Observing Young Children: Transforming Early Learning through Reflective Practice, 4th Edition

“The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all that we do.”

United Nations Convention of Children's Rights, Article 3, Section 1 (“Early learning and,” 2007)

I began the process of observing children with the guidance of the first edition of Sally Wylie’s Observing Young Children. As naïve as it sounds, I remember wondering how an entire book could be dedicated to, what seemed like an inherent ability. As many educators can attest, observation is an art that often marks the skill of the teacher. I credit the original textbook (and my teacher) for my solid background in observational techniques. I use observation on a regular basis in research and practice, and so, it was a pleasure to revisit the subject, to refresh my methods, and to gain insight into the current philosophies behind its use.

Observation is perhaps the single most integral skill for an educator. It is the basis of building relationships with children, refining our programming, researching our methods, collaborating with parents and co-workers, and assessing young children. This renders observation essential to a modern Early Childhood Educator’s tool kit; thankfully, Wylie & Fenning’s book sets forth a comprehensive and thorough exploration into the intricacies of diverse observational methods.

The authors have built on their extensive research for the 4th edition, adding a new introduction chapter to adapt to the ever-changing perspectives of a post-modern era. New photos, exhibits, and student exercises are not the only revisions. Wylie and Fenning succeed in delivering their message of “appreciative inquiry” using a “responsive and inclusive lens” (2012, p. xxi) throughout.
The essence of this book lies in this sentence (Wylie & Fenning, 2012, p. 7):

“Our practices should be governed by a philosophy of what we believe about all aspects of our role, including but not limited to children, our views about childhood itself, our image of what an educator could be, and our values regarding relationships, families, partnerships, mentoring, sharing, and learning, including the willingness to change and transform as we continue to learn and discover.”

Readers with “clipboard” personalities will deeply appreciate the organizational style, which is suitable for academic and reflective reading. The preface not only outlines changes to the fourth edition, but also gives the reader crisp insight into each chapter. Students will benefit from integrating into their vocabulary, the terminology that is cleverly bolded and summarized at the end of each chapter; yet the authors omit the “definitions”, perhaps to ensure that readers comprehend, rather than regurgitate, the knowledge within. (There is a glossary at the back for quick reference). The chapters are coherently formed, using clear headings and sub-headings, and peppered with examples that link content to concept. These anecdotes and exhibits are essential to the book.

Much like the constructivist methods currently recommended for teaching children, Wylie and Fenning invite us to build on experiential knowledge by including excerpts from other educators’ reflective processes. This adds life to the “story” and allows the reader to visualize and formulate a clear picture of the intricate nature of observation. One of my favorites is the following excerpt, which coherently defines the role of observation:

I once sat by a window looking out across the street at a man who was acting very strange…I opened the window so I could hear his words, I was
even more mystified. The words coming out of his mouth were in a language I didn’t understand, and they sounded very strange indeed. I watched this man for some time trying to figure out what he was doing walking aback and forth on the sidewalk making weird gestures and sounds. I had decided he was crazy and had begun to feel afraid when finally I stood up and saw the whole picture. There at the man’s heels was a dog. Immediately everything made sense. (2012, p. 37)

The book is divided into three sections, the first discusses the personal and professional reasons for observation and prepares the reader for this valuable process of inquiry; the second outlines documentation techniques for recording what is seen and heard; and the third, elevates the book to a transformative level by outlining reflection and inclusion practices.

The photographs and exhibits accommodate visual learning styles, and succeed in solidifying complicated concepts. For example, the daunting task of early intervention is mapped out by Kristine Fenning on page 279. I only wish the photos could be in colour but then I imagine that would drive up the cost of the text, which is unfair to struggling students.

“For teachers to be effective in supporting student learning, they must constantly be checking for student understanding” (Shepard as cited in Genishi and Dyson, 2009, p. 143). Observation is at the very core of “checking”, and is a transformative method of scaffolding learning, questioning practices, troubling educational processes, and re-visiting formative assessment. Much as authors Genishi & Dyson (2009) propose that educators refrain from stringent adherence to one philosophy in an attempt to “problematic
curricular uniformity” (2009, p. 137), Wylie and Fenning maintain that observation is not limited to one particular curriculum, but essential to all as part of a reflective cycle (2012, p. 43). This stance is carried throughout the text in the diversity of methods described. The text succeeds in conveying the message that observation is fluid in methodology, and depends on circumstance and purpose (2012, p.7).

PART I

Chapter 1 introduces the “cycle of observation” (Wylie & Fenning, 2012, p. 43), a non-linear process consisting of interchangeable components, and highlights the reasons for observing young children as follows: sustaining safety and well-being practices, expanding professional roles and promoting reflection, evaluating the classroom as a group, documenting an equitable overview of information, making adaptations to the environment, and maintaining occupational standards (2012, p. 52-56).

To be a truly effective ECE one must know how to observe children. This is no easy task. The tendency to get lost in their imaginative paracosms may halt objective note taking or well-meaning intentions to record an anecdotal. In contrast, one might observe in surveillance-mode—as opposed to discovery-mode—transcribing only that which we seek to change about children. As Wylie and Fenning suggest, classrooms tend to run on “panoptical time” (Lesko, as cited in Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 56), leaving little room for scheduled observation sessions, but instead, relying on teachers’ ingenuity and ability to multitask (2012, p. 57). Part 1 deconstructs observation—identifying the “levels” and types of observation, discussing portfolios, and explaining confidentiality procedures—to pursue every angle possible and be mindful of these challenges. The strategies within
provide the reader with the technical means to boost observational skills. Yet the stories intertwined keep the reader entertained—at times I forgot I was reading a textbook.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

The authors transcend the narrow view of observation as an assessment measure, by turning it back on the teachers themselves, advising “appreciative inquiry” (2012, p. 6) as a means of transforming teaching pedagogies. Capitalizing on observation for pedagogical documentation may encourage teachers to adopt more variant methods of formative assessment and foster a child-worthy attitude that values the rights of children and the Code of Ethics (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Wylie and Fenning state:

> Appreciative inquiry expects early childhood professional to be systematic, collaborative, and equitable in their approach; it is a give-and-take process, whereby both the educator and the child experience the teaching and learning roles in order to learn from one another. (2012, p. 6)

Furthermore, the authors flesh out the concept of appreciative inquiry by borrowing a familiar and useful metaphor in the field of education — the “lens”— as it is adopted by observer, can and will influence that which is discovered and the interpreted meanings. The cultural, philosophical, developmental, and social implications of this lens are introduced (2012, p. 24). Wylie & Fenning offer up the “Areas of Child Development” (2012, p. 28-30) as core knowledge for an educator but warn of using it as a standardized “prescription” to pathologize (Genishi, 2009, p. 30). The beauty of observation is that it can free educators from “the uniformity of curriculum” (2009, p. 137) to see what children *can do*. The process of critical reflection (appreciative inquiry and reflective approaches) and “possibility thinking”(Wylie & Fenning, 2012, p. xxiii) — an
expressive phrase that I find encompasses the essence of inquiry—can personalize an educator’s pedagogy of observation.

Writers block

As a mature student, I am particularly thankful for Chapter 3, which focuses on writing as an art form (an important element of documentation that is often overlooked). As educators adopt alternatives to prescribed checklists, we must be eloquent with our descriptions. I am reminded of the report cards I brought home as a child (some 20 years ago) that had handwritten notes beside the grade. If we are to return to these personal gems for communicating information to parents effectively and equitably, we must know how to write.

PART II

Circle versus line.

Since observation is rarely canonical, Part II of Observing Young Children, 4th Edition delves deeper, challenging students to “uncover(ing) something unknown” (Wylie & Fenning, 2012, p.120) by breaking down the elements of observational methods such as anecdotals, running records, and ABC analysis, and enriching them with interpretation and reflections that “ascribe meaning” (2012, p. 132) to unanticipated and seemingly common behaviours. The authors carefully describe “the cyclical process of pedagogical narration” (2012, p.149) as it applies to curriculum planning. Chapter 6 offers a thorough exploration of these visual and graphic methods of documentation. This is not to denote the value of checklists and rating scales, which are also discussed in the context of “assessment for”, “assessment of” and “assessment as” learning (2012, p. 310). Wylie and Fenning deliver a thorough investigation into the topic of assessment in Chapter 8, which is
a hot topic in the current education environment. The beauty of using observation as the underpinning of pedagogical documentation and critical analysis is that it can reveal the unnoticed and the unexpected; it is cyclical and unique—the antithesis to the linear focus of standardized testing. Building on this, the book includes a wealth of pictorial representations that has the reader immersed in the classroom and truly comprehending the techniques discussed.

**Digital Innovator**

Thank you to Wylie & Fenning for not ignoring technology (as a mature student this is a trap we can fall into), but rather adopting the attitude of digital “innovator” (Lee & O’Rourke, 2006), understanding that kids use technology, and so should we. The reader is invited to explore various forms of technology for observation and adaptive planning such as audio/digital and video recordings. The authors touch on the benefits of websites, databases, blogs, tweets, and educational software (2012, p. 226). My only concern is that this section is not extensive enough to cover the myriad of uses for these technologies; but perhaps, —given the recent explosion of app’s and technological devices — that is a subject better managed on the student resources/companion website (description to follow).

Continuing with their study in diversity, Chapter 8 covers the controversial subject of early identification and early intervention. Observation is essential to the individualized planning process when forming a network of long-term multidisciplinary interventions, and creating a thorough process of intervention for a child (Boyd et al., 2010). The cycle of observation is at the heart of the individualization of treatment and preventative measures for easing behavioural, social, and communication impairments.
This classroom in a book, is supplemented by the student resources/companion website and the on-line instructor’s manual website to capitalize on the interactive approach to teaching. On a practical note, it is refreshing to have use of “cloud computing” in place of the elusive CD (which I tend to lose). The website elevates the book to new levels of efficiency for both teacher and student. For example students are introduced to the process of critical reflection with the suggestions for “Reflective exercises for the students” as follows:

- What do I know and understand?
- What do I still need to learn? How will I go about discovering and learning this information?
- What questions do I have for my instructor?
- Who among my peers can help me understand the key concepts and practices introduced in this chapter?

The authors have clearly worked diligently to support students and teachers in their examination of the observation process rendering this book an essential element of Early Childhood Education for students and practitioners alike. The intended readership is primarily Early Childhood Education students at diploma and undergraduate levels; however, it would also be of interest to postgraduate students doing research, and practitioners in the field who wish to keep their methods current and collaborative. The emergence of a less standardized era of testing, evident in such frameworks as *The Ontario Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (2010-11)* and *The Early Learning and Child Care English Curriculum Framework for New Brunswick (2007)*, will render observation an essential skill for all educators and child researchers. This book will be creased and worn, used
readily as a resource for those times when we, as educators, students, and child advocates, share the power of observation to critically reflect on the unexpected in our dealings with children.
References


