

The Art of Observation and Documentation of Children's Play

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Abstract

How might we use data to make children's learning through play visible? Noticing and valuing the ideas, thinking, theories, questions and feelings of our youngest learners involves the process of observation. Understanding their strengths, interests, needs and challenges also comes from meaningful documentation. At the same time, one of the most difficult aspects of observing and documenting children's play is the *what* and *how*. So much data can be gathered about our students that we get lost in what to look for. The end result is that data is either diluted or there is too much data. Another challenge to the process is what is worth documenting and how do we present data to reflect who our students are and to accurately make visible their learning stories. This action research explored the possible influences of teaching a pattern of observation and documentation on play practices. Findings that were revealed through a thematic approach to data analysis include: 1) feeling more intentional about what to look for and what to document; 2) becoming more aware about the filters and perspectives brought to the observation and documentation process; and 3) implementing the pattern to inform planning and to personalize play for students. Implications to future practice require systematic engagement with ongoing, collaborative practices of observing and documenting children's play.

Keywords: Observations, Documentation, Play, Data, Perception

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Introduction

The perceptual shift in assessment for learning has been moving away from traditional ways of gathering evidence (Mackenzie, 2021). Most certainly as early childhood educators, there is recognition that the old methods are developmentally inappropriate for young learners. Rather holding great value in the early years is assessment through the process of collecting and interpreting information during children's play through observation and documentation.

Valuing who children are, acknowledging their feelings and respecting their working theories and ideas happen through observing children's play. Making visible children's ideas, their strengths and their work in progress require forms of documenting (Stacey, 2015). However understanding the complexities and nuances in learning through play requires a purposeful and systematic approach to observation and documentation. While observation and documentation has the potential to yield powerful insights, the perceived challenge surrounds the what and how to observe and document children's play. Without direction, the process becomes cumbersome (City et al., 2013). Either too much information is gathered, lacking in purpose or data is diluted, missing essential details. Either way, the effectiveness and value of observing and documenting diminishes.

The gap between the desired and actual experiences and benefits with observation and documentation of children's play defines the parameters for action research. Responding to the gap, this study investigated the impact of teaching a pattern for observation and documentation of children's play on early childhood practices.

Engaging in Action Research

For early childhood teachers, questions about what children are really learning as they play are infinite. Observation and documentation offers an antidote to understanding children's everyday play moments that are filled with extraordinary meaning (Curtis & Carter, 2022). Generating understanding and knowledge around observation and documentation of children's play however, is fraught with so many questions.

- What aspects of children's play should be observed and are worth documenting?
- What processes, skills and tools might support teacher observations?
- How might observer subjectivities and biases be addressed?
- In what ways might the process serve learning and teaching?
- How might children's identities be made visible and life stories be valued through observation and documentation?

Responding to these questions, the author developed a course entitled "The Tapestry of Play" and used action research to explore the impact of teaching an observation and documentation pattern on play practices. The course involved virtually delivering a series of three workshops at 90 minutes each session. Participants included 24 early childhood educators working in different international schools in Spain, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The process involved a collaborative, iterative and reflective approach to build teacher knowledge and competency. Participating teachers were first introduced to a pattern of observing and documenting children's play, consisting of three elements:

- **Collecting data:** What information about students and learning during children's play is worth gathering and documenting?

- **Forming perceptions:** What is involved in the process of reflecting, analyzing and interpreting data?
- **Planning next steps:** What role might observation and documentation play in curriculum design and lesson planning?

After its introduction, participants engaged in continuous practice using the observation and documentation pattern throughout the course. Embedded into each virtual session were opportunities to watch videos of children's play, analyze data collaboratively and reflect on the process as an individual and in a whole group. Post-session tasks were also assigned, giving additional and extended time for application and reflection in daily practice.

Time deliberately allocated for reflections was essential to the process (Stacey, 2015). First, reflections served to inform adaptation and refinement of teaching the observation and documentation pattern based on participant feedback. Reflections also enabled teachers to consider how and what aspects the observation and documentation process impacted their play practices.

The research process therefore situated participants in a teachers-as-researchers role. Participants used their knowledge from their pedagogical experiences, their learning from the virtual sessions and their experiences on the job to drive the research process and construct their own knowledge, with the shared goal of improving play pedagogy.

Methods

Data sources came from the three virtual sessions including small group dialogue, whole group processing, individual teacher reflections, course facilitator field notes and session recordings.

Small Group Dialogue

Opportunities for small group conversations were provided throughout the course. To help facilitate conversations, indirect questions were provided to initiate and guide discussions (Cohen et al., 2017). Dialoguing allowed participants to generate ideas about the observation and documentation pattern and co-construct their understanding about the use and impact of the pattern on their play practices.

Whole Group Processing

Whole group sessions were facilitated to bring together individuals with differing experiences and viewpoints. By sharing insights from the small group conversations, common patterns and themes were identified. Processing as a whole group also allowed assumptions about the observation and documentation pattern to be challenged and nuances to be highlighted. The time given to extend ideas, qualify responses and exemplify points added to the depth of data.

Individual Teacher Reflections

Participating teachers maintained a journal for written reflections throughout the course. Being deliberate about time for individual reflections served as a valuable form of documentation of the research journey, informing about the progress of the study (Spencer et al., 2020). Reflections shared by participants made visible their interpretations of the use of

the observation and documentation pattern through the lens of their own experiences in both the virtual sessions and their own classroom contexts. Capturing teacher thought processes, experiences with the pattern, challenges faced with its implementation and lessons learnt contributed to the comprehensiveness in data.

Course Facilitator Field Notes

Adding to the written documentation of teacher reflections, the course facilitator's field notes tracked the evolution of participant questions and impact of the observation and documentation pattern on play practices. Field notes have the power to enhance data and provide a rich context for analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). Notes taken during the virtual sessions captured both spoken words and non-verbal communication to deepen understanding of participant feedback to the pattern's use and its effects. Notes taken immediately after the sessions minimized possibilities of details being forgotten and inaccurately remembered or represented with passage of time.

Recordings of Virtual Sessions

All sessions were video and audio recorded, allowing specific moments or the entirety of whole session processings to be reviewed as many times as needed. The recordings gave a full spectrum of information, capturing the saying, doing and relating of individuals (Mitchell & Reid, 2016). Revisiting the course through recordings enabled the subtle exchanges which may have been overlooked in real time, serving to further refine data collected.

Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was used to build complex and nuanced descriptions from multiple perspectives. Similarities and differences were detected across the various data sources through repeated review and revisit of content (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Categories were formed based on patterns including common use of language, recurring concepts and shared experiences. Repeated occurrences within the categories; relationships and connections between categories; and contrasting aspects for distinct differences provided broader concepts and overarching ideas for themes to then be identified.

Feeding the themes back to participating teachers throughout the sessions served to validate the ideas, increasing the trustworthiness of findings. The collaborative approach where opportunities to further discuss what resonated with participants from the themes resulted in more representative findings. Where content was surprising and unanticipated because of the nuances presented, opportunities to clarify and elaborate on ideas were possible.

Findings

The order of findings presented follow the sequence of the observation and documentation pattern introduced to participating teachers in the virtual sessions. Each component of the pattern resulted in a distinct impact on play practices.

Collecting Data: Being Deliberate & Intentional About the Work

Serving as preliminary information to the course, participating teachers were given the opportunity to address their current knowledge and skills surrounding observation and

documentation of children's play. Provided were expressions that the process was vague, decreasing the value in the purpose for collecting data and the efficacy of details gathered.

Impression 1: *I don't know what I'm supposed to watch for when the children are playing. I just write down everything and then I don't know where to go from there.*

Impression 2: *It's too much. I have all this information piling up but I don't know what to do with it.*

Impression 3: *Where do I begin? And when do I make my observations of children at play? And how do I know what to observe and what to document?*

Exploring the question 'What information about students and learning during children's play is worth gathering and documenting?', the data collection component of the pattern fostered a more deliberate approach, enhancing intentionality of the process. The pattern ensured teachers focused on the collection of relevant information fit for purpose, contrary to the random data previously collected without a framework. The implication resulted in a shift in practice. Prior to their observations, teachers needed to think critically and determine carefully the aspects of learning they intended to gather data about. Teachers then understood what was worth documenting as there was now purpose given to the observation process. Recognizing the need for planning in advance of making observations, teachers felt the process was more targeted and it gave value to their work. One participant remarked:

I've become more mindful of what I'm looking for. My data is more focused when I think about the learning I'm going to observe and note down, before I make my observations. I think about data differently and I see the importance of observation.

The pattern also enabled teachers to make the distinction between data and perception. Data on its own has no value, as making judgements and forming interpretations are not involved (Satapathy, 2019; France & Almarode, 2022). Perceptions on the other hand, requires a process of making sense of information to construct meaning of what one sees and hears (Curtis & Carter, 2022). Knowing the difference between data and perception helped teachers become more aware of how quickly they formed opinions when making observations. Teachers became conscious of their assumptions about children's play, prioritizing the need to gather enough data before making accurate perceptions. The practice of not rushing the process and pausing enabled teachers to use data to drive their interpretations.

Slowing down to gather enough data before meaning making resulted in a more holistic view of students, leading to a better understanding of the motivations and intentions behind children's play. As one participant articulated:

Collecting data before I insert my meaning has filled in the missing pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. When I jump to conclusions too quickly, I miss pieces, and then I get confused and I misunderstand my students. I need to take a much bigger step back and not allow my perceptions to dictate so I can have a bigger picture of the situation and what children are really doing. Not everything's in black or white. It helps me to know what's really going on because I've taken the time to see all that I can.

After repeated experiences of gathering data in both the virtual sessions and on the job, what became apparent to participating teachers is that they were making more generous

interpretations of children's play. The process of moving beyond initial impressions and looking deeper into children's play enabled teachers to see different perspectives and consider other factors to the situation that may have been overlooked had they formed interpretations prematurely. As one participant concluded in her written reflection:

Be aware! Take more time to find out why. Listen better. Ask more questions. Because if you observe long enough, you might not be really married to the idea of your initial interpretation. You will find that you have changed your perspective and see the children differently. You can always learn so much more.

Forming Perceptions: Broadening Perspectives & Deepening Understanding

After collecting data, participants were posed with the question of 'What is involved in the process of reflecting, analyzing and interpreting data?'. As they experienced collaborative analysis of data in both small and whole group conversations, this led to the emergence of a central concept, the notion of filters (Wong-Powell, 2017). Participants brought diverse values, beliefs, teaching experiences, life backgrounds and contextual factors to the study. By recognizing the influences of these unique filters on their perceptions of children's play, the diversity of participants enriched their interpretations of play observations. After processing data with colleagues, one participant highlights:

We have similar and different experiences growing up and experiencing life's achievements and challenges. And coming from similar and different places somehow gives us different views and attitudes about children's play. Looking at data together, these conversations have opened a door: we can talk about play but it could have so many meanings.

Perception is a filtered experience shaped by the different dimensions of one's identity, serving as lenses through which individuals view and make meaning of the world. The John Hopkins Diversity Wheel (2021) outlines the conscious and unconscious filters that influence the information one chooses to focus on and the interpretations one makes. In one example, as participants were watching a video of three boys building with blocks, it was observed that one boy raised a block over the head of another boy and paused in that position. Different interpretations of the boy's actions emerged.

Interpretation 1: *It looked like he was being playful. The students in my class do similar things like that because they're trying to get the attention of another student, to engage them in play.*

Interpretation 2: *I was waiting for the boy to be hit over the head with that block. I've seen it happen so many times! I was waiting for it!*

Interpretation 3: *He was probably playing planes so of course he would fly a block over the head of another boy. It's what kids do when they play planes. We see this all the time, pretending to fly something around.*

While participating teachers watched the same video of three boys playing with blocks, the various work experiences that the teachers drew upon influenced the way they interpreted the boy's behavior. While in the first interpretation, the teacher used her own students and

classroom context to form her perceptions, the second and third statements were conclusions grounded on former situations experienced.

The value of seeing and understanding differently emerged through small group conversations as participants explored the possible filters they used in observing the three boys and then interpreting data.

Participant 1: Everyone has a different life story and these stories allow us to connect in different ways. When we're open to sharing our thoughts, beliefs and ideas we can begin to understand where each person is coming from. And that's enriching!

Participant 2: It has been helpful to hear the different viewpoints because it has allowed me to reframe my thinking. Sometimes I see things in a certain way. So, hearing other perspectives lets me consider a different outcome because I'm reminded that I can see things differently than maybe the way I usually do or want to.

Through collaboration and by incorporating different voices, assumptions were challenged, prompting participants to reevaluate how they saw a situation and their interpretation of that observation (Bocala & Boudett, 2022). The diversity in voices enabled teachers to build upon each others' ideas and reveal aspects that were previously overlooked through a singular perspective. Participants concluded that the exposure to diverse viewpoints led to a richer pool of experiences, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of children's play.

Planning: Developing Meaningful Next Steps

Through observations, teachers' understandings of their students were enhanced and knowledge about children's play increased. Combined with the question of *'What role might observation and documentation play in curriculum design and lesson planning?'*, participants felt empowered to leverage documented observations and insights to inform the planning process. Developing curriculum and designing lessons no longer happened by chance; there was thoughtful attention to specific aspects of the curriculum and learning and teaching based on data.

Bringing my observations to the planning meetings with my team has guided our time together. It helps to focus our conversations on what provocations we need to next provide our students. It tells us what's missing from our lessons. And, it lets us know what we should observe for next.

With the emergence of more deliberate and intentional approaches to planning for play, participants gained confidence in personalizing play experiences for their students in different aspects shown in Table 1. The depth of information about students supported teachers to plan for more focused and impactful play provocations; modify play environments purposefully; and reflect on their presence and facilitation in children's play.

| PURPOSE OF OBSERVATIONS | INTENDED DATA TO BE COLLECTED | OUTCOMES ON PERSONALIZING PLAY |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| For assessment | Gain a deeper knowledge about children's strengths & challenges in areas including: -developmental milestones -language & communication skills -mathematical & scientific thinking -social & emotional development -executive functioning skills -metacognitive skills | Planning play provocations -built on student strengths -support individual challenges Informing adult-student exchanges -kinds of questions posed by adults -knowledge & skills needed to be explicitly taught Extending play through feedback -student self-assessment -reflections from both students & adults |
| For scaffolding | Monitor how play evolves & documenting learning over time | Responding to students in: -levels of adult facilitation -pacing of play provocations -complexity of play experiences |
| For inspiration | Reveal student curiosity & wonder by understanding: -motivations behind play -intentions for playing -engagement in play -ways to extend play scenarios | Designing play environments -presence of focal points -varied learning materials -individualized displays |

Table 1: Personalizing play experiences

The benefits of teaching the observation and documentation pattern on planning for personalized play were shared during the final session of the course as participants described:

Participant 1: *Because I know my students better, my lessons are more student centered. The observations help me to see learning from the child's point of view. I can now better plan for their play based on what I'm seeing and not what I'm thinking.*

Participant 2: *Observations are key to all that we do. The data enables us to refine our thinking and understanding of each individual student. We can plan for their unique play journey.*

Participant 3: *Observing students is truly a gift in getting to know your students. I use my documents of children's play to inform my next steps as I look to differentiate my approaches to play.*

Limitations to the Study

Teaching a single pattern may limit the ability to adapt, possibly making it context specific and oversimplifying the complexities of play. While acknowledging the potential limitations, the pattern offered a valuable framework to the initial vagueness expressed by the participating teachers about the process of making observations and documenting children's play. In addition to clarifying the purpose and process, the pattern promoted consistencies in how and what data were collected. Utilizing data to form more accurate perceptions about children's play also minimized potential bias emerging from teacher filters, contributing to data-driven decisions for planning children's play.

The use of a small sample size with immediate results also may not guarantee findings are representative, generalizable and have longevity. Purposive sampling provided relevant information to the study as participation was by virtue of professional role. Further investigation with a larger sample size and extending the course to additional study groups is warranted. Additionally, to determine the residual impact of teaching an observation and documentation pattern, follow up conversations including interviews with participating teachers should be made (Schmoker, 2021). While the framework may show positive results to play practices, the study requires follow-up to detect potential drift over time.

Implications to Practice

While the study yielded immediate results from a small sample size, there are promising influences to teaching an observation and documentation pattern on play practices. The iterative and reflective process in developing teacher knowledge, skills and competencies highlight the need for a systematic approach to observation and documentation. Arising out of the initial concern identified by early childhood teachers, a framework helps to define the purpose for observing and identify what is worth documenting. A pattern for observation and documentation serves to systematize the process of gathering data before forming perceptions, serving to acknowledge and minimize the impact of filters as potential biases. Additionally, the process can be used to facilitate planning to improve play experiences that are data driven and personalized.

However the impact of teaching an observation and documentation pattern goes beyond systematizing the process. Ongoing practice in the virtual sessions and practical application of the framework shifted the thinking of participating teachers, holding value in repeated experiences. Collection of evidence therefore requires multiple measures and more than a single entry (McTighe, 2018). Through an iterative and ongoing process, participating teachers developed a more holistic view of their students and a deeper understanding of children's play. As expressed by one early childhood teacher:

I needed to go back and observe again and again because when I processed my notes with peers, our perceptions were so different that I wondered if I was missing something. It was useful to observe again because what I first saw wasn't what I saw again the next time, and the next, and this added to how I was seeing my student.

With repeated observation and documentation practices, participants also experienced increased accuracy in their perceptions. Providing opportunities to engage in frequent observations and return to data is necessary, resulting in more complete portraits of students and optimal conclusions (Axelsson, 2023). As one participating teacher recalls:

I'm more careful not to judge the first time I observe because I've been in a place where I formed my opinions too quickly. And, I was wrong! I am reminded that observing and documenting is a process if we want to make the right interpretations of our students.

While mining for robust data and forming accurate perceptions require discipline by committing time for practice and being deliberate about repeating the process, it also demands a collaborative approach (Campbell et al., 2016). The collaborative inquiry of participants in experiencing the observation and documentation pattern is a powerful shift. Collecting and interpreting data can be challenging for one teacher alone. Moving the observation and documentation process to a shared experience transforms individual understanding to collective insights, significantly deepening understanding about children's play and enriching the perspectives about students.

While teaching a specific observation and documentation pattern is a valuable starting point, the study supports a systematic approach, ongoing practice and collaborative engagement as crucial elements in harnessing the full potential of providing a framework. By incorporating these features in the process, a more comprehensive approach to fostering habits and mindsets around observing and documenting children's play is cultivated.

Conclusion

Engaging in action research values the knowledge and experiences that teachers hold and can bring to the field. Serving as an authentic way to approach professional learning, action research provides opportunities for teachers to identify areas for professional growth, dialogue about experiences, share practices, reflect on processes and adjust approaches based on their learning.

The significance of this study informs the direction of observation and documentation of children's play. As teachers inquire into the why, what and how of the process, teaching a pattern brings purpose, value and a pragmatic approach into practice. Through careful observation and documentation, teachers can represent with accuracy, the identities and stories of children and give respect to who they are as individuals and as learners (Curtis, 2017; Carr & Lee, 2017). Children are complex individuals with a rich background of experiences, strengths and interests waiting to be uncovered.

The depth in findings obtained from small and whole group conversations, combined with individual participating teacher reflections and course facilitator field notes, empower teachers to use a pattern as the cornerstone to observation and documentation practices. By developing these skills, teachers can move beyond assumptions and premature perceptions about children's play and truly value children for who they are, fostering a more responsive and personalized learning environment for all.

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