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Child Observation in Australia and the USA: A Cross-National Analysis

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This article reports findings from a study of how early childhood teachers think about and use child observation in Australian and US classrooms. Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyse data from the two nations, and the paper reports on how teachers use child observation in each country. Uses in US early child settings included: assessing academic progress, adjusting curriculum/teaching strategies, diagnosing instructional needs/readiness, gathering information for reports to parents, dealing with behaviour problems, assessing social adjustments, and documenting special needs. Australian uses included: identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, understanding children to guide their behaviour, informing work with parents and other professionals, extending shared interests among children, noting individual differences that can extend the learning of the group, reflecting on the flow of the day, and evaluating teaching. Research methods are described, similarities and differences across data sets are discussed, and implications for policy and practice are presented.

Introduction

This paper reports findings from a cross-national study of Australian and American early childhood teachers' perspectives on child observation. The work reported here has been done over the past 4 years as part of the collaborative efforts of a team of researchers from Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the USA. The larger project of the research team is to study early childhood teachers' work in the US and Australia, and a particular focus of that effort and this paper is the close examination of how child observation is used as part of early educators' work.

In this paper, we report analyses of Australian and American data sets related to the specific uses of child observation in early childhood classrooms. After methods for collecting

and analysing data are described, seven uses for child observation (from each of the data sets) are identified and discussed. We include a discussion of similarities and differences between the two country's uses, and conclude with implications for policy and practice. While we recognize that the data for this analysis do not represent all early childhood educators across either nation, we believe that patterns in the data deserve the attention of educators and policy makers in these and other Western countries.

In early childhood education, child observation is understood traditionally as an essential source of information for developing and implementing child centred curriculum. Child observation has been advocated primarily as a search for understanding the individual child existing in a time, a community and a set of relationships. For instance, McAuley (1993) has described observation as a central tenet of the tradition of early childhood education and drawn attention to the holistic philosophies informing the child study movement that was active at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a recent interview, Millie Almy called for a return to traditional uses of child observation. When asked what the core of early childhood education ought to be, she replied; “Carefully observing children as they play and building curriculum that's appropriate for each child from what we see and hear. That should be the core” (Greenberg, 2000, p. 6).

While theories informing practice have undergone substantial refinement during the twentieth century, the focus on the holistic aspect has remained constant. Although Australian early childhood education programs are known for the emphasis placed on child study and the importance of understanding the whole child, Grieshaber, Halliwell, Hatch and Walsh (2000) have suggested that the purpose of observing children in Australian programs is changing and that traditionally accepted ways of doing and recording observations may be under threat.

The shift away from a view that observation is primarily a search for understanding of the child is reflected in popular texts. For example, Decker and Decker (1997) discuss similarities between child observation techniques used at the beginning of the twentieth century by Harriet Johnson, Caroline Pratt and Susan Isaacs, and authentic methods of assessing young children's growth and development that are promoted today. Decker and Decker make the point that both advocates of authentic assessment and advocates for early childhood education recognize the importance of observing what children can do in culturally relevant (authentic) situations. However, Grieshaber and colleagues (2000) have argued that in a climate where standards and outcome-based approaches dominate the educational agenda, the traditional concept of child observation is being confused with concepts such as authentic assessment (Decker and Decker, 1997), formative assessment, and summative assessment

(Kelly, 1992). Such confusion threatens what many early childhood educators consider to be an essential element of early childhood curriculum work—that is, child observation being used as a source for enacting child centred curriculum. The comparison of data from Australia and the USA enables an investigation of the similarities and differences in how teachers use child observation and whether such confusion is evident in the data across the two countries.

Methods

The data for the Australian analysis were gathered as part of the larger study mentioned above. The first phase of the Australian study involved an open-ended questionnaire that was sent to 200 students who had graduated from early childhood teacher education courses offered by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) during the 1990s. Respondents to the questionnaire were given the opportunity to volunteer for an in-depth look at child observation and curriculum decision making, and 24 participated in this phase, composing written descriptions of their uses of child observation and offering descriptions of critical incidents (Tripp, 1994, p. 69). These critical incidents captured examples of how the teachers actually used child observation in their work with young children. Data from the 24 statements and 71 critical incident descriptions were summarized and sent back to the teachers, seven of them then participated in two teleconferences, during which their responses, and the responses of their colleagues were discussed. Teleconferences were audio taped and transcripts of both meetings were typed verbatim. Data for this analysis are drawn from the written descriptions, critical incidents, and teleconference transcriptions. The Australian participants were teachers and directors working in long-day child care centres (with children aged from birth to 5 years), community kindergartens (with children aged 3 and 4 years), state preschools (with children aged 4 and 5 years), state primary schools (with children aged 6 and 7 years), or special schools (for a complete description of methods, see Grieshaber, Halliwell, Hatch, and Walsh, 2000).

The US data were collected in the South-eastern United States, and all but two participants worked in Eastern Tennessee. Data consisted of transcribed taped interviews with 25 preschool teachers (two were teacher-directors) who worked in Head Start programs (6) or in Title 1(12), private (4), church-based (2), and on-campus (1) preschools. Undergraduate students conducted interviews as part of voluntary activity that generated extra credit for university coursework. Interviews were based on a set of guiding questions, two of which asked teachers to discuss if and how they used child observation in their teaching and another that asked for specific examples of using child observation. Thirty-five kindergarten teachers

were interviewed in the same project, but the analysis of that data is not included in this report because the age level and structure of kindergarten in the US match primary schools in Australia, and only three primary teachers are represented in the Australian data.

Data analysis for both Australian and American data sets was qualitative and inductive. The basic strategy was to look for patterns in the data that were pertinent to our purpose: to find out how teachers used and thought about child observation. Our general strategy was to read the data, searching for evidence that supported the identification of patterns of meaning—what (Spradley, 1979) called domains. Once potential domains were identified, the data were read again with only these domains in mind. A systematic search for disconfirming evidence was then undertaken, giving us confidence that the patterns we draw in this report are well grounded in our data.

We acknowledge that there are limitations in our data. The Australian data are limited to a special group of teachers, that is, graduates of QUT early childhood programs. The US data represent teachers with levels of education similar to their Australian counterparts. Only three teachers did not have college degrees, and all but one of the college degrees was in an early childhood field. US teachers' degrees were earned at nine different institutions. So, while the US participants represent a more diverse group than the Australians in terms of education, they do not reflect the backgrounds or workplaces of typical preschool teachers across the United States. In addition, the depth of contact with the Australian participants gives more confidence that the data accurately reflect their beliefs and practices than the US interview data. Still, on the issue of child observation, we believe we have sufficient data from both sides to draw some comparisons between these two groups, and given the limitations mentioned, to draw some tentative implications that may be of interest to practitioners and policy makers in early childhood education.

Uses of child observation in American settings

Our analysis of transcripts of twenty-five interviews with American preschool teachers led to the identification of seven primary uses of child observation. For these teachers, child observation is used to:

- Assess academic progress
- Adjust curriculum/teaching strategies
- Diagnose instructional needs/readiness
- Gather information for reports to parents

- Deal with behaviour problems
- Assess social adjustment
- Collect documentation for special education placement

Each use is described and an example of teachers' descriptions of each use is presented in the following sections.

Assess Academic Progress

Assessing academic progress was the most cited reason for using child observation among the teachers interviewed. Although only a few teachers used the term, we have selected the modifier academic on purpose. As teachers described how they used child observation to evaluate children's progress, their notions of what constitutes progress were clearly tied to skill and performance-based approaches. Many used skills checklists as the basis for their observations and some mentioned using child observation as tools for addressing accountability concerns in relation to programs, administrators, and/or parents. A teacher in a Title I Preschool in a large urban district summarized what was expressed by many.

Child observation is one of the biggest tools that we use in assessment of a preschooler because they can't sit down and take standardized tests. I use a skills checklist with each child. You know, if I observe that they have picked up on a number or counting or something like that, then I check it off, and that helps.

Adjust Curriculum/Teaching Strategies

When asked about uses of child observation, several teachers identified making adjustments in their curricula or changing their teaching strategies based on observations. When a follow up question asked if there was a relationship between child observation and curriculum, even more noted the connection between observation and adjustment. The teachers looked for children who were struggling with particular content and described strategic adjustments such as stopping activities, breaking into small groups, giving individual attention to certain students, and changing activities so they were more appropriate. Again, many teachers appeared to be taking an academic approach to curriculum and some, like the church-based preschool teacher-director below, discussed teaching adjustments in the language of learning modalities and learning styles:

I like to see how children react to different learning methods. I feel visual aids help children; most seem to learn better from seeing than hearing in my classroom. By observing, I can notice the appropriate ways my students need to be taught. I also want to see and recognize that a variety of methods are being taught [by my teachers] so that every child's needs' can be met with the many different learning styles.

Diagnose Instructional Needs/Readiness

Although concerns with assessment and evaluation dominated teachers' thinking about uses, several teachers also noted the diagnostic dimension of child observation. Again, most of the responses reflected academic concerns, for example, noting skills that the child had not mastered. Some of these teachers used the language of readiness in their responses. For them, observation meant (among other things) noting which children were ready for the concept, skill, or theme being studied. The private preschool teacher quoted below works in a small city. She uses child observation in diagnostic ways as the starting place for planning her curriculum and instruction.

For us, the purpose of observation is to know what to teach and how to go about teaching. We see what the children need and start from there. It is hard to plan for preschoolers until you know what they are capable of.

Gather Information for Reports to Parents

As teachers were explaining their uses of child observation, several made direct reference to gathering information for parent conferences or report cards. It was clear in both public and private preschool settings that parent conferences and/or report cards were important and that having information based on direct observation was also important. Some programs had adopted systematic assessment and reporting systems developed by others, some used checklists developed in-house or adapted from other programs, and some gathered information for parents in less structured ways. The teacher-director below works in a private preschool located in an affluent suburb. Her comments provide some insight into how child observations might be used in parent conferences in such settings.

We try to make notes as we see things and keep records on the children. With our four- and five-year-olds, we have an evaluation check-off kind of a thing that we do with them; and it's given to the parents at conference time. With us looking at kids

going to kindergarten, we're trying to see that they are ready and make recommendations to parents as whether or not we feel the child should go to kindergarten or whether they need a year or two to develop.

Deal with Behaviour Problems

Teachers also identified dealing with behaviour problems as a use they made of child observation. The language in their responses indicated that teachers interviewed saw child observation as a way to get to the bottom of disruptive behaviour in the classroom. They talked of finding out who was responsible when conflicts arise between children. Some described situations where they were unsure of how to handle certain children and used child observation to try to understand children's behaviour and motivation. A teacher from an urban Head Start program expressed it this way:

We observe for evaluation and a lot of behaviour. It's very important for them 'cause I think that's something they need first and foremost is to learn good behaviour.

Observation will tell you a lot about, you know, if there's a child or two that have a problem. The one that's getting hit might be the one that started it, so you have to observe constantly.

Assess Social Adjustment

Some teachers mentioned assessing social adjustment. These responses seemed to reflect the teachers' concern for young children's social development rather than a concern for classroom order-as in the dealing with behaviour answers. In the preschool sample and even more so in the larger kindergarten sample, teachers indicated that they observed children in an effort to see how individual children were connecting with their peers. A teacher in a rural Title I preschool emphasized watching to monitor children's social adjustments.

I watch to see if they are on track socially and academically. You can find out a lot of stuff by just watching them interact with each other. I watch their every move. I will watch kids at centres, on the playground, walking the halls, and when they are talking to each other. It is so interesting to see and hear what students say.

Collect Documentation for Special Education Placement

A number of teachers also mentioned using observation as documentation for special education placement. This makes sense given that the rules for considering a child for special education placement require careful documentation that includes a teacher observation, but it

points up the American teachers' mind-set that child observation is an instrumental strategy done as a means of accomplishing some external purpose. Here the purpose is to satisfy special education requirements, whereas above it was to evaluate children's progress for parents or program administrators. The teacher quoted here works in a Title I preschool in a small city. Her comments reflect those of other teachers who mentioned special education referral processes in relation child observation.

Some of the children don't seem to know what's going on in the classroom. You realize that the kid is not responding to you, and I document things like that. So there are observations that you'll be doing all the time and those are informal observations. Then there are more involved ones. Sometimes those types of observations lead to referrals.

Uses of child observation in Australian Settings

Twenty-four Australian teachers provided written examples of using child observation in their work, and 71 critical incidents focused on recent events and situations that we hoped could illuminate teaching practices and influences on that practice. From these data, seven categories emerged. Australian teachers used child observation to:

- Identify individual strengths/weaknesses, problems, development, and progress
- Understand children to guide their behaviour
- Inform work with parents and other professionals
- Extend shared interests within a group
- Note individual interests that can extend learning for the group
- Reflect on the flow of the day, the routines for learning
- Evaluate own teaching

Again, descriptions and data excerpts are provided in the following sections.

Identify Individual Strengths/ Weaknesses, Problems, Development, and Progress

This was the most frequently mentioned use of child observation, which led us to consider whether these teachers were moving towards privileging assessment over understanding children as the primary purpose for using child observation (Halliwell, 1993). All the teachers indicated they used observation to assess attainments. The following example from a state preschool teacher indicates the nature of the uses of child observation in this

category. In this example, the teacher was able to change the goals for the child after observational information helped her see that the child was able to achieve at a level not noted previously.

The child has significant developmental delays. She couldn't count to 5 or recognize and name primary colours. She was placed in care and after the holidays was observed counting to 5 and naming all primary colours. This changed the goals we had for the child completely, and now we're aiming for other higher goals. If we hadn't been able to observe this we would still be aiming at incorrect levels for this particular individual.

Understand Children to Guide Their Behaviour

Despite the apparent move toward using observation for evaluation, some teachers wrote of weaving assessment information into what one teacher called a developmental history, a case record that increased understanding of a child existing in a time, place, and set of relationships (one of the basic tenets of traditional child observation). The following example from a non-contact childcare director illustrates how observational information can be used to build a case record or developmental history, with the ultimate aim of guiding behaviour. Here the benefit of a team approach and the perspective of the director from outside the room are apparent.

Each day I could hear Sam crying and crying without stop. Nothing carers could do would placate him. They tried picking him up, comforting him, controlled crying technique, ignoring him, etc. From down in the office I noticed that the crying was occurring at the same times each day. I passed on my observation to the carers in the room, which then gave them a new avenue to explore through observations. I felt like I had brought in a fresh idea to a complex problem. This information was relevant and needed to be passed on to the carers.

Inform Work with Parents and Other Professionals

Using child observation for informing work with parents and other professionals is often closely aligned with the use of child observation for identifying individual strengths/weaknesses, problems and developmental progress, as the content of the latter can be used as the basis for discussion and reporting to parents and other professionals. However, the following example indicates a different use for observation, where staff noticed a potential medical problem that the parents had not. This childcare teacher's description reminds us of

the orientation of early childhood education towards the health and welfare of the children with whom we work.

Observations by self and assistant of child going to bathroom having swelling in groin area; referred to parents - relating observed condition in professional manner, parent followed through and doctor advised. Child had a hernia. Having info to back up report to parents allowed quick diagnosis and problem operated on to remedy. We were pleased to have picked up on problems parents hadn't noticed and parents were thankful for our care of child.

Extend Shared Interests within a Group

Extending shared interests within a group was another use of child observations. The utilization of children's shared interests by teachers can create opportunities for learning with and from others that are often not possible when children are learning alone or in isolation. The following anecdote indicates how an event seen by many as tragic (the death of Princess Diana), was dealt with by one childcare director in her efforts to support children's search for understanding. This example shows how the circumstances of everyday social life were included meaningfully in an effort to deal with a quest for understanding larger events and issues.

The children were discussing and coming to terms with Princess Diana's death. I sat back and recorded what the children said. I supported the conversation by adding questions for the children to clarify what they meant and for other children listening to understand the conversation, and by displaying it for parents to read, helped both parents and staff understand what children comprehended and ways we can support children to make sense of the event.

Note Individual Interests that Can Extend Learning for the Group

The interests of individual children can be used to develop curriculum in the same ways that group interests were used in the example above. The childcare teacher who provided the following excerpt cited it as an example of looking for opportunities to extend the learning of the group based on observations of particular children's behaviours. Here, direct observation by the teacher meant an immediate response to a child that also provided opportunities for other children to be involved.

One of the children started to mix the colours of the paint. I used this to do colour mixing - giving children small amounts of paint to mix then use if wanted. Several

children mixed the paint, Look I made green. How do you do that? I put yellow in blue. We were able to extend thinking. Some children do not like the colours being mixed and this gave the children who like to mix colours the opportunity to do so without upsetting the others.

Reflect on the Flow of the Day, the Routines for Learning

The following vignette demonstrates how the use of observation can alter the way in which routine practices are undertaken. Here, a state preschool teacher was able, through the help of the assistant and children, to instigate a change that resulted in a more organized tidy up time. Although the response was not immediate (such as the example with colour mixing), consideration of observational information was used here to change a routine matter that was considered to be problematic.

Tidy up time over several weeks. Observation indicated children were crowded around prop boxes, articles not sorted into appropriate boxes, noisy, confusion etc. Discussed problem with children and teacher aide; decision made to place prop box in central area, explained to children appropriate place of articles. Observations after change—tidy up time much more productive, less noise and sorting was completed much better. Teachers need to change prop boxes was important for children's self esteem (jobs well done) made sorting even easier, access was much easier. This resulted in productive tidy up times which saved time and which gave positive feedback to [the] children by [the] teacher and [the] teacher aide.

Evaluate Own Teaching

This vignette portrays a non-contact childcare director in conflict as she grappled with academic knowledge gained from her pre-service teacher education program and what she sees the children and parents as wanting. As she evaluated her own teaching, she raised the issue of values, which lie at the heart of most curriculum decision making, by asking whose values are we reflecting?

A parent brought in some colouring books to the preschool group at our centre. Our arts policy values children's work, and does not encourage adult directed activities. All children in the group wanted to be involved. We as carers could not believe it, and questioned our art approach. We did not value adult directed art. Whose values were we reflecting? Every parent survey requests more structured art e.g. egg carton

caterpillars. Maybe it's time we reflect the families' values and needs instead of our academic beliefs.

A Comparison

There are similarities and differences among the uses identified in the Australian and American data sets. In terms of the general areas of use, there are close connections between the data sets, but a closer look reveals subtle differences in how teachers think about using child observation in the two countries. By subtle, we mean that there were slight differences in the data that were not obvious immediately. These differences were teased out as a result of the continued searching for systematic evidence mentioned earlier. The data are now compared and the subtle differences between the two data sets are used to organize our concluding discussion.

Similarities

In terms of substance, there are clear connections between US and Australian uses of teacher observation. Both sets of teachers were paying attention to what could be called diagnostic concerns. This is not a surprise given early childhood teacher education programs and the general tenets of the field of early childhood education. The Americans were overt in their expression that diagnosing children's progress, development, and learning styles is an important function of child observation. Australian teachers couched their diagnostic efforts using terms such as understanding children, noting individual interests, and reflecting on the flow of the day. Both used the diagnostic information gathered through observation to shape what they did in the classroom. Both identified adjustments they had made in response to information gathered through child observation.

In addition, both USA and Australian teachers had concerns related to evaluating or assessing student progress. Assessing academic progress and assessing social adjustments are examples of the American approach, while identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, problems, development and progress was the strongest category in the Australian data. As will be discussed below, differences in the attention given to assessing academic learning were a matter of degree-both groups were interested in evaluating student progress.

Both used child observation to prepare for communications with parents, and both agreed that observation was a window into understanding children's behaviour. The way these uses were framed by teachers was different by country, but the focus on parent communication and child behaviour was parallel. In summary, we can say that teachers in both countries used observation for diagnosis, making adjustments, assessment, parent communications, and examining children's behaviour.

Differences

The most obvious difference is that American teachers identified *documentation for special education*, while Australians included *evaluation of their own teaching*. No parallel use was noted for the special education concern in the Australian data, and this is understandable given special education law in the USA.

We found another difference in what, at first glance, might be taken for a similarity. The Australian teachers included using child observation for evaluating their own teaching, while the Americans talked in terms of evaluating their effectiveness. The American teachers framed their judgments about effectiveness in terms of how well they were satisfying the academic expectations of their programs, directors, or parents. A close look at the quotation from the Australian director reveals a different pattern. For her, evaluating her own teaching meant looking closely at alternatives that might better serve the children (and parents) of her program. She was willing to evaluate her own assumptions and values for the sake of improvement. We believe this approach is quite different from evaluating teaching methods for the sake of improving narrowly defined academic outcomes.

A close look at other apparent similarities reveals a pattern of subtle difference. In terms of diagnosis, adjustment, and assessment, US teachers seemed to assume that the only way to think of these issues was within a skill-based, academic framework. Their comments were peppered with phrases like, skills checklists, learning methods, and on track socially and academically. Australian teachers seemed to be moving in the direction of an academic model, using phrases like, aiming at higher goals and referring to skills such as counting and naming colours. But, when they described observation as being used for understanding children and making adjustments, they were framing their descriptions around meeting the needs of the child as a complex individual, not as implementing a technology for making diagnoses and prescriptions to improve academic progress.

The contrasting examples representing parent information and children's behaviour are telling as well. In the US vignette, the emphasis is clearly on gathering information so that the

teachers can report to parents on the child's progress and even using observational information to support recommendations about whether the child is ready to be sent ahead to kindergarten. The Australian example tells how careful observation enabled teachers to inform parents of a serious medical condition. The point is not that US teachers would not have noticed such a problem and informed parents. The point is that, when asked, Australian teachers thought of this incident as an example of how they used child observation, while American responses were dominated by academic accountability concerns. This is an important point as it reveals important differences in the category systems used by the teachers in the USA and Australia.

The approach to dealing with children's behaviour is different across data sets. There seems to be an effort to use observation to gather information to guide children's behaviour in the Australian data. The data suggest that teachers approached challenging behaviour through a problem solving approach, seeking information to complete the puzzle about why particular behaviour might be occurring. The American teachers seemed to be using observation to get to the bottom of behaviour problems—so that classroom control could be maintained. This may lead to the same kind of response, but a generally different orientation that could be characterized as the difference between guidance and control is evident in the data.

This analysis is tentative, and we are certain does not apply to all American or all Australian early childhood teachers. Still, a careful examination of our data indicates subtle but real differences in the ways those teachers involved in the study from the two countries think about and use child observation.

Interpretations from the US data

Our reading of the data is that early childhood teachers in the United States operate within a larger education context in which concerns for accountability, academic progress, and technological efficiency dominate. The push in education across the school years is for evidence that children are learning more, sooner. American education is driven by society's concern that its children are behind children in other countries. Standardized testing takes place from the earliest primary grades. It should be no surprise that an emphasis on academics and accountability has influenced preschool teachers' thinking and practices. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of these norms, it would be a surprise if their thinking was not influenced.

Relatedly, American society is conditioned to think that all problems can be solved if only the right technology is applied. This mindset influences how school problems are addressed, as well. Across the board, we are looking for technologies of instruction and evaluation that will solve our educational problems. The American teachers in our study

talked of evaluation checklists, which represent a kind of assessment technology, as if they were a taken-for-granted component of child observation. As the preschool teacher in the vignette said, I use a skills checklist with each child because they can't sit down and take a standardized test. Another teacher-director described learning styles technology as the way to supply appropriate instruction for her students. These are examples of the ways that a technological approach to thinking about schooling has influenced American teachers' thinking about child observation. Contextualizing teaching approaches within American society confirms that although teachers are part of an early childhood education culture, the enculturation of society by technological efficiency is pervasive.

Interpretations from the Australian data

The Australian data showed that child observation is used to inform teaching decisions and that in early childhood education, the importance of observing and recording information about children remains one of the central tenets of curriculum and teaching. Current Australian early childhood texts tend to endorse the tradition of using child observation as the basis of child centred curriculum, but emerging differences can be found regarding the dominant educational purpose of child observation. Although teachers still use observation as a basic information source for actioning child-centred curriculum, we detected a change in the purposes for which observation was used which parallels the changes noted in American texts (*e.g.*, Decker Decker, 1997) that are readily available in Australia. Observational information was gathered for informing teaching decisions and getting to know children, but it is now also used for purposes of assessment. In comparison with the American data, there appears to be a greater congruence in the Australian data between uses of child observation and a search for understanding the child as a person existing in a time, community and set of relationships. Nevertheless, the Australian data did show evidence of the increasing social pressure for academic accountability and the use of technical measuring devices.

Information gathered by the teachers was assembled to help them be sensitive and responsive to the unique talents, interests, achievements, and aspirations of each child. This is the case even where observation is used to assess performance against external standards. However, assessment (even authentic assessment) assigns priority to assembling information in forms that identify attainments, chart milestones, and monitor rates of progress in terms of developmental norms, teaching-learning sequences, or other standards mandated by authorities. In other words, assessment is oriented towards comparing children's achievements with previously identified norms or standards.

Australian children are now measured against standards prescribed by external education authorities such as the outcomes identified in the *Queensland Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (1998) for children aged 4 and 5 years, and the developmental continua for reading, writing and number for children aged 5 to 8 years in the Queensland Year 2 Diagnostic Net (Department of Education, Queensland, 1995). Other Australian states have similar documents, including the South Australian document '*Curriculum Frameworks for Early Childhood Settings: Foundation Areas for Learning*', which identify outcomes for children aged 3 to 5 years (Department for Education and Children's Services, 1996) and the Western Australian *First Steps* literacy development continuum (Western Australian Ministry for Education, 1991). The influence of these requirements can be seen in the comments made by teachers about their use of child observation, as well as the actual samples teachers provided of their observations.

Measurement of children against externally imposed standards exists in contrast to previous Australian practices. In the past, early childhood textbooks and teachers in Australia have frequently adopted a normative perspective which assumes an orderly pattern of developmental sequences in the early years (Cullen, 1994, p. 53). In normative approaches such as stage theory (*e.g.* Rousseau, Hall, Gesell, Freud, Piaget) and practical applications of stage theory such as developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997), a picture of the average or normal child was presented as a guide to the teacher (Weber, 1984, p. 171). These norms were the basis on which observations of children's development were made.

Understanding the whole child can now be interpreted as incorporating another dimension, that of understanding where the child fits on an externally imposed developmental continuum, a framework of outcomes or standards, or some similar construct. Child observation remains the means used for gathering this information. These technical approaches to plotting development incorporate the ages and stages notions that came to the fore in child development theories in the 1920s and 1930s by theorists such as Gesell (Weber, 1984). Also implicit in the idea of a continuum is the notion of being able to predict and control the child's educational growth, an idea that has survived from the 1960s and is evident today in much of the standards movement (see Grieshaber, 1997). It seems that the uses of child observation have evolved over time according to circumstances, with different aspects being accentuated according to prevailing trends. A current trend in the Australian data appears to be to retain the use of child observation for informing teaching decisions. However, this trend also reflects the influence of current requirements to provide information

about outcomes and standards. Teachers therefore draw on child observation for a variety of purposes, including assessing children to make judgments against externally imposed standards.

The Australian teachers in this study are using child observation for at least two broad purposes: first, attempting to satisfy externally imposed requirements; and second, striving to understand children as complex individuals through the creation of child responsive curricula. Achieving both places demands on teachers that potentially traps them between the two competing purposes for using child observation. Teachers' use of phrases such as aiming at higher goals and referring to skills such as counting and naming colours shows the tendency toward meeting the external requirements is blended with the concern for creating child responsive curricula. What is not evident yet is the complete use of a technology of assessment, where child observation is used to make diagnoses and prescriptions to improve academic progress.

Conclusions across data sets

The data from the teachers in the USA indicate that child observation is used as a means of skills-based assessment. While teachers from the Australian context did use child observation as a means of assessment, it was not as pronounced as in the data from the USA. Like the teachers from the USA, the Australian teachers are using child observation for a variety of reasons. However, for the Australian teachers, the data show a change from the traditional use of child study as a way of understanding children holistically, to use for skills-based assessment. In this study, the Australian teachers appear to be moving to a place where the USA teachers have been for some time. That is, the Australian teachers are moving towards using child observation for skills-based assessment, drawing away from the traditional uses of child observation. At the present time however, the Australian data show evidence of using child observation in a unique way. It is used for traditional purposes to create a holistic focus on the child and at the same time is being used to satisfy external demands for information about standards. It remains to be seen whether the flexibility of teachers to serve both purposes can be sustained in the future.

It seems that in both the Australian and American situations, society is preoccupied with academic accountability and technical measuring devices. Understanding that there is a close relationship between what is valued by society and what is reflected in educational policy provides an explanation for much of the current situation. Schools are an expression of societal values, and teachers are an integral part of society. It appears that the dominant

influences of society may be over-riding what is promoted in early childhood education as effective theory and practice. We believe that resistance to the pressures of accountability is growing but it may be a case of too little—too late, particularly in the American situation. We are concerned that the Australian teachers will continue to be propelled further down the road of accountability.

Philosophical issues of early childhood education need not be reduced to technical issues of measurement. There are alternatives to the dominant academic and technical influences, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for teachers to withstand pressure to work in the ways required by such approaches, particularly as many curriculum and policy documents now perpetuate the performance agenda. We question whether the original intent of child observation can be preserved in the current climate; and we worry about the possible consequences for children and teachers.

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