

Tina Bruce | Stella Louis | Georgie McCall

Observing Young Children



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DEDICATIONS

We have chosen to dedicate this book to the values and ideals of **Nelson Mandela**, in his efforts towards a new South Africa, free from the atrocities and social injustice of the apartheid era. Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave a tangible image through his phrase 'the Rainbow Nation'.

There are those who do good work quietly across the years and are rarely acknowledged for the important contribution they have made to improving the quality of the lives of young children.

Nel Redelinghuys is one of these people. Her work as a teacher of young children, in Johannesburg, initiating an early education group for black children during the years of apartheid and then subsequently supporting developments in Soweto, has been undertaken quietly, with sustained commitment.

We would like, in this small way, to recognise her dedicated efforts for the Rainbow Nation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tina Bruce CBE is an honorary visiting professor at the University of Roehampton, having originally trained as a teacher at the Froebel Educational Institute. She was also trained at the University of Manchester to teach children with hearing impairments and taught in both special and mainstream school contexts. She was head of the Froebel Research Nursery School in the Froebel College, becoming Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Studies in what is now called the University of Roehampton. She has worked with the British Council (New Zealand and Egypt) and was awarded International Woman Scholar by the University of Virginia Commonwealth.

She has published many articles and has a long and successful track record of publishing books with Sage: these include *Exploring Learning: Young Children and Blockplay* (edited by Pat Gura with the Froebel Blockplay Research Group directed by Tina Bruce), *Developing Learning in Early Childhood* and *Essentials of Literacy* (co-authored with Jenny Spratt). She was also editor of *Early Childhood: A Student Guide* and the award winning book *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today*.

She is a vice-president of the British Association for Early Childhood and a trustee of the Froebel Council.

Stella Louis MA is an early years consultant who has worked as a nursery nurse, nursery manager, DCE course coordinator and Early Years Training coordinator. She wrote her first book in 2008 on understanding children's schemas and has had articles published in *Nursery World* and *Early Education*. Stella has developed a sustained interest in working with parents and is involved in research on sharing knowledge and understanding of young children's schemas with parents. Stella is currently studying for a Doctorate in Education at Roehampton University and is a Froebelian-trained travelling tutor, working in the UK and in South Africa in an initiative funded by the Froebel Trust.

Georgie McCall trained with the NNEB nursery nursing qualification and subsequently trained as a teacher at Goldsmiths College. She is an extremely

experienced teacher who has been Head of Ann Bernadt Nursery School and Children's Centre for over twenty years. She has great expertise in working with children with special educational needs and developing parental involvement and outdoor play. She also has considerable experience in training early years staff in the inner city both in London and in Sierra Leone (with the VSO). She is a travelling tutor with the Froebel Trust in Soweto.

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INTRODUCTION

At most times in history, and in most parts of the world, the first seven years are regarded as the time when children learn who they are, about those who are significant to them, and how their world is. They take part, and if sensitively helped by those around them, they contribute creatively and imaginatively. They grow and develop physically. They develop empathy, compassion and thoughtful feelings.

This is a book about the process of finding user-friendly and purposeful ways of observing and planning that will help parents and practitioners to become informed and able to help young children to develop and learn. It is designed to support those who are working with young children and their families in a variety of group settings. It is also about looking with insight at children and providing them with what they need in order to develop and learn optimally, examining the historic background of observing and planning, and describing examples of good practice in different group settings. It helps to monitor a child's progress – what is needed now and to work out what is needed next.

Children learn through and with the people they love and the people who care for them. They learn through being physically active, through real, direct experiences, and through learning how to make and use symbolic systems, such as play, language and representation. Whether children are at home, or attend group settings, they need informed adults who can help them. This book will help those who work with young children so that all the developing and learning of the earliest years can be consolidated during middle childhood, hopefully in ways that will build on what has gone before.

This book gives high status to adults (i.e. parents and early childhood specialists of all kinds) who love and work with children. Observation has a long and time-honoured history and this will be explored in the book.

Observing children in spontaneous situations in a variety of other settings, the book emulates the spirit of Susan Isaacs working in the 1930s and 40s. She used theory as a lens to interpret carefully made observations and recorded the progress of children, showing the importance of observation that indicates what is needed to support and extend children's development and learning. The book is full of examples of good practice in recording

observations that can then inform planning. Unless we know, tune into and understand our children, unless we act effectively on what we know, we cannot help them very much.

Clinging to dogma ('I believe that children need ...') or saying 'What was good enough for me ...' is not good enough. Children deserve better than that. The pursuit of excellence means being informed. This book will help adults increase their knowledge and understanding of the young children they work with by using observation which will inform their planning: they can then act for the good in the light of this.

All the examples given in this book can be used with different National Framework documents worldwide. However, this cannot be done in a tightly prescribed way because the book's authors share the concerns of many parents and educators of all kinds working with young children – that curriculum frameworks must be used as a resource and never as a limiting straitjacket.

GLOSSARY

The glossary which follows contains some of the key terms used in this book. You may wish to refer to this before you read the book or while you read it, or perhaps use it as a way of pulling together some of the strands explored in the following chapters.

Anecdotal records

These are a tried and tested way of gathering observations. In a busy group setting it is not always possible or desirable to have a notepad or sticky note at the ready to jot down on-the-spot observations. Anecdotal records are compiled after the time of the observation, with quiet reflection, when alone, with a colleague or parent, or with the child, after the event has taken place. (For example, at the end of the day, or the end of the week.) They can be written, annotated photographs (often of constructions, dances, action in the sand, water, garden) or examples of paintings, drawings etc.

Because of this, it may only be possible to give a rough date and time of day when the observation was made, but it goes without saying, the more accurate the better, and it should be noted if there is guessing included. Often a practitioner or parent will say, 'Oh, I've just remembered, the other day he spent half the afternoon in the garden looking under stones! He's doing it again today. This might be significant, so I'll write it down'. Or looking through the anecdotal records the practitioner might notice that Jodie always waves goodbye to her mother, and then goes to the clay table for a focused time there. This makes it clear that this is the way she self manages the transition from Mother being there to Mother going to work. It will therefore be important to make sure there is always a clay table for her, so as not to disturb the way she deals with this so positively.

Anecdotal observations are a useful way of adding to and enhancing the other kinds of records, and are often helpful in adding detail to family

scrapbooks and child profiles. But they are not as reliable or accurate as other methods if they are made too long after the event, because our memories can sometimes play tricks on us. On the other hand, they often bring alive the way a child engages, or not, with their learning. They are useful in bringing us to consider what a child is interested in and needs.

Diaries

These are dated anecdotal records, but because they are kept on a daily basis, they can become a great burden.

Formative records

These are records which build up gradually and continuously over time. They are the most useful kind of record, as they help us to see how individual children are learning, and how we are helping them to learn well. They will involve us in keeping narrative records. Formative records emphasise the process of developing and learning and help us to monitor progress.

Narrative records

There are several different kinds of narrative record, but they all aim to give the date, the time of day when an observation was made, and the duration of the observation, albeit with varying degrees of preciseness. Anecdotes are the least precise kind of narrative record compared with running records or specimen records, which are both made on the spot. Narrative records use the following methods: writing, diagrams, sketches, electronic recordings and photographs (still and moving sequences). Nowadays they are increasingly being stored on computer, with booklets printed off for parents to keep as home records and family memories of the children's learning while attending the setting. These often become treasured family possessions.

On-the-spot narrative records

1 Running records This type of narrative observation is typical in that it is made on the spot and notes what a child does and says (i.e. actions and language). The date and the starting and finishing time are recorded. Later on, the observation can be added to (using a different coloured pen, since

these will be anecdotal records). Still later that day (ideally), or if not at the end of the week, running records can also be looked at with a particular focus or coded in particular ways.

2 Specimen records These narrative observations are also made on the spot. They note actions and language, as well as information about the situation and place. Again, the date and starting and finishing time are noted. Details can be filled in later (with a different colour pen, as the additions are anecdotal records).

Because specimen records give the actions, language and context in which these took place, they are able to yield rich quantities of information, which can be reflected on later that day (ideally) or later that week to take a particular focus, or to code according to particular emphases.

Planning

It is important to distinguish between plans and planning.

Plans tend to be set in concrete and therefore inflexible. They do not often take account of the educational needs of individual children. They also tend to be separate and remain unattached to anything save for what is supposed to be covered in official framework documents. 'Transmission' describes their approach. This means beginning with what the official framework document says should be covered, and then breaking this down and teaching it (transmitting it) in small manageable chunks, week by week, until everything that is required has been transmitted.

Planning is an active process which helps us to look ahead, organise, manage and review what we offer to children and their families, and to act on this. The planning process involves us in making longer-term plans (e.g. FLOW charts) and in seeing 'Possible Lines of Direction' (PLOD charts) as well as weekly and daily plans which link with the formative records we keep of each child's progress. The planning process enables us to link what we have observed as important for the child in developing his/her learning with what is required in official framework documents. Planning is the bridge which links the two.

Schemas

Schemas are a set of repeatable actions, which can be generalised in different situations. The experiences of life are integrated into these patterns and are gradually coordinated. Coordinations lead to higher-level and more powerful schemas. (Atthey, 1990: 35–7)

Summative records

At regular intervals we will need to take stock of where a child is in his/her development and learning. We will need to look at what we are offering the child and the family. Summative records can help us review what is going on at a particular time. These focus on results and products, rather than how they came about. Such records help us evaluate what we offer the child. They also help us identify children's special educational needs and disabilities.

The most useful summative records can be compiled easily from the formative records, by giving them a particular *focus*, by looking at the way they have been *coded*, by reviewing the *FLOW* or *PIOD* charts and related *planning* records. These can be used when sharing progress with parents, colleagues in the same setting, or colleagues from other agencies. Many settings now keep formative observations in electronic forms which can also be printed off as booklets for families. These days it is usually the norm that summative records are electronically stored.

Standardised tests of various kinds can be useful in confirming (or not) children's progress and in helping to pin-point (diagnose) their strengths and difficulties. However, if standardised summative tests dominate they lose their usefulness, and children are then tested rather than assessed. This in turn creates an atmosphere of fear in the children because they quickly pick up on the fact that their parents as well as staff are anxious about the results. It is not healthy when there is a sense of those external to the situation holding all the power and creating such pressure for children to achieve in narrow ways. In countries where there is a narrowing of the curriculum a situation develops where schooling is externally assessed and judged: this might interfere with children's education more than it supports it. This book is about educating young children with an emphasis on helping each child to develop and learn. Planning as a constantly flowing process (rather than making inflexible plans) is a crucial part of this.

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CHAPTER 1

WHY KEEP RECORDS?

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- The difference between assessment and evaluation.
- The reasons why observation is important.

We need to keep records so that staff and parents can do their best for each child and each group of children. Through getting to know a child, we also get to know how to help that child develop in all aspects and learn more, and we can recognise what to offer the child next. Getting to know that child is about:

- **assessment** – i.e. the child's progress;
- **evaluation** – i.e. what we have offered, are offering and what, in the light of what we find, we decide we will offer the child next;
- our records – which we will need in order to **link** assessment with evaluation.

There is no 'royal road' to record-keeping. Each team in each setting will need to find its own way, including parents and children as part of the process. The record-keeping will need to feel owned by every person working with it.

Observing children in a variety of situations

As soon as words like assessment and evaluation are used, there is a tendency to think that children should be observed in testing conditions, or