

The Power of Observation with Toddlers: An Investigation of Music

by Mary Bowne, Jennifer Kampmann, and Natalie Abbey

Observation is a simple yet powerful tool that allows teachers to discover the desires, needs, and interests of a child. Beyond planning for immediate needs, taking time to observe for the deeper meaning of a child's interactions with people, objects, and their environment provides opportunity not only to enhance curriculum but for teachers to engage in reflective practice.

Key Observations

Educators understand the complexities of time, routines, curriculum planning, and developmentally appropriate practices associated with toddlers. What educators may not fully take advantage of — to reduce these complexities — is the power of observation:

- To discover the desires, needs, and interests of a child.
- To learn the deeper meaning of a child's interactions with people, objects, and their environment.
- To enhance curriculum.
- To engage in reflective practice.
- To see children's intent in action.
- To see the child for the unique individual he or she is in the classroom and at home.
- To understand and include children's home experiences, cultures, and beliefs.
- To connect children's past experiences into current learning to make these more meaningful and long lasting.

Toddler Communication

When simple observation does not seem to yield the results desired, teachers must let the children show us what they understand. Teachers can provide children with the tools and materials necessary to express their ideas and desires, as well as to show us their existing knowledge. Teachers often assume that they know what children are interested in, or what they should be focusing on, based on an overall knowledge of toddler development. What tends to be a challenge is how best to engage these young children. For example:

A classroom of toddlers was taking a walk outside of the classroom and heard different sounds within the environment. Even though different kinds of music were played in the background during free play and were also utilized during selected large group times for such activities as dancing with scarves and singing songs together, these sounds were uniquely different.

As the children listened to the sounds, they pulled the teachers' hands to further investigate where the noises were coming from. After exploring different areas of the building, the children came to the conclusion that the noises were coming from the second floor of the building. They demonstrated this by pointing up. Proceeding up the stairs, the children found two university students, one playing the xylophone and the other playing the drums. Since the teachers did not want to disrupt the students' practice, the class found a discrete location to sit down and watch.

After some time, the music students realized the children were there and asked them if they wanted to come over and look at the instruments. The children explored the instruments, looking at every detail. The music students asked the children if they wanted to play the instruments. The children's non-verbal behaviors and facial expressions showed their enthusiasm for this idea, pulling teachers by



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the hand to where the instruments were. They wanted a trusted companion (a teacher) to assist them in this exploration.

Although the non-verbal behaviors exhibited great enthusiasm during this experience, it was not until the classroom practiced a fire drill, leading them to the neighboring university music building, that the teachers realized the toddlers' true interest in music. One of the children's mothers was in her office, engaged in a voice lesson with an undergraduate student. The children walked by her office and again demonstrated their excitement through their non-verbal behaviors by pulling the teachers into the office. A few children whose verbal skills were more advanced said things like, "Come" and "Go in." Since the children recognized this mother, they were comfortable in this new environment and sat down to listen to the voice lesson. The mother showed the children the musical score the student was singing from and how the musical scale worked — the higher the note on the score, the higher the voice. The teachers and children returned to the classroom with a renewed excitement for music.

These teachers needed to find a way to capture the attention of these very young, largely non-verbal children. Thinking about how toddlers communicate, reminded them that even the youngest toddlers can communicate their needs and wants through a combination of vocalizations and body language. Something as simple as purposeful observation was the key to helping these teachers understand the children's motivation.

Emergent Curriculum

Once a clear understanding of children's motivation has been found, the next step is to sit down as a teaching team to discuss the desires, needs, and interests of the children. For example, in our music scenario it was important to look past surface knowledge like hearing music and finding the location of where it was originating. One question to ask would be, "Could it be that the children are actually interested in the instruments themselves? How they move? What they look like?" By taking time to observe on a deeper level, teachers will be able to enhance their classroom curriculum and begin to engage in inquiry projects based on the in-depth observation in which they engaged.

When teachers realize they need to have a more open mind and be willing to follow the children's lead, a core belief in

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emergent curriculum surfaces. Also important is becoming more reflective in one's own teaching practices and thoughts about teaching and learning. For example, in our music illustration, after these initial experiences, the teachers and children found

other instruments within the center to explore and play:

- Plastic drums, a floor piano, recorders, push button xylophones, rhythm sticks, and maracas were just a few items that the children played with during free play.
- The instruments were brought to large group, where they were introduced, labeled, and played for the children to hear.
- The instruments were then passed around to each child to further explore and play.
- In order to further this exploration, the instruments were then placed back in the classroom for the children.
- The teachers also thought of unique learning activities including filling glass jars with differing levels of water, which when hit by a stick, made different sounds, similar to those of a xylophone.

Detailed observations helped these teachers begin to think more deeply about the music curriculum opportunities available to them and the children; they weren't limited to listening to music in the classroom. Cultural backgrounds, unique learning experiences, different music genres (e.g., jazz, lullabies, soft rock, and classical), and activities that connected and supported this music were implemented in the classroom each week: creative dance, painting and drawing, movement (e.g., jump like a frog), and use of props (e.g., scarves) to demonstrate imagination and creative movement.

Extending Children's Learning

The teachers also wanted to extend children's learning by engaging in more experiences with them outside the classroom:

- Conducting walking tours to the university music building, where practice and recitals take place on a regular basis.
- Sharing teachers' and parents' musical instruments and vocal talents with the children.
- Building children's vocabulary of musical terms, including the names of instruments: clarinet, flute, guitar, rhythm, loudness and softness, beats, fast and slow, xylophone,

piano, saxophone, tuba, trombone, and trumpet.

- Informing children of the 'proper' social manner of listening to a recital or practice. Although the children were already intrigued with the musical performance or practice, the teachers wanted them to understand the appropriate behavior of sitting quietly and listening to musical performances.

As the semester progressed, the children began to recognize the components of rhythm and tempo when playing musical instruments and singing songs in the classroom. A few verbal toddlers communicated some of these terms while playing or listening to music as well. The children also sang songs independently while conducting other free play activities and often asked for background music within the classroom environment. Large group experiences often led to singing more songs, rather than conducting other activities. Indoor and outdoor walks usually ended up visiting the music room/building, no matter in which direction the walk had begun.

When teachers realize they need to have a more open mind and be willing to follow the children's lead, a core belief in emergent curriculum surfaces.

Conclusion

Understanding what truly interested the children helped the teachers appreciate the importance of observation, the power of non-verbal and simple verbal cues, and the need to follow

children's lead. Observation and reflection informed the teachers' curricular decisions, helped them feel more confident in their teaching abilities, and deepened their relationships with children. Jablon, Dombro, and Miller (2007) agree that observation is key to identifying children's interests, needs, and desires. This is one example of how a classroom of toddler teachers took their work with children to the next level by engaging in reflective practice and thought. As a result, the curriculum was negotiated and the children were able to feel ownership of the project.

Reference

Jablon, J. R., Dombro, A. L., & Miller, M. (2007). *The power of observation for birth through eight*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAY ALBRECHT

