to facilitate effective practice. While the current process of observation, assessment and planning that is being followed for individual children is encouraging, it has its limitations because some children may not be observed on a regular basis and therefore information about their current needs, interests and abilities may be missed. The use of observations to assess children's progress is seen by most of the practitioners as a challenge. This study has revealed important insights into the ways in which outsider researchers can inspire early years practitioners to reflect upon their own practice and provision.*

## **Background to the Study**

This paper reports the research process and findings of a review of observation, assessment and planning practices carried out by staff in a Sure Start Children's Centre in the North West of England. The study took place between October 2009 and May 2010 and involved 10 one-hour interviews with each of the 10 members of staff.

## **Observation in Relation to Early Years Education Policy**

However viewed, the success of the previous and present government's drive towards providing all children with the best start in life depends on the performance and practice of the early childhood practitioners. This includes the carrying out of systematic observations, which is a key part of the practitioners' repertoire of skills. If used appropriately, observation helps practitioners to identify each child's individual strengths and interests, in order to understand how best to support their learning and development.

Research, such as the government-commissioned Effective Provision for Pre School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), shows that attendance at early childhood settings of high quality has an unquestioned impact on children's learning and development. Furthermore, the earlier independent Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002) with its focus on "Practice, Principles and Professional Dimensions" identified that the links between planning, assessment, recording and the cyclical process of using records to inform planning and assessment of progression appeared not to be well understood or well used in many settings and that training in this area is crucial in ensuring children's progress in all areas of learning. Such studies have had a direct impact on government initiatives and policies; for example, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, which guides and directs early years pedagogy, curriculum and practice currently in England, was built on the research findings of the EPPE project.

In order to achieve the long-term vision of high-quality early childhood education and care, the government's priorities included providing greater training opportunities for existing staff. Despite the efforts of the previous government in raising standards there is still much work to do for the incumbent government with their commitment to continue to invest in the early years phase of education.

In the recent history of early childhood education and care in the United Kingdom, Sure Start Children's Centres have played and continue to play a pivotal role in promoting learning and development of babies and young children, including those from disadvantaged groups. Sure Start Children's Centres evolved from Sure Start Local Programmes and Early Excellence Centres, and although their origins preceded the Every Child Matters agenda (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004) they have become an integral key part of achieving the Every Child Matters outcomes, which are as follows:

- be healthy,
- stay safe,
- enjoy and achieve,
- make a positive contribution, and
- achieve economic well-being (DfES, 2004).

These outcomes set out to support the learning and development potential of children, and the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF],

2008) is a response to the emphasis on high-quality early years provision as set out in *Every Child Matters—Change for Children* (DfES, 2004). It establishes a set of learning and welfare requirements that all early childhood providers should meet, replacing the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfEE, 2000), *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2002) and the *National Standards for Under 8s Daycare and Childminding* (DfES, 2003). According to Santer and Cookson (2009) it was the previous government's expressed aim to ensure that childcare provision should be amongst the best in the world, based on the understanding that when children experience good quality childcare there are improved outcomes. This represents enormous challenges for the workforce, and one of their key contributions is the successful delivery of the EYFS. This ambitious programme of reform has inevitably produced some tensions and dilemmas. Despite the detailed practice guidance produced by the previous government to support the delivery of the EYFS, there are still concerns expressed regarding the broadening of the outcomes' focus to encompass the youngest children from birth to three (DfES, 2002). Furthermore, there could be a tendency to interpret the developmental grids as fixed norms that could lead to target setting and inappropriate experiences for the youngest children. The current Children's Minister Sarah Teather asked Dame Clare Tickell, Chief Executive of Action for Children, to carry out an independent review of the EYFS, which began in July 2010, and one of the four main areas explored is how young children's development should be assessed. The review (Tickell, 2011) highlights concerns amongst some practitioners about the process of observation and assessment:

Where some practitioners felt they had to document every activity, more experienced practitioners explained that they had the next steps in their heads and didn't always need to write them down... Some recommended more high quality training to help practitioners use observation appropriately, focusing on children as individuals and involving parents and carers. (Tickell, 2011, p. 35)

Spring 2012 saw the publication of the reformed EYFS framework,<sup>1</sup> which continues to place ongoing formative assessment at the heart of effective early years practice:

Ongoing assessment (also known as formative assessment) is an integral part of the learning and development process. It involves practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations. (Department for Education, 2012, p. 10)

As part of the reformed EYFS, the "Development Matters" guidance has also been re-launched (Early Education, 2012) to address concerns that the grids were previously being used as developmental checklists. It is now referred to as non-statutory guidance, which can help practitioners make best-fit judgements about whether a child is showing typical development for their age. Acknowledging the concerns highlighted in the Tickell Review, the reformed guidance reminds practitioners, in the form of a footnote on each page of the document, that the development statements

and their order should not be taken as necessary steps for individual children and should not be used as checklists.

Despite this re-positioning of the existing guidance, fundamentally little has changed in the developmental statements, which continue to be broken down into age bands. During the consultation period, those who were critical of the “Development Matters” statements expressed concern that:

Practitioners are too reliant on them, using them as a check-list without fully understanding the content of the statements. Comments made in the call for evidence also suggest that use of pictures alongside the statements can stigmatise children who are slower developers. (Tickell, 2011, p. 33)

Thus, it remains essential that practitioners use a secure knowledge and understanding of the holistic nature of child development, in order to be sensitive to the developmental and learning needs of babies and young children and to guard against the use of age/stage bands as the driver for observation and assessment. However, within the EYFS early years practitioners are required to use child observation as part of both formative and summative assessment, and herein lies the challenge. On the one hand, using observation as a basis for open-ended learning opportunities in response to children’s own interests; and on the other, to chart each child’s achievements according to pre-determined early learning goals that are set in legislation (Podmore & Luff, 2012).

## **The Use of Observation**

According to Nutbrown:

Observation is crucial to understanding and assessing young children’s learning . . . Observations which are rarely reflected upon are a wasted effort. It is only when practitioners seek to understand the meaning behind what they have seen that the real worth of observational practices are realised. (2006, pp. 132–133)

Carrying out and recording observations of young children has a long-held tradition in early childhood practice. Susan Isaacs’s influence on the field of early childhood has perhaps been the most significant through her emphasis on the value of observation-led records for understanding children’s learning and development (Giardiello, 2011; Robson, 2006). Isaacs (1930) placed a great deal of importance upon young children’s active exploration and provided the blueprint for objectively recorded naturalistic observations. She would have approved of the terminology “*Look, listen and note*” used in the EYFS (DCSF, 2008; Department for Education, 2012) to describe the process of carrying out observations. Isaacs (1930) also stressed the greater the experience and expertise in understanding how children learn and develop, the more valuable the written records are.

To support practitioners there is a wealth of literature about observational approaches; for example, Sharman, Cross, and Vennis (2007 *Observing Children and Young People*), Podmore and Luff (2012), and Palaiologou (2008). According to Willan (2005), close observation of children helps to link theory and practice and

part of learning to be a good observer involves learning to know when to stand back in order to watch and, above all, listen. The difficulty with this view is that unfortunately not all practitioners working with young children have studied the theories relating to learning and development in early childhood and therefore are unable to make these links in the first place, as identified in the interim findings of the Nutbrown Review (2012; see below). This has enormous implications for the quality of experiences that young children have whilst in early years settings. As Katz (1992, p. 3) points out, there is need for learning in early childhood to have “horizontal relevance” (i.e. what is learnt is relevant to the child at the present stage of development), as opposed to “vertical relevance”, which implies learning that is designed to prepare children for the next activity or the next class in some future experience. Early years practitioners who have a theoretical understanding of the way young children learn and develop will be able recognise children’s existing skills and interests and build on these to promote further learning. Knowing what to look for remains at the heart of effective early years pedagogy but this should not be solely confined to observing the child’s visible skills such as identifying colours, numbers and shapes (see Key Findings section). If these skills are over-emphasised, evidence of the children’s developing dispositions, attitudes and emotional development, which can be of greater significance, may be missed (Bruce, 2010). In this respect, the works of theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner help to shed light on the complex world of children and enable practitioners to interpret and analyse their observations more effectively (Nutbrown, 2006). Piaget promoted the importance of understanding child development, and his cognitive developmental theory initially developed from observations made on his own three children focuses on the way individual children adapt to their environments as they actively seeks out ways to understand it (Piaget, 1954). This focus on the child’s active exploration as the means of establishing new understanding can be seen in the emphasis that the EYFS places on providing a resource-rich play-based environment and ample opportunities for children to explore as they choose. Piaget developed the view that all children, from birth to early adolescence, pass through four specific stages in their development and explained that young children acquire knowledge of the world by repeatedly executing action-producing schemas through the processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1954). Piaget’s ideas of sequential developmentalism have left a lasting impression on early childhood policy-makers in England as they still form the basis of practice in early childhood provision, as shown in the age/stage bands within the re-launched “Development Matters” guidance. In the implementation of the EYFS it is possible to see their interpretation of Piagetian theory as practitioners observe, record, assess and plan. However, there is also a need for caution regarding Piaget’s approach to fixed developmental stages, largely governed by chronological age, in order to avoid the risk of some practitioners taking a deficit view of what children could do. Identifying what children have achieved is much more helpful in informing the planning for the child’s next steps in learning, as reflected in Vygotsky’s work.

In contrast to Piaget, who concentrated on the individual child’s learning and development, both Vygotsky and Bruner emphasised the child’s social interactions

with significantly more knowledge than others such as adults and peers. Vygotsky (1978), who likened the child to an apprentice, believed that with skilled guidance and collaboration children are able to develop their existing knowledge and skills (identified as the zone of actual development) in reaching a new level of mastery. Vygotsky stressed the importance of attending to the children's zone of actual development in order to understand when they are ready to move towards their potential developmental levels; that is, knowledge and skills yet to be mastered. Vygotsky (1978, p 86) defined this as the children's zone of proximal development, describing it as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more able peers". Bruner (1973), influenced by Vygotsky's ideas, developed the concept of scaffolding, where a significant other provides help through intervening at the right moment and then gradually removing the help as the child succeeds. This requires practitioners to be observant and alert to opportunities within the child's repertoire of activities for this type of interaction to take place.

Differing theoretical approaches, such as those highlighted in this section, provide a lens through which to frame and interpret observations. They also empower practitioners to reflect on their own learning and practice and to evaluate whether the observations actually capture children's learning and development effectively. Nevertheless, practitioners should not be constrained by established child development theories in interpreting what they see, hear and record as it is the children themselves that bring theoretical ideas about learning to life. In knowing what they know, practitioners working alongside children and parents can co-construct new understandings about the way children learn and develop. This approach, promulgated by the Reggio Emilia early childhood settings in Northern Italy, uses observation as the context rather than the method and regards inter-subjectivity (i.e. when the observer, the observed and the setting dynamically interact) as significant in the analysis and interpretation of the evidence gathered (Papatheodorou & Luff, 2011; Rogoff, 2003). This approach is also mirrored in the key principle of the EYFS, under the section "Enabling Environment", which states that:

children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and carers. (Early Education, 2012, p. 2)

## **Considerations and Challenges**

A significant consideration, in relation to the required skills and expertise necessary to carry out effective observations, is that staff in Children's Centres are often from a wide range of backgrounds and will have had very different kinds of initial training. The *Rumbold Report: Starting with Quality* (Department for Education and Science, 1990) identified concerns that a high proportion of staff working with three to four years olds had limited access to continual professional development. One of the key findings of the EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2004) identified that settings where a good

proportion of staff were qualified to graduate level were able to foster more effective all-round progress in the children. Moss (2003, p. 25), whose work involves examining early childhood provision across Europe and beyond, advocated a new type of “worker on a par with school teachers in terms of training and employment conditions”. With this in mind and in recognition of research findings such as the EPPE study, the previous government committed a £305 million Graduate Leader Fund that superseded the Transformation Fund to drive forward a graduate-led workforce with the new status of Early Years Professional (Santer & Cookson, 2009). According to the now non-operational Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC),<sup>2</sup> Early Years Professionals are key to raising the quality of early years provision. They are in the words of the CWDC “change agents” to improve practice (CWDC, 2006). To further assist in the process of raising quality early years provision, the full range of qualifications for nursery staff and childminders in England underwent a government-commissioned review which was independently led by Professor Cathy Nutbrown. The interim report, published in March 2012, identified significant concerns about the pedagogical content and lack of time taken to study for some qualifications:

there appears to be a belief that current level 2 and level 3 qualifications do not include sufficient time to study the underpinning theory for working with children, that they do not demand that learners experience a variety of settings before qualifying, that they are too broad (looking at the 0–19 age range, rather than, say, 0–7 years), and that they lack sufficient detail on child development and observation. Foundation Degrees and other higher education qualifications are generally held to be more robust. (Nutbrown Review, 2012)

A consistent theme emerging from theory and research is the competency required by early years practitioners to facilitate young children’s learning, which includes the skill of child observation.

### **The Commissioned Study**

The initial request from the operational manager of the Children’s Centre to conduct an external review was heavily influenced by the desire to arrive at specific outcomes that would feed directly into the Children’s Centre’s self-evaluation form. This form is linked to the judgements that Ofsted will make at inspection. However, this raised concerns in relation to the integrity of the research and for that reason the first meeting with the operational manager was spent discussing the way in which the proposed review should be carried out in order to provide reliable information and better analysis of current practice and provision. It was considered important that the monitoring processes should be collaborative and that the research activity should not be perceived as something being “done to” the staff of the Children’s Centre but as one in which there is willing engagement, with a view to making use of the review to build on their own practice in working with children and their families. In this respect it was critical that the “subjects” of the review were involved in all stages of the research process. Consequently the research team, which consisted of three



academic staff, sought a methodology that promoted dialogue and partnership between participants in order to subscribe to democratic principles and to adhere to “authentic participation” in conceptualising and practising research and evaluation (Campbell, 2003; McTaggart, 1997).

### **Identifying the Aim of the Review**

In order to help formulate a viable research brief, a series of stages based on Kurt Lewin’s action research cycle were used. Lewin (1946) argued for a system of analysis, reconnaissance or fact-finding, planning, execution, and then a repetition of the whole cycle. Although originally devised by Lewin, many descriptions of action research cycles for educational contexts have been proposed. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 185), the “improvement of educational practices, understandings, and situations depend on a spiral of cycles” and suggest that “the ‘action’ moment of the cycle is a probe into the future”. Hubbard and Power (1999) and Sagor (2011) also describe action research as a cyclical process and provide step-by-step guidance, with the first stage described as clarifying the vision where goals are established through structuring a research question or aim. This was the research team’s first step, and over a series of meetings the focus of the commissioned review was refined and following a great deal of discussion a detailed action plan was drawn up by the research team and agreed, initially by the operational manager and then later, during the contextual visit, by all involved in the review. Although recognition was given to the issue of access to relevant training, the main focus was on observation, assessment and planning. The commissioned review would be guided by the following aims and objectives:

#### *Aim*

- To carry out a review of current strategies in observation, assessment and planning in order to inform future plans for the setting.

#### *Objectives*

- To examine current practices for observation.
- To identify how these link to assessment.
- To examine how assessment is used to inform planning.

By the end of the review, an analytical report of the key findings would be provided.

### **Reconnaissance or Fact-finding**

Following the refining of the commissioned review, a contextual visit was carried out by two members of the research team with the purpose of sharing the research intentions and ethical considerations with the practitioners who were directly

involved in carrying out observations in the Children's Centre. During this first group meeting, the two researchers noted that whilst they were made to feel welcome in the Children's Centre the practitioners were generally ill-prepared for this meeting and displayed a lack of understanding about research processes and methodology. To illustrate this point, the practitioners became anxious when conducting interviews was first mentioned, as they associated this with being interviewed for a job rather than as a research method. However, once the rationale for the study had been explained and it was understood that it was not a performance review exercise, the practitioners became enthusiastic and arrangements for the interviews were discussed. The considerable amount of time spent with the practitioners helped the researchers identify the most productive questions to ask during the interviews in order to collect the most appropriate "rich" data. McChrystal (2000, pp. 359–360) recommends that "academics and practitioners should work in partnership, with practitioners involved in the [research] process from the beginning, keeping them informed throughout".

## **Methodology**

The context for the research determined a case-study approach as this lends itself to the study of individuals and local situations and can contribute to both action and intervention. In addition, the complexities, contradictions, and causal relationships in a situation may be more readily revealed than using alternative research methodologies. In his defence of case-study research, Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 242) concludes that "good social science research is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods that for a given problematic, best help answer the research questions at hand". Thus, strengths of the case-study approach include the fact that it can represent different viewpoints which can then be used to inform future policy-making and the identification of potential training needs.

### *Methods*

This qualitative case-study focused on understanding the practitioners' experience of carrying out observation, assessment and planning within the context of the EYFS framework. Individual experiences were examined to identify commonalities in the practitioners' perceptions of the value and use of child observation. Furthermore, it was important to discover how the organising procedures of child observations were operating in practice.

### *Collection of Data*

Interview data, collected from each of the 10 practitioners, were used to inform the review. At the beginning of each interview, a standardised preamble was used, the purpose of which was two-fold. Firstly to reinforce the underpinning rationale for

the interview, including issues of confidentiality, and secondly to develop a comfortable interviewer–interviewee relationship. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with a fairly open framework, allowed for focused, conversational, two-way communication.

All of the interviews were approximately 60 minutes in duration and examples of interview questions, which were designed to reflect the aims of the review, included: How often would you carry out observations? What methods do you adopt for carrying out observations? What other information is used to support direct observations? What do you see as the drawbacks (difficulties), if any, in carrying out observations? How do you interpret/analyse the observations? How do you share the information you have gathered from your observations? How do you link the observations and assessments to the EYFS areas of learning? Could you tell me how you use the observations to identify the next steps? (Planning)? What training have you had in carrying out observations recently?

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Using an inductive approach, which allows themes to emerge from the data, the transcribed interviews were read and reread by the research team to identify common threads and to check the frequency and distribution of phenomena (Chambliss & Shutt, 2010).

### *Analysis/Interpretation*

In processing the data into meaningful groupings, the research team began with basic coding to identify concepts. Constant comparison was employed across the datasets using Wolcott's (1994) typology theory, which requires research studies to have an analytical lens that combines the data and theoretical underpinnings with larger implications (i.e. corroborate data with extant or existing theory or research). According to Wolcott the researcher should be "extended beyond the purely descriptive account . . . that proceeds in some careful systematic way to identify key factors and relationships among them" (1994, p. 10). To help with the analysis, the research team used a combination of the Block and File approach (Grbich, 2007) and conceptual mapping. In the Block and File approach, the data were underlined, italicised, colour-coded and numbered according to the criteria that emerged from the first stage of basic coding. The segments were then grouped and placed in a table format. Conceptual mapping allowed a simpler and more flexible interpretation of the issues identified in the data. Through using a combination of both approaches subthemes emerged linked to that of practitioner self-identity, which was of interest to the research team. It was important that the findings should be presented as an interaction of multiple voices to reflect the collaborative nature of the review.

### **Key Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the review are presented under sub-headings to help readers understand the various themes emerging from the data, and direct quotes are used for illustration .

### *Practitioners' Cycle of Action*

Following the contextual visit the practitioners instigated their own cycle of action, which resulted in the introduction of formats for carrying out and documenting the observations and new procedures for assessment and curriculum planning. Time was now set aside for the practitioners to meet and discuss the weekly observations in order to plan for the following week. The practitioners had recognised that a more consistent and cohesive approach to child observation would support informed planning for children's needs and interests. Comments in support of the changes include:

Before . . . not enough of us had the basic knowledge . . . knowing what to observe.

At the minute we're just implementing our new sheets, we've come up with new sheets for observation and planning and we've been doing it, just really properly started it this week but last week we started the observations and I do think it's working better 'cos [*sic*] before that, I'll be honest, we weren't really getting time to do it, we weren't really working as a team and actually doing the observations.

Already we are feeling the benefit of it in the rooms 'cos [*sic*] everything is running a bit smoother.

These comments suggest that the practitioners contributed to the review by creating a communicative space (Kemmis, 2001). By investing time and effort in reflecting on their current practice and procedures they took courage, particularly in relation to exposing deficiencies in practice. As researchers we contest that the practitioners became inspired to examine their own roles and responsibilities because of the collaborative nature of the review, and that they welcomed the freedom to talk about the changes they had implemented during the interviews.

### *Key Person Role*

The setting follows the statutory requirements of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008) to adopt the key person system, which sets out the special responsibilities of the key person for working with a small number of children enabling them to feel safe and cared for. Interviews revealed that there was a clear understanding of the key person role in the Children's Centre. Under the newly introduced procedures, each key person was undertaking planned observations of two key children each week in most cases. Although this is a good starting point, for an individual child this may mean only one planned observation every three weeks.

### *Spontaneous Observations*

There are other forms of observation taking place, including the informal noting of significant actions and/or responses. One practitioner highlighted the importance of these more informal, spontaneous observations:

if you don't notice everyday things, you don't notice how far ahead some of them are to plan for them.

Another practitioner discussed the process:

we've put this like board up in the milk kitchen 'cos [sic] its got to be like confidential and its got to be out the way. Its just got the 6 areas of learning on and alls [sic] we'll do is we'll get a sticky note, we'll just write the observation, date it and just put our initials and we'll just stick it in what areas it covers. That could be like [sic] for somebody else's key children and if they haven't [yet] seen it [happen]. So then what we'll do at the end of the week, we'll take all of the notes down and split them, they'll go to the key children's like in order and then they'll write it up on the observation sheet and then we'll do our planning off the observations.

These spontaneous observations are being carried out by all practitioners on all children and are shared in the formal group planning sessions. The value of this type of observation cannot be underestimated as a child's spontaneous interaction with their environment and resources, both physical and human, provides a window for observation and assessment that allows the practitioner to intervene strategically to deepen and extend thinking and thereby aid progression. This of course relies on the practitioners' understanding of the way young children learn, which is necessary in developing praxis (Freire, 2002); that is, practice informed by theory.

The use of these spontaneous observations may offset the low number of planned observations on key children in the children's centre; however, there needs to be an underlying structure in which both planned and spontaneous observations are used most effectively to give a more holistic picture of the child. For example, these spontaneous observations, which form the largest part of the evidence gathered on the children often depend on which context the practitioners choose to notice something specific and within a pre-determined context. This can be seen in the following comments:

They all love creative and construction stuff like the garages. They like story time when we all sit down together and sing songs, quiet time and the outdoors. They love outdoors.

I've got 3 children, 3 little boys and most of my observations are through like personal social and emotional, turn taking games cos [sic] I've got these 3 little boys who are not sharing and they're hitting out a lot and their behaviour so I'm just concentrating on turn taking games with these at the minute I'm just doing circle times with them. So for mine its like Personal, Social, Emotional now and my observations are concentrating on that area.

### *Assessment*

While the current process of observation, assessment and planning that is being followed for individual children is encouraging, it has its limitations as some children may not be observed on a regular basis and therefore information about their current needs, interests and abilities may be missed. If regularly weekly individual observation of all key children is deemed unrealistic, then the practitioners should

consider more flexible approaches to their observation practices. This would be facilitated by an underlying structure for planned and spontaneous observation (as outlined in the previous finding), and could include increasing the number of observations within the continuous provision<sup>3</sup> in the nursery for both individuals and groups of children.

Furthermore, the increased use of continuous provision, for planned and spontaneous observation, will allow for even greater insights into both individual and group learning given that the context of the learning has been chosen by the child or children and therefore will be more meaningful to them than a planned activity designed to test a particular skill or ability. As continuous provision offers children the opportunity to return to self-chosen activities, it should therefore provide practitioners with the opportunity to observe ongoing developments in learning as new competencies emerge. According to Broadhead and Burt (2012, p 148): “learning and progression are fluid, continuous, incremental and elusive”. It is evident from the following comment that this practitioner struggles with how to “harness” the child’s learning potential provided through continuous provision, in this case building with coloured blocks.

If we see a child, say like I’ve just done one [observation] before. A child was playing with the building blocks so when I sat down with him he was just building them up so I asked him a colour and he identified the colours so I asked him a few more and the only one he couldn’t identify was black. So the next step would be so the child could recognise black. I’d do an activity with black objects or get him to colour with a black pen or pencil to see if he knew black.

Rather than acknowledging the potential of block play as a process that enables holistic learning, the practitioner intruded on the child’s play by turning it into a product of measurable learning (Bruce, 2010). More preferable than focusing on a specific learning objective, a suggestion from the Development Matters Guidance (Early Education, 2012, p. 43) would be to “provide a wide range of materials, resources and sensory experiences to enable the child to continue to explore colour, shape and texture”.

### *Daily Routines*

Planning for observation as part of the daily routine is taking place, although some routines do create challenges and barriers for observation. It is clear through some practitioner responses that observations are carried out within the routines of the day; for example, the observations of the key children. One example of a successful use of routine to carry out an informal observation is illustrated in the following comment:

... might be at social time, sometimes we’ll eat with the children and talk to them about what they are eating, favourite food, sometimes we’ll do spontaneous observations at social time.

Through discussing the barriers to carrying out observation, some practitioners indicated that there are elements of the daily routine that, although vital, are time consuming such as nappy changing, organisation of snacks and meals and communication with parents. However, this type of daily activity could also be used more effectively as a medium in which to carry out observations. For example, not all observations need to be written down at the time as much useful information will be exchanged verbally through informal discussions between practitioners and with parents. However, particularly in light of the newly introduced EYFS progress check at age two (National Children's Bureau, 2012), it is important to build up over time a record of observational information that can be shared more formally with other practitioners and parents and used as a tool for reflecting on.

### *Further Obstacles*

Some further challenges for practitioner observations were identified, such as planning time for observation and the difficulties of observing babies, given the demanding practical nature of the practitioner's role within that room. This is recognised by the higher ratio of practitioners to children as established in the EYFS. One practitioner, when discussing her own practice, recognised a personal obstacle in carrying out observations rather than being directly engaged with the children:

I need to step back . . . finding it very hard . . . habit of diving in . . . getting stuck in.

This is a good example of reflection where the practitioner has identified a particular aspect of their practice and has acknowledged a need to develop this further. This is an important step in the process of overcoming the barriers for observation. Schön (1983) describes two types of reflection as reflection-in-action, which is the process of re-shaping what is being worked on while working on it, and reflection-on-action, which is the process of looking back at an experience in order to gain deeper insights. The above comment shows reflection-in-action as the practitioner articulated initial responses, thoughts and feelings about carrying out observations.

### *The Use of Observations*

The evaluation of observations takes place on a regular basis. The use of the weekly planning meeting allows for observations to inform the planning for individual children. Practitioners identify the children's needs for further support through making links to the Development Matters aspect of the EYFS.

However, this use of observation sometimes reflects a view of the Development Matters from the EYFS as a tool to be used in identifying perceived gaps in the child's learning and development rather than as a means to hone in on the child's interests and/or strengths on which to build. This is shown in the following comment:

We are looking for things now like targets to see if they . . . such and such can ride a bike and if they can't do that how are we going to do this with them. What are we going to do to bring them onto that point . . . ?

The use of observations to assess the children's progress is seen by most of the practitioners as a challenge. Although the content of the observations is recorded and used to inform planning meetings, how this translates to effective provision for the children has been identified as problematic.

off [*sic*] the observations we plan next steps to further it, but sometimes we can't cos [*sic*], for example if we write such and such says cat, we can't really further that. Sometimes I struggle on how to further that.

A greater understanding of the effective practice and planning and resourcing aspects of the EYFS would support practitioners in interpreting what they have recorded. There was little evidence of a consistent approach to planning and a review of the use of the weekly planning sheets should be considered in order to make the planning cycle explicit for all practitioners to promote consistency across the Children's Centre. Planning decisions in an early childhood setting either take a bottom-up approach in which practitioners' decisions respond to children's rights, changing needs, and interests, or take a top-down approach when working within a goal-orientated curriculum such as the EYFS framework. In this case, practitioners seek to answer questions about what they want the child or children to achieve and what steps should be taken based on the child's own interests (MacNaughton, 2003). At first glance the difference may seem negligible but collecting evidence on children's learning for assessment and planning purposes within the EYFS will generally involve particular approaches that include criteria-referenced interpretations (i.e. the Development Matters statements) and goal-based interpretation, which involves looking at the evidence on individual children's achievements towards their goals for learning.

### *Sharing Information with Parents*

Parental involvement is generally encouraged throughout the process of observation and parents have access to their child's records at any time. This is illustrated in the following comment:

Parents—we speak to them every day about what we seen [*sic*]. They can see their child's file anytime. There's a thing on the door where they can let us know if they want their child to do something.

Other practitioners asked parents to keep a written record about how their child plays at home. The following comment demonstrates how this was put into place:

Weekend diary—started for every child, daily diary but we weren't getting them back everyday so we suggested a weekend sheet if they did anything at the weekend. One of my key parents will tell us what the child have done at the weekend so we will record that and put it in our planning. Works well cos [*sic*] we observe what they are interested in and it works well working with the parents.

One practitioner admitted that she had not yet discussed her observations with parents but recognised the advantage of doing so:



Yes. I haven't talked about any of the observations or nothing yet but I will do, Yes 'cos [*sic*] the child might do it at home as well as doing it in nursery. I show them the file and that which has pictures in.

Given the inconsistencies in the way parents are able to enter into a dialogue about their child's learning and development, then, both practitioners and parents would benefit from a shared conceptual framework (Whalley, 2007). Developing this framework for thinking with parents would also encourage a shared language about the ways in which children learn and how adults can support this (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). A suggestion would be to set up a training session within the centre to help parents find a focus for their observations at home.

### *Further Training Needs*

Further opportunities for training in observation and analysis thereof were requested by all practitioners. The contextual visit and the interview data revealed that more training is required as to how long-term and short-term planning can build on the knowledge gained from observation. There is a tendency in the identification of appropriate next steps based on the interpretation of the observations for staff to focus solely on norm-referenced development to the detriment of the Development Matters within each of the areas of learning and development.

As can be seen from the following practitioners' remarks, a recurrent theme emerged regarding the need for further training on the observation, assessment and planning processes in line with the EYFS:

I would find it [training] useful, cos [*sic*] I don't know whether what I am doing now is right or wrong.

Yes, I'd like the training. When I write them down, I always think I'm writing it wrong and I have to ask someone if I'm doing it right... I could talk about it but I don't know how to put it into words, well I do know but I just question myself how to put things into words.

### **Implications for Practice and Provision**

That carrying out observations and assessments to inform planning is a complex matter has been well documented (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003) and is reinforced by the findings from this study. It is increasingly acknowledged that this process requires knowledgeable and informed practitioners, who understand how babies and young children learn and develop and who are able to apply this understanding effectively in their practice. Furthermore, the development of relevant skills necessitates a reflective approach, which can successfully enhance the techniques of observation, assessment and planning through the process of ongoing evaluation.

This study has identified that the practitioners are open to new ideas and are willing and eager to explore new procedures to facilitate effective practice. This includes the development of continual evaluation of these procedures. The introduction of the new approach to observation, assessment and planning and the

commitment of the staff to this is a case in point. The practitioners were able to cultivate a stance towards their own practice that was based on self-reflection and the examination of ideas (Goodnough, 2011). Through their own cycle of action they created opportunities to engage in purposeful activity, which contributed to greater understanding of how best to carry out and use child observations. For example, the practitioners recognise the importance of the key person approach in carrying out observations and are implementing this within their practice. Furthermore, the key person observations clearly provide some insight into each individual child's development and learning. This is an essential aspect of gathering information about each child. However, a greater variety of contexts for observations would provide a more rounded picture of the children. For example, the practitioners need to plan opportunities to observe children initiating and developing their own ideas and carrying these out, for example, in areas of continuous provision to allow children's interests, as well as progress, to be identified. Notwithstanding, the practitioners were using some opportunities within the daily routine to gather information, and where this was carried out it was successful. Whilst challenging, further exploration of the possibility of incorporating observations within the procedures of the daily routine would be extremely beneficial and would allow for further insight into children's naturalistic learning and development.

Although evaluation of the observations is carried out on a regular basis thought should now be given to how the observations can be used to identify children's interests and strengths using the EYFS as a guide to effective practice rather than as a measurement tool. For example, one of the key ways in which babies and young children learn is being in pairs or in small groups with other children; as well as developing their social and emotional skills, it stimulates ideas and involvement that move learning forward (DCSE, 2009).

The newly introduced weekly planning meeting is particularly welcomed by all the practitioners, and could be built on further to explore how to use some of the issues emerging from the research. This could include such matters as a consistent approach in the analysis of the observations, children's achievements, their interest and ideas and next steps in their learning.

In relation to this, all practitioners recognise the importance of continuing professional development and therefore would value the opportunity to engage with relevant and appropriate training. In light of this the practitioners would benefit from a training needs analysis to inform their continuing professional development. Continuing professional development may include opportunities for practitioners to observe practice in other settings.

## **Final Thoughts**

This review shows the impact of involving participants from the outset in the research process. The researchers' initial contextual visit served to create a time and space for the practitioners to begin a process of reflection that resulted in a cycle of action to develop their own practice and provision. The research team provided an

opportunity, through the semi-structured interviews, for the practitioners to engage wholeheartedly in a way that helped them to see their own practice and procedures in carrying out observations. This is a challenging time for all those involved in early childhood education and care, with the spotlight firmly on quality of provision. There is a renewed emphasis on the importance of carrying out meaningful observations within the EYFS framework and the contribution they make in providing effective early childhood education. This review has revealed important insights into the ways in which outsider researchers can inspire early years practitioners to reflect upon their own practice and provision.

## Notes

- [1] The reformed Statutory Framework for the EYFS takes effect from 1 September 2012.
- [2] The CWDC was formed in 2005 with a remit to strengthen the children's workforce. However, in March 2012 it lost its status as a non-departmental public body due to cuts in public funding by the present coalition government. The Department for Education Teaching Agency has taken over the CWDC's work with early years.
- [3] Carefully chosen and organised quality resources placed in areas that are always available for children to access independently across every area of learning.

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