Teachers Roles In Action Workshop Series

Observing Children at Play: Teachers as Scientific Inquirers

A Workshop for Early Childhood Educators

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Observer

Documenter

Coach

Mediator

Architect

Planner
Early childhood teaching requires that teachers wear many hats, thereby acting in a variety of roles (teachers roles in action). By alternating between observer, architect, coach, mediator, planner, scribe and documenter in daily classroom life, the teacher becomes a thinking, vibrant professional, responding to the active learners in her care.

Observation is the first and foremost step in the teaching-learning cycle, a springboard for quality practice. Teachers must be inquisitive—asking astute questions and continually wondering, “What makes this child tick,” in order to understand the children in their care. Each child is an ever-changing puzzle for teachers to make sense of. Observation is an art form, which takes practice, skill and persistence. In return for their observation efforts, teachers come to know the children that they teach, both as individuals and as a group.

In *Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children*, Cohen and her colleagues speak wisely about knowing children:

> There are reasons for a child’s behavior, of course, plenty of them. Sometimes it is hard to decide which is the most likely of several possible reasons for the same kind of behavior! But while every bit of behavior is caused by something, we must sadly admit that what that something is for the particular child, who is the enigma, is often a mystery. That is why as teachers we must gather good clues that will lead to understanding. Only by learning to see children as they are, and especially as they see themselves, will we get our clues. It is not as simple as it sounds.”

It is not as simple as it sounds. Yet, teachers know that observation is a large part of quality practice with young children. *Observing Children at Play: Teachers as Scientific Inquirers* assists early childhood professionals in becoming keen observers of young children. The following ideas are explored:

- Child observation requires specific skills in combination with a sense of curiosity.
- In order to interpret the behavior of young children, one must employ multiple perspectives.
- Naturalistic child observation serves multiple purposes.
- Ongoing observation poses both rewards and challenges to everyday classroom life.

*Source: Adapted from Cohen, Stern and Balaban (1983).*
Shaniqua gathers her doll, blanket, and bottle and sits down at the table. She announces, “My baby has to eat.” Next she adjusts the blanket so it covers the baby and reaches for the phone which is in the pot of food. As the pot begins to fall, Shaniqua catches it with her entire forearm, looks at the teacher with her eyebrows furrowed and says, “Whoa.” By the look on her face, it is clear that she has averted a potential disaster. After Shaniqua recovers the pot, she takes the phone and holds it up to her ear. Then she seems to realize that she forgot to dial, and takes the phone down into her hand to do this. After she dials, she begins a conversation. Looking surprised, she asks into the phone, “What?” and starts to giggle. “Yeah,” Shaniqua says, as she feigns listening. Next she exclaims something only part of which is audible: “You takin’ a picture ______?” After another moment she says into the phone, “You better, you better go home. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. ‘Bye girl. What you doing?” Then she asks “What?” and smashes her lips down onto the receiver. Ending her conversation, Shaniqua says, “Bye,” and sets the phone down.

What can a teacher learn from observing Shaniqua at play? Developing questions from multiple perspectives guides the teacher toward a full inquiry and understanding. A teacher observing Shaniqua might ask:

**Child Development**
- What does Shaniqua learn as she plays?
- What experiences does Shaniqua bring to this play?

**Diversity**
- How is Shaniqua alike and different from other four-year-olds in my classroom?
- What can I learn about Shaniqua’s home culture by watching her at play?
- What is the value of sharing my observations of Shaniqua’s play with her parents?

**Context**
- How does this setting contribute to the play experience?
- How does the play setting contribute to understanding Shaniqua?

**Roles and Strategies**
- How can I support Shaniqua’s interests in the mothering role?
- How can I extend her learning experiences?

**Self**
- How do I value Shaniqua’s play in the housekeeping corner?
- How can parents’ observations factor into what I know about each child?
Resources for Further Readings:


Ideas to Explore in This Workshop

- Child observation requires specific skills in combination with a sense of curiosity.
- In order to interpret the behavior of young children one must employ multiple perspectives.
- Naturalistic child observation serves multiple purposes.
- Ongoing observation poses both rewards and challenges to everyday classroom life.

Workshop Overview

Approximate time: 3 hours

Activity A: Use this paper to tell us...

- Purpose: A warm-up exercise showing “children act and teachers know.”
- Time: 15 minutes
- Materials: Paper and crayons

Activity B: “Read me”

- Purpose: Knowing the difference between observation and interpretation.
- Time: 45 minutes
- Materials: Paper and markers at tables; book; easel and markers
- Handout: B1: Observation and Interpretation: A Two-Step Process
Activity C: Observing and Recording
Purpose: Using language as an observation tool.
Time: 30 minutes
Materials: Shaniqua video
Handouts: C1: Observing and Recording Children at Play
          C2: Helpful Language
          C3: List of Adjectives, Verbs, and Adverbs

Activity D: Saying What You See
Purpose: Clarifying your words.
Time: 20 minutes
Handouts: D1: Shaniqua, A Descriptive Anecdote

Activity E: From Observation to Interpretation
Purpose: Forming data-based interpretations.
Time: 25 minutes
Materials: Shaniqua video; highlighter markers
Handouts: E1: Interpreting Shaniqua
          E2: Reflecting from Multiple Perspectives

Activity F: The Whys and Hows of Observing
Purpose: Determining purpose and strategies for observing.
Time: 30 minutes
Handouts: F1: Why and How to Observe

Activity G: Together Make Meaning
Purpose: Providing closure.
Time: 15 minutes
Materials: Photographs of children at play

For This Workshop You Will Need:
• Paper and crayons
• Paper and markers at tables
• Easel and markers
• Shaniqua video showing dramatic play
• Photographs of children at play
• Copies of all handouts
Use this paper to tell us...

**Purpose:** A warm-up exercise showing “children act and teachers know.”

**Time:** 15 minutes

**Materials:** Paper and crayons

**Getting Started**
Ask participants to quickly represent their morning before coming here, using the papers and markers in any way they like. (For example, participants may draw a messy house, their morning exercise, or a traffic jam; they may even crumple the paper to show that a disaster happened!) Allow three minutes for them to work with the crayons and paper. When they are finished, ask them to form pairs. Ask each person to take two minutes to explain to the other what they’ve done with the paper, discussing their representation. One person talks and shares while the other listens. Then they reverse it, the listener becomes the speaker. When the conversation dwindles, you may ask the following questions.

**Discussion Guide**
- In what ways did you tell your partner about yourself?
- How do children tell us about themselves?

**Facilitation Notes**
Emphasize the following comparisons between the way adults and children are able to reflect on their own behavior and represent themselves:

- How do children represent their thoughts, feelings and ideas? How do adults?
- How were you similar to or different from other adults? (e.g., in your approach to the task, what you did with the materials, your feelings of completion etc.)?
- In what ways are children both alike and different?

**Conclusion**
Adults can reflect, contemplate and represent their thoughts, feelings and ideas quite easily. You’ve made the paper stand for something from your experience; you gave it meaning which was then communicated to your partner. Children are quite different from adults; they just act—they play, speak and move. Each act is important, as it tells us about who they are and what is important to them. The teacher’s job is to observe and interpret children’s behaviors in order to understand them, and in doing so, help them to understand themselves and the world around them. It is from this point of understanding that we think and act, and design programs for young children and their families. In this sense teachers must be curious and want to know more. Curiosity is an important aspect (a core disposition) of successful teaching, and observation is the cornerstone of quality practice. Let’s begin here by observing.
Observing Children at Play: Teachers as Scientific Inquirers

“Read me”

Purpose: Knowing the difference between observation and interpretation.
Time: 45 minutes
Materials: Paper and markers at tables; book; easel and markers
Handout: B1: Observation and Interpretation: A Two-Step Process

Getting Started (Step 1)
The trainer now becomes the actor in a scenario entitled “Looking at a Book.” Group participants need paper and an available writing tool to record observations. Ask participants to observe and describe what they see.

As the leader, you may follow the directions below or create your own “Looking at a Book” scenario. The entire scenario should last about three minutes.

Move a chair far enough back so that your group can see your whole body. Take the children’s book and sit with it in your lap with your legs crossed. Look up and then look around. In one fluid movement, stand up on your tiptoes to search for someone or something. Abruptly sit back down and awkwardly open the book backwards. Slowly turn the pages, clumps at a time, until you reach the front of the book. Recross your legs and look up at the ceiling, then hesitantly reach down and scratch one leg, then the other. Open the book again, sigh deeply, and smiling occasionally, begin to point at the pictures. In doing so, briefly look around at the group members, then look down to point again. Keep pointing at the pictures while your eyes look elsewhere. This time point and say what you see. Then begin to quietly point and count to yourself. Point and count again, this time louder and look up at the group as you are doing this, and smile softly, knowingly. Take the opened book, and clumsily turn it to show your group members.

Facilitation Notes
Now turn to the easel and ask the full group to share their descriptions freely as you record their responses in list format. Order of the behavior observed is unimportant, this is a time to develop a full list of their immediate observations.

Ask participants, “What did you see?” Examples of what they might say include:

distracted
antsy
wants attention
is hungry
points and counts
looks at other people
is waiting to be picked up
needs a friend
is ritualistic
can’t read
hyper
hates books
doesn’t talk much
imitates teachers
is bored
likes to label pictures
has a rash

Lessons from the Field
The participants want to say the “right” answer and may feel hesitant to call out freely. A fun and active way to encourage calling out is to throw a stuffed animal or ball around as they call out what they saw. The participants can throw and catch as they please, calling out what they saw as they catch and then “passing on” to another peer.

Activity B
Step 2
When you’ve gathered a full list of responses, ask the participants to review each one and to differentiate between phases that are descriptive and those that are interpretive (see handout B! for clarification). As the group reviews the list, write “D” for description or “I” for interpretation next to each:

Discussion Guide
Consider asking the group one or more of the following questions:

- How can “interpretive seeing” assist or hinder us in knowing the children we care for?
- Why is it important to be able to see children objectively?
- How does “who we are” influence what we see and understand about each child?

Facilitation Notes
Acknowledge all responses. Assure participants that as adults, it is natural to make quick interpretative statements and to actually “see” behaviors in this manner. Moving quickly from description to interpretation can serve as a shortcut, a quick way of observing children and making meaning of their behavior. However, when we don’t give “full weight”—time, language and objectivity—to our observations, we can miss seeing the fullness of each child.

We bring certain biases to observing children. While we observe a problematic behavior, we may think to ourselves, this child is a bother—a “brat.” Or we may be attracted to another child and think this child is “sweet.” Indeed, our individual lenses may short-circuit our objectivity and possibly deter us from “knowing” each child. If this is so, it is imperative to begin fresh with each child, and establish a “clean” way of observing.

Language is an important tool to describe the behavior of children. While emphasizing the common and natural aspects of interpretative seeing, recognize the challenge of using objective and descriptive language as a tool to both capture and teach. The language of observation captures the essence of each child and teaches the observer to see the child as they are.

Teachers’ individual styles guide the way they observe and record. One does not have to be a writer to record quality observations. Teachers may feel threatened to do this “the right way.” There are many ways to observe and record. It is important that each individual find a comfortable and useful observation method that best suits their personal style.

Conclusion
Use the handout B1, Observation and Interpretation: A Two-Step Process, to explain how to gather descriptive data and formulate interpretations.

Moving On
As you transition to the next activity, suggest to participants “Now that we have discussed how to observe, using descriptive and objective language, let’s take the challenge of doing just this, with a live child, on videotape. Remember that for now, you are only to observe and record. Let’s first practice gathering data; refrain from making any interpretations. Make an effort to use descriptive language, as language is the tool we use to communicate the wholeness of each child, through observation.”
Observation and Interpretation: A Two Step Process

Becoming a skilled observer is the starting point for quality practice. Teachers must be curious and gather the following sorts of data about children: their physical presence and gesture; their disposition; the way they connect with other children and adults; their interests and preferences; and the way they think and learn. Such information serves as a springboard for teaching, the first step in the teaching-learning process. From this information we interact and respond to children, plan curriculum, document, and assess their growth and development.

Observation has two parts:

- **Descriptive Data**: observable facts and specific descriptions of what is happening. These are usually elements of a situation that most people would identify and agree upon. Descriptive data tells you “how” the child does “what.” This includes both observable facts (what) and rich descriptions (how) of what is happening.

- **Interpretation**: the meaning we make from what we see.

To be sure that your interpretations are based on descriptive data, ask yourself:

- What led me to make these statements?
- What did I specifically see?

**What do you really see?**

To enhance your skill as an observer, use the following guidelines:

- **Be objective.** Don’t make broad generalizations. Focus on the child’s activity, not your initial judgement. (e.g., “Shaniqua catches it with her forearm and says ‘whee.’”)

- **Be specific.** Record child-specific details (e.g., “Shaniqua smashes her lips into the receiver.”)

- **Be direct.** Use direct quotes when recording conversation (e.g., “Bye girl—what you doing?”)

- **Be complete.** Determine a beginning and end to an incident and capture the range.

- **Be sensitive.** Describe tone of voice, facial expression, and body posture (e.g., “Looking surprised, she asks into the phone...”)

- **Be aware of the filters you bring to observing.** Consider how your personal history, culture, life experiences, and values influence your observations.
Activity C

Observing and Recording

Purpose: Using language as an observation tool.
Time: 30 minutes
Materials: Shaniqua video
Handouts: C1: Observing and Recording Children at Play
C2: Helpful Language
C3: List of Adjectives, Verbs, and Adverbs

Getting Started:
Ask participants to form small groups of six people to view the entire “Shaniqua” video and to get a feel for this child in context. (Sample video clips are available online at http://prekstaffdevelopment.org/workshop_resources.cfm.)

Next, repeat a portion, about two minutes long, of the video. Using this two-minute clip, the participants in their small groups should attempt to record detailed, descriptive and objective statements. Remember, collect only descriptive data this time and refrain from making interpretive statements. Use the handout C1: Observing and Recording Children at Play, to record these observations.

After each member of the group has tried this individually, have them work in small groups to agree on three statements that objectively describe the behavior of Shaniqua at play. Use the handouts C2: Helpful Language and C3: List of Adjectives, Verbs and Adverbs, to assist in this activity.

Before you record each small group’s descriptive data at the easel, divide your paper into two columns lengthwise. Label the left-hand column “description” and the right-hand column “interpretation.”

Discussion Guide
Initiate a give-and-take discussion with participants as they share their attempts at recording observations.

Participants may be trying to use descriptive and objective language for the first time, (e.g., “Shaniqua slowly leaned into the body of the teacher sitting in the chair. As she did, she quickly looked up and smiled, while the teacher returned the glance.”) As they share this, you can either repeat, or write the descriptive statement on the easel as indicated. While doing so you can add, “that gives more information about how Shaniqua moves and communicates, thanks.” Restating their responses in such a way gives value and purpose to each descriptive statement.

Facilitation Notes
If you have time, note that this kind of looking closely is quite different than the earlier descriptions made in Activity A, “Read the book - Read me.” Ask the group:

• How are these observations different?
• How does this impact your understanding of each child in your care?
## Observing and Recording Children at Play

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Using Helpful Language

Less Helpful Language (General)
“Shaniqua feeds the baby.”

Helpful Language (Specific and Detailed)
“Looking directly into the eyes of her baby, Shaniqua symmetrically arranges the four bottles handed to her. In a choppy rhythm, she puts the bottle to her baby’s mouth, authoritatively calls for ‘daughter’ and hands one of her bottles to a requesting friend. Shaniqua then quickly puts the pretend food in her mouth while looking around for observers.”

When gathering data, think about using the following components of language to find the best words or phrases to enliven your descriptions. Be sure to include a fuller and more engaging picture of what is happening.

Adjectives: These are words that define or qualify a noun. They add interest and detail to the description. From the example above, notice “choppy rhythm” and “requesting friend.”

Verbs: These are action words that describe what is happening. You can almost feel the verbs above: “arranges,” “calls,” “hands.”

Adverbs: These are words that describe the quality of verbs. They give flair and movement to the description. Notice the adverbs above: “symmetrically,” “quickly,” “authoritatively.”

As we view the video of a child at play, try to think of a list of adjectives, verbs and adverbs to support the data-gathering process.

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Source: Adapted from Carter and Curtis (1996).
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Activity D

**Saying What You See**

*Purpose:* Clarifying your words.
*Time:* 20 minutes
*Handouts:* D1: Shaniqua, A Descriptive Anecdote

**Getting Started**
Show the full six minute video of Shaniqua at play one last time and then distribute the handout, *D1: Shaniqua: A Descriptive Anecdote*. Ask participants to react to this anecdote. This is a chance to debate, clarify and agree on what is written, before moving to the next task, which is interpretation.

Choose a reading technique that best matches your group. Participants may read the same part of this anecdote or have small groups select a different section of their own.

**Discussion Guide**
Consider the following questions:

- Does the anecdote accurately describe what you saw?
- Can you get a good sense of Shaniqua through the language?
- Would you suggest other ways to describe what you saw?

**Facilitation Notes**
Accept all critiques of and edits to the Shaniqua anecdote. Emphasize the individual nature of observation and accept that “differences” in opinion are natural and can be a way of broadening your own perspective. Help participants be aware of what might influence their observations, such as their own culture, temperament, or experience.
Shaniqua, A Descriptive Anecdote

Shaniqua in the housekeeping center

As the scene begins, Shaniqua stands in front of the small wooden stove, adjusting the lid on a metal pot. She hastily grabs a red spoon and orange plate as a teacher sitting at the wooden table asks, “What’s for dessert?” Shaniqua approaches her and answers, “This.” As Shaniqua climbs up on the teacher’s lap, she approves the dessert choice by saying, “Okay.” Shaniqua begins to eat the dessert, making rhythmic spooning motions toward her mouth while the teacher talks to her and rocks her on her lap. During this, another girl in Shaniqua’s class approaches the table, dressing a baby doll.

Presently, Shaniqua selects a doll from the wooden bin on the other side of the table, grasping it by its hair. She orients toward the teacher who is asking her something and shakes her head “no.” Shaniqua places her baby into a short wooden high chair, and looks behind her at the camera for a moment. She then attempts to slide the wooden tray on while holding a small, plastic baby bottle, which proves to be a difficult task; but she persists. Presently the teacher coaches her by suggesting, “Up a little higher, move it up a little higher” (referring to the tray). Then Shaniqua notices the slots on the chair where the tray is to be placed, and adjusts her grip. “Up here?” she asks, looking back at the teacher for help. The teacher tells her, “Hold it straight,” and again Shaniqua tries this adjustment, saying “Okay,” and smiling at the teacher. As she becomes more frustrated, Shaniqua says in a low voice, “Can’t do this.” The teacher seems to notice her distress and comes over to help Shaniqua put in the tray, saying, “Put it right here.” The tray slides in as if by magic and Shaniqua throws her head back, giggling, with her hand covering her mouth.

Next the teacher bends down and picks up a bottle and hands it to Shaniqua saying, “Want your baby bottle? Here.” Shaniqua accepts the bottle and looks around. Suddenly she yells “Daughter? Daughter! Come here!” and looks around for the playmate who might be her daughter. A classmate approaches and Shaniqua looks at her, smiling.

Shaniqua is still sitting in front of the high chair, going about the process of feeding her baby. She places a blue bottle inside the chair under the tray, and selects two bottles, one pink and one purple, and places them on the tray in front of the baby. She holds the purple bottle up to the baby’s mouth for a moment, but then loses her grip and the bottle falls. She picks it up and resumes feeding. Presently, another girl approaches Shaniqua and asks her if she can have a bottle. Shaniqua gives her a bottle, saying, “Here.” Then Shaniqua places another two bottles on the tray along with a bunch of plastic purple grapes on the orange plate. Shaniqua picks up the grapes and bites them, and makes a chewing motion while she puts the grapes back down on the plate. The teacher asks her something and she says “Huh?” Suddenly she stands up, abruptly putting the orange plate down on the table where the teacher has been sitting, and says, “I gotta do something.” She then reaches down on the floor to get something.

As Shaniqua stands next to the high chair, she takes another baby from the bin next to the wall and also finds a brown telephone. Another girl says something to her, and she replies emphatically, “It’s my telephone.” She smiles and uses the telephone to gesture toward herself. She sets the phone down in a pot of food, and looks toward the teacher, who is saying something to Shaniqua. She picks up the phone and answers the teacher by saying, “No, it was over there.” Apparently there is a dispute with another girl in regard to the telephone. Shaniqua takes the phone, walks over to the other girl, and asks, “Can I have it?” The other girl reaches out to touch the phone but nods “yes.” Shaniqua says, “Thank you,” with relief. In approval of this exchange, the teacher comments, “Very nice.” Shaniqua says something that is inaudible.

Next Shaniqua gathers her doll, blanket, and bottle and sits down at the table. She announces, “My baby has to eat.” Next she adjusts the blanket so it covers the baby and reaches for the phone, which is in the pot of food. As the pot begins to fall, Shaniqua
catches it with her entire forearm, looks at the teacher with her eyebrows furrowed and says, “Whoa.” By the look on her face, it is clear that she has averted a disaster. After Shaniqua recovers the pot, she takes the phone and holds it up to her ear. Then she seems to realize that she forgot to dial, and puts the phone into her hand to do this. After she dials, she begins a conversation. Looking surprised, she asks into the phone “What?” and starts to giggle. “Yeah,” Shaniqua says, as she feigns listening. Next she exclaims something only part of which is audible: “You takin’ a picture ______?” After another moment she says into the phone, “You better, you better go home. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. ‘Bye girl. What you doing?” Then she asks, “What?” and smashes her lips onto the receiver. Ending her conversation, Shaniqua says, “Bye,” and sets the phone down.

Shaniqua cradles her baby and gives it a bottle. She begins adjusting the blanket again, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration. After the blanket is arranged to her liking, Shaniqua continues to feed her baby, adjusting her grip on the bottle. Then she looks up around the room, at her teacher or perhaps at others. Her teacher notices that Shaniqua is having difficulty feeding and suggests, “Tip your bottle up so baby can drink.” Shaniqua tries this for a moment, but almost drops the baby, saying “Whoa.” Shaniqua asks her teacher, “Why you gotta lift it?” And her teacher answers her in a soft voice. Apparently agreeing, Shaniqua says, “Yeah.” She continues holding the bottle to the baby’s lips, but she seems frustrated that the bottle will not go inside the baby’s mouth. Shaniqua looks up and tells the teacher “Her, her lips can’t keep it on,” gesturing with the bottle in one hand. She scrunches up her nose in frustration and tries to twist the bottle inward. Shaniqua continues feeding. Next she looks up at the teacher, and says something not entirely audible, “Baby don’t need no _____,” shaking her head and lowering her voice at the end of her statement. She continues this exchange with the teacher while feeding her baby, eyebrows raised, and smiling.
From Observation to Interpretation

Purpose: Forming data-based interpretations.
Time: 25 minutes
Materials: Shaniqua video; highlighter markers
Handouts: E1: Interpreting Shaniqua
E2: Reflecting from Multiple Perspectives

Getting Started
Ask participants to create groups of three and begin to make meaning of the Shaniqua episode. They can begin to formulate interpretations by using their observations from both the easel and the handout E1: Shaniqua: A Descriptive Anecdote. Ask them to talk about both what they learned about Shaniqua and what Shaniqua is learning through play. Give at least 15 minutes for this activity and then ask the small groups to share their interpretations.

Discussion Guide
Ask participants to come back to the large group and share their interpretations.

Facilitation Notes
As participants give their interpretations, help them to find a way to stay connected with the “observational data,” that is, your objective and descriptive observations. You may want to highlight, circle, or draw arrows to specific anecdotal references that tell them “how” they know. Doing this occasionally makes the explicit connection between data and interpretation.

E2: Reflecting from Multiple Perspectives assists participants with a list of reflective questions to pose in order to broaden their understanding of Shaniqua. Compare their interpretations with the list of questions. Are all the perspectives covered?

Lessons from the field
Be sure to make the following points regarding diversity and team building. People have their individual perspectives on what they observe and interpret. People tend to lean heavily on one perspective (such as development) over another (such as diversity), depending on who we are in relation to the child. This is not only natural and expected, but the benefit of working in a team. We need to understand “our own lens” and appreciate each member’s opinions and understanding. Combining the perspectives of all those working with the child makes for a fuller, richer understanding. Valuing everyone’s opinion and acknowledging differences is a way to create team building with the adults you work with daily.
As the scene begins, Shaniqua stands in front of the small wooden stove, adjusting the lid on a metal pot. She hastily grabs a red spoon and orange plate as a teacher sitting at the wooden table asks, “What’s for dessert?” Shaniqua approaches her and answers, “This.” As Shaniqua climbs up on the teacher’s lap, she approves the dessert choice by saying, “Okay.” Shaniqua begins to eat the dessert, making rhythmic spooning motions toward her mouth while the teacher talks to her and rocks her on her lap. During this, another girl in Shaniqua’s class approaches the table, dressing a baby doll.

Presently, Shaniqua selects a doll from the wooden bin on the other side of the table, grasping it by its hair. She orients toward the teacher who is asking her something and shakes her head “no.” Shaniqua places her baby into a short wooden high chair, and looks behind her at the camera for a moment. She then attempts to slide the wooden tray on while holding a small, plastic baby bottle, which proves to be a difficult task; but she persists. Presently the teacher coaches her by suggesting, “Up a little higher, move it up a little higher” (referring to the tray). Then Shaniqua notices the slots on the chair where the tray is to be placed, and adjusts her grip. “Up here?” she asks, looking back at the teacher for help. The teacher tells her, “Hold it straight,” and again Shaniqua tries this adjustment, saying “Okay,” and smiling at the teacher. As she becomes more frustrated, Shaniqua says in a low voice, “Can’t do this.” The teacher seems to notice her distress and comes over to help Shaniqua put in the tray, saying, “Put it right here.” The tray slides in as if by magic and Shaniqua throws her head back, giggling, with her hand covering her mouth.

Next the teacher bends down and picks up a bottle and hands it to Shaniqua saying, “Want your baby bottle? Here.” Shaniqua accepts the bottle and looks around. Suddenly she yells “Daughter? Daughter! Come here!” and looks around for the playmate who might be her daughter. A classmate approaches and Shaniqua looks at her, smiling.
Shaniqua is still sitting in front of the high chair, going about the process of feeding her baby. She places a blue bottle inside the chair under the tray, and selects two bottles, one pink and one purple, and places them on the tray in front of the baby. She holds the purple bottle up to the baby’s mouth for a moment, but then loses her grip and the bottle falls. She picks it up and resumes feeding. Presently, another girl approaches Shaniqua and asks her if she can have a bottle. Shaniqua gives her a bottle, saying, “Here.” Then Shaniqua places another two bottles on the tray along with a bunch of plastic purple grapes on the orange plate. Shaniqua picks up the grapes and bites them, and makes a chewing motion while she puts the grapes back down on the plate. The teacher asks her something and she says “Huh?” Suddenly she stands up, abruptly putting the orange plate down on the table where the teacher has been sitting, and says, “I gotta do something.” She then reaches down on the floor to get something.

As Shaniqua stands next to the high chair, she takes another baby from the bin next to the wall and also finds a brown telephone. Another girl says something to her, and she replies emphatically, “It’s my telephone.” She smiles and uses the telephone to gesture toward herself. She sets the phone down in a pot of food, and looks toward the teacher, who is saying something to Shaniqua. She picks up the phone and answers the teacher by saying, “No, it was over there.” Apparently there is a dispute with another girl in regard to the telephone. Shaniqua takes the phone, walks over to the other girl, and asks, “Can I have it?” The other girl reaches out to touch the phone but nods “yes.” Shaniqua says, “Thank you,” with relief. In approval of this exchange, the teacher comments, “Very nice.” Shaniqua says something that is inaudible.

Next Shaniqua gathers her doll, blanket, and bottle and sits down at the table. She announces, “My baby has to eat.” Next she adjusts the blanket so it covers the baby and reaches for the phone, which is in the pot of food. As the pot begins to fall, Shaniqua catches it with her entire forearm, looks at the teacher with her eyebrows furrowed and says, “Whoa.” By the look on her face, it is clear that she has averted a disaster. After Shaniqua recovers the pot, she takes the phone and holds it up to her ear. Then she seems to realize that

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Interpretation

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Interpretation

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E2: Broaden Your Understanding of Shaniqua: Reflecting from Multiple Perspectives

Child Development
- What kinds of play do I see Shaniqua engaged in?
- How is play related to her development?
- What is Shaniqua learning?

Diversity
- What does Shaniqua bring to the play?
- How does she respond to adults and other children?
- How is she alike or different from other four-year-olds in your setting?
- What does she tell us about herself through her play? How is she unique?

Context
- How does the environment take Shaniqua’s development into consideration?
- How does the dramatic play area and the long, extended playtime contribute to what you know about Shaniqua?
- How does the environment support her play?
- What changes in her environment could best assist her development?

Roles and Strategies
- How can I support Shaniqua’s play?
- How can I encourage active learning?

Self
- How do I view Shaniqua’s play?
- What child development principles do I value?
- What are my experiences with housekeeping mama and papa play?
Naturalistic Observation: Catching children in the act...

In this workshop we have been practicing naturalistic observation. This method of coming to know individual children is unobtrusive; it does not interrupt or interfere with the important business of being actively engaged with the world. Further, the story we begin to weave about a child will most likely be “child true.” Naturalistic observation does not sacrifice child choice and child initiative which are key developmental aspects to understanding a young child’s behavior. Seeing a child in self-determined meaningful contexts and interaction styles, brings relevance to understanding the child’s everyday functioning.

Getting Started
First review the handout F1: Why and How to Observe, with participants. Have members turn to the person next to them and share ways in which they would use naturalistic observations. Suggest that they can add, delete or change items as they think about a particular child for whom these suggestions apply. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for these discussions.

Next ask the pairs to talk about their successful strategies and challenges to observing young children. Invite them to “walk and talk,” returning to the room after 15 minutes.

Discussion Guide
As facilitator, read the comments to the full group and affirm the many individual purposes and strategies for observing young children.

- What is the best way to incorporate observation into everyday practice?
- How do we find regular time to observe?
- How can we use these observations?
- What purpose(s) can they serve?

Lessons from the Field
We understand that making observation part of everyday practice is an ongoing challenge. By saying, “I just don’t have time” or “I have too many other demands—too many other things I have to do,” we dismiss what is “the cornerstone” of quality practice.

Teachers are as diverse as the children they are observing. A wide range of how and when teachers observe as well as how they use these observations is to be expected.

Moving On
Let’s take one last moment to collectively observe—this time with photographs.
### Handout F1: Why and How to Observe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Observe? (Purpose)</th>
<th>How to Observe (Strategies)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Inform practice</td>
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<td>• Document development</td>
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<td>• Contribute toward assessment</td>
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<td>• Share perspectives with colleagues</td>
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<td>• Communicate with parents</td>
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<td>• Develop ideas for curriculum</td>
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<td>• Design goals for diverse learners</td>
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<td>• Think though intervention strategies</td>
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<td>• Support childhood transitions</td>
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<td>• Keep our eyes and mind fresh</td>
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<td>• Inform administrators</td>
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Together Make Meaning

**Purpose:** Providing closure.

**Time:** 15 minutes

**Materials:** Photographs of children at play

**Directions**
Have participants form groups of three by moving their chairs together or physically moving to a quiet part of the room. Distribute photos of children at play, giving each group of three one picture. As the participants pass the photo around, have them say one descriptive statement about the child(ren) at play (no interpretations yet!). As each person shares, the other two have to agree or adapt the statement until they reach a common perception. After the group feels they have fully described the child, they begin to share interpretations, based on earlier descriptions. Again, the group must come to consensus in the same way. When this task is complete, have each group join another group, and share interpretations of their photograph. Does the other group see what you see, or can they offer something different?

**Discussion Guide**
What is the point of closing with this exercise? Some suggestions for extending thinking with questioning are:

- What lens do you each bring to looking at children?
- How can we be sure to look fully at a given situation at a given time?
- In what way do we rely on our knowledge of four year olds to help make meaning?
- How do the perspectives of other adults help or hinder my thinking?

**Closure**
Extend the comments from one of the above questions to summarize and bring closure to this workshop.

Children are complex puzzles, ever changing and growing. As we try to understand them as best we can, we realize that we are bound by our own perspectives at a given moment. It is important to remember two things. First, our strength as teachers lies in our own ability to “see” children clearly. Second, to create the fullest picture of a child it is important to recognize the multiple perspectives offered by team members and colleagues.