

## *Honing our Observing*

### *Stephen Spitalny*

What characteristics can one expect in a child who is ready to enter grade school? Part of the work with kindergarten-aged children is to become aware of their degree of readiness and to provide pedagogical opportunities for their development. We can develop this awareness through careful observation of each individual child over time. At our school, we have developed a four-page form that the kindergarten teachers use as an aid to their observation of the children. Each teacher keeps a notebook of these forms, one per child, and in it keeps track of his or her observations throughout the school year. The point is to gain a full picture of the development of each child without separating him or her from the group to do it. With the help of the teacher's notebook entries, a sort of moving picture of the child's development becomes possible. By observing carefully throughout the year, the teacher is also already prepared for parent conferences and end-of-year written reports.

To encourage us all to look at the questions of grade school readiness for ourselves I have not included here the form our school uses. It is best to compose one's own study rather than use a form someone else created.

Children are continually in the process of becoming, so it is important to work with observations that are living pictures and refrain from labeling. For example, "This child does not speak the sounds 'r' or 'y'," is an observation. A judgment or label would be, "This child has immature speech." "Tends to bump into furniture and children," is an observation. "Awkward" is a judgment. Practicing observing without judging is an activity that a group of colleagues might want to work on together.

The following is a list of questions worth considering. One might decide to add other areas of observation or omit some of these.

#### *General Appearance*

- What is the child's general appearance? Is hair usually combed before arrival at kindergarten? Is shirt tucked in? Are shoelaces tied? Are face and hands washed? Does child keep shirt tucked in, shoes tied, etc., during the course of the day?

#### *Senses*

- What do you observe about the child's sense of touch? Is there a tactile sensitivity or defensiveness?
- What about the sense of self-movement? How is the posture? How is muscle tone? Is the child aware of his or her own body in space, in movement? For example, does he or she collide with others often?
- How is the sense of balance? How is the child's feeling for space (up/down, right/left, front/back?)
- How is the child's sight? Is he or she able to track moving objects with the eyes? Is visual stimulation distracting? Does he or she seem to see what others see? How is the child's hearing? Can he or she tell which direction a sound is coming from? Can he or she

discriminate between different consonant sounds (for instance, hear the difference between read and bread)? Can he or she listen to someone speaking while there are other sounds going on? Is auditory stimulation distracting?

- Can the child taste? Are there foods that he or she either must have or avoids? Are there smells that this particular child avoids, or intensely dislikes? Is he or she hypersensitive to smell? (How about that pot of indigo dye?)

### ***Movement Patterns/Gross Motor Development***

- What is this child's tendency for laterality (dominance in hand, foot, eye, and ear?)
- Observe and describe the child's way of walking and running.
- Can the child perform the following types of movements? Skipping, one-foot-hop, two-foot-hop, gallop, lizard crawl (on stomach), creeping (on hands and knees), bear walk (on hands and feet) log roll, somersault, monkey bars (hand over hand), swinging, throwing, and catching.
- Observe and describe this child's way of sitting in a chair during lunch or story. Notice posture, chair-tipping, hooked legs, ability to stay seated.
- Are any reflexive movement patterns evident?
- How are the child's midline barriers?

### ***Fine Motor Development***

- How is the child's grasp with paintbrush, crayon, scissors? How about his or her grasp while folding cloths?
- Describe his or her dexterity, for example in managing zippers, tying shoelaces, and fastening and unfastening buttons and snaps.
- How about finger game movements, finger knitting, and sewing?

### ***Speaking and Listening***

- How is the child's enunciation and clarity of speech? Are there particular speech sounds that the child does not articulate?
- What language is his or her mother tongue? Are there other languages in the home?
- How is the child's vocabulary?
- Are there language or speaking difficulties? Is the volume of the child's voice louder or quieter than most? When this child speaks, do others understand?
- How is the child's listening? Does he or she exhibit an understanding of what has been spoken?
- Does the child sing? How accurate is his or her pitch?
- How does the child manage with speaking/singing and finger game simultaneously?
- In his or her play, can a capacity for imagination be observed through his or her speech?

### ***Life Forces***

- Are the child's hands warm or cool, dry or moist?
- How is the child's breathing? A mouth breather? Out-of-breath easily? Noisy breather?
- How is his or her stamina? Does she tire easily?
- What do you know from parents about the child's sleep rhythm? How is going to sleep and waking up? And bathing? And elimination?
- Are you aware of stress factors in this child's life?

### ***Physical Readiness Signs***

- Has the child lost any teeth?
- Is there an arch in the foot?
- Has there been a lengthening of limbs, waist, neck?
- Is the pudginess gone from cheeks, belly, hands, fingers?

### ***Social Interaction/Play***

- Describe the child's relationship to peers.
- Describe how the child relates to adults.
- Are there repeating themes in the child's play?
- Is the play more out of fantasy or imagination?
- How does this child play with others?
- Describe play if and when this child plays alone.

### ***Task Orientation, Attention, and Focus***

- How is this child's focus on self-generated activities?
- How does he or she respond to adult guidance in regard to tasks?
- Is the child able to accomplish tasks that require a certain sequence such as sweeping the floor and collecting in a dustpan?
- Does the child complete tasks? With or without reminders and encouragement?
- Describe the child's attention span for activities not self-generated?
- How is the child's focus during transitions (a time of high sensory input stress)?
- Does the child exhibit separation anxieties?

### ***Additional Considerations***

- Does the child put right shoe on right foot, left on left?
- If the child counts objects, is the count accurate?
- If the child writes letters and words, are they oriented from left to right? Are the letters recognizable?
- When eating, does food often get on face and clothes? If so, does child seem to notice?

### ***Overview***

- Observe and describe child's drawings (people with appropriate appendages and digits, location of people - on ground or in air, houses with doors and windows, etc.)
- How do the senses work together in this child?
- Describe level of confidence and competence.

If one is creating a form to organize observations of each child, it is also handy to include space for other comments, and for concerns that the parents may bring. A written form can be a powerful tool for honing one's observational skills, as well as an aid to becoming more organized and professional.

]When using a form, my intention is not to label the child, but to develop a moving, living picture. The child is on the road to becoming, and our task is to help him or her along as best we can.