



## Observing and Assessing Children's Learning

Using Teacher Observation to  
Improve Children's Learning

Ministry of Education: Republic of Vanuatu  
Early Childhood Care and Education

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# Observation of Young Children in the Early Years Programme

## Introduction

Young children respond to the world in individual and different ways. These differences are as a result of their varied backgrounds and experiences. Teachers can take advantage of their role in classrooms to gain information about how children function within different settings and environments. This information can help teachers to:

- understand the learning needs of each of the children in their care; and
- address the learning needs of individual children through a play-based program.

One important way teachers can understand children's development, interests, and needs within the early years classroom is through systematically observation and recording or documenting those observations.

## What is Systematic Observation?

Systematic observation includes the following:

- informal observation in class and other locations (playground, trip outside school);
- formal or planned observation in class at set times throughout the year;
- monitoring work in progress; and
- checklists and notes.

As a result, over time teachers can come to understand what the children know and how their students learn best. For example:

- The teacher observes that a child does not sing or participate in group activities. As a result, the teacher might reflect on what this means for that child and how to make that child more comfortable about expressing him or herself.

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- The teacher observes in an activity that the child is not able to state the sizes of objects so assumes the child lacks knowledge of size. Later, the teacher observes the child sorting shells by size from smallest to largest during a free play time. The teacher now realizes that the child understands size differences but just lacks the vocabulary.

The key to systematic observation is basing interpretations on observations of a child over time in a variety of situations, rather than on a one-time assessment of a child's skills and abilities that is limited by a single task.

Systematic observation allows teachers to capture and record meaningful details while children are engaged in a variety of activities. For example, if three children are dramatizing a story of two parents taking their baby to a doctor, the teacher can observe:

- **Language skills:** Is the child, as parent, able to use language that expresses worry about the baby's health?
- **Social skills:** Is the child, as parent, empathetic to the baby's needs and able to respond appropriately to the baby's cries?
- **Understanding of how adults act in different situations and within different roles:** Does the child, as parent, hold the baby lovingly?
- **Understanding of how adults talk in different situations and within different roles:** Does the child, as parent, use a soothing voice to calm the baby?

Children do not need to represent their learning in the same way at the same time to make the teacher's observations a solid assessment of a child's learning:

- One child may count how many papers are needed for a group of children to each make a picture.
- Another child might count how many children are lined up for a turn on the slide.
- Another may count how many bananas are in the bunch the teacher has brought for a snack.

Each of these situations is a demonstration of the knowledge a child has and is a valid way for the teacher to document learning. However, if there are five bananas in the bunch and the child counts accurately to five, this observation must be followed up by another observation that shows whether or not that child can count beyond five.

Children come to school with a wide range of skills and abilities. They vary in the way they interact with others, how well they socialize, and in what knowledge they bring to an activity. When teachers take time to observe children as they work and play in the classroom, they have the chance to understand how to modify classroom activities, routines and instructional practices to improve learning for all students. Gathering student data through observation allows teachers to:

- reflect on the classroom environment, curriculum, and teaching strategies;
- determine which aspects of the learning experience are working well for the children; and
- determine which might be changed to meet children's needs better.

For instance, if the teacher notices during free play time that many children seem to struggle with self-regulation this becomes an opportunity for teaching behavioral skills. Self-regulation is the ability to control one's own behavior in ways appropriate to the situation and/or setting. The children's struggle with it is not an indication that free time activities should be cancelled because the children are not ready. The teacher may decide to teach specific routines to support children in learning social skills. These routines may be as simple as having them children sit down for five minutes and listen attentively to a story being told. Through systematic observation of the whole class the teacher becomes aware of patterns of needs and can respond specifically.

When making observations, teachers should also:

- have a solid understanding of child development;
- use this understanding to identify developmentally typical behavior as well as indicators that a child might be struggling with learning in specific areas;
- carry out their observations in an objective manner; and
- avoid assumptions or biases that affect their understanding of children.

To review, systematic observation should:

- occur regularly and systematically over time;
- involve collecting information from multiple sources (for example, teachers and parents); and

- involve collecting information from multiple environments (for example, playground, Open Day, trips).

This range is important because children often exhibit different behaviors and skills in different contexts. A teacher may observe that a child’s use of language in the classroom is limited. On the other hand, the child’s parent may observe that the child has an extensive vocabulary and uses a lot of language in interactions with neighborhood friends. With this information, the teacher knows that the child is capable of using language in play. So now the teacher can plan ways to ensure the child feels more comfortable speaking in more structured situations in the classroom.

### Developing and Using Observation Tools

The section above recommended teachers use ongoing, systematic observation. In this section we provide you, the teacher, with suggestions for developing observation tools. We also provide you with a detailed observation checklist for your ongoing use and for reporting at key times during the year.

The results of your observation can be documented in a variety of ways such as:

- On a separate piece(s) of paper for each child or in your journal/notebook. You could make a few notes on what you observed, when and where and if any instructional action is required to assist the learner. These papers could also be stored in each child’s portfolio. The page could be set up like this:

|                               |                     |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Child’s Name:</b>          |                     |
| <b>Date:</b>                  | <b>Observation:</b> |
| <b>Action needed, if any:</b> |                     |
| <b>Date:</b>                  | <b>Observation:</b> |
| <b>Action needed, if any:</b> |                     |

On a class checklist that you develop to observe and assess each child's performance in a specific skill set that you take from the Vanuatu National Syllabuses Primary Years. An example checklist is provided in the observation tool below.

- In the child's portfolio. For instance, you might want to select and store in the portfolio a sample of each child's writing every three months in order to show growth.

Observation tools can help you to give parents unique feedback on their children's work and progress throughout the year. To assist your observation and reporting of results to parents, the Ministry of Education has developed the Vanuatu Early School Observation Tool.

### **Vanuatu Early School Observation Tool**

This tool contains observation checklists for learning skills such as:

- General Learning Skill Development
- Physical Development
- Social Development
- Mathematical Skill Development
- Language Skill Development
- Child Protection
- Health

There are open-ended questions requiring written comments in these areas of learning:

- Personal Characteristics
- Signs of Learning Disabilities
- Concluding Observations

The observation tool follows in Appendix A with instructions on how to use it.

## Appendix A - Vanuatu Early School Observation Tool

### Vanuatu Early School Observation Tool

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**Name of Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Kindy:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Child:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age of Child (years and months):** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **How to Use this Tool:**

After you observe a child's behaviour, record your conclusion by placing a checkmark (√) in the correct column for each statement below. Write in your observations and conclusions in the sections that ask for your comments.

#### **When to Use this Tool:**

This tool is most effectively used when you complete and record observations at the beginning of the year, midway through the year, and the end of the year. This information will help you, parents and the child to see how the child has progressed in his/her development.

However, throughout the year you can also use the tool to observe and assess individuals or small groups of children by focusing on only one skill area or even just a few of the sub-skills within one area.

**General Learning Skill Development**

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Age Appropriate</b> | <b>Needs Support</b> |
|--|---------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Is curious                             |               |                        |                      |
| Is attentive                           |               |                        |                      |
| Is a self-starter                      |               |                        |                      |
| Completes tasks                        |               |                        |                      |
| Respects routines                      |               |                        |                      |
| Plays independently                    |               |                        |                      |
| Likes new challenges                   |               |                        |                      |
| Is willing to try new activities       |               |                        |                      |
| Dances or moves to the music (rhythm)  |               |                        |                      |
| Learns to sing songs                   |               |                        |                      |
| Recognizes and names basic colors      |               |                        |                      |
| Concentrates on a task and finishes it |               |                        |                      |

What have you noted about this child specifically? What are the learning strengths of this child? Are there areas of concern? Please comment below.

**Physical Development**

|   | <b>Outstanding</b> | <b>Age Appropriate</b> | <b>Needs Development</b> |
|---|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Large muscle control and development    |                    |                        |                          |
| Small muscle control and development    |                    |                        |                          |
| Appropriate speech articulation for age |                    |                        |                          |

What have you noted about this child? What are the areas of strength? Are there any other concerns you have regarding the child's physical development? For example, what do you observe about her/him walking, jumping, climbing ropes? How does the child work with small puzzles, holding crayons, and other objects? Are there any significant differences in how the child does things compared to other children? Please comment below.

**Social Development**

|   | Usually | Sometimes | Seldom |
|---|---------|-----------|--------|
| Enjoys playing with other children  |         |           |        |
| Shares well   |         |           |        |
| Shows friendship to others  |         |           |        |
| Is supportive of peers  |         |           |        |
| Initiates play activities   |         |           |        |
| Has the capacity to lead  |         |           |        |
| Follows the lead of others  |         |           |        |
| Seeks help when needed  |         |           |        |
| Says grace and understands the value of being thankful                      |         |           |        |
| Uses materials with purpose   |         |           |        |
| Is comfortable with adults  |         |           |        |
| Is mature for age/grade   |         |           |        |
| Exhibits a good sense of humor  |         |           |        |
| Takes care of materials   |         |           |        |
| Listens attentively   |         |           |        |
| Knows what keeps him/her healthy, for example, washing hands, cleaning nose |         |           |        |
| Uses the toilet independently   |         |           |        |
| Has good manners and says things like 'thank you', 'please'                 |         |           |        |

Comments:

**Mathematical Skill Development**

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Age Appropriate</b> | <b>Needs Support</b> |
|--|---------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Recognizes and names basic shapes                    |               |                        |                      |
| Compares items by size                               |               |                        |                      |
| Recognizes and makes patterns                        |               |                        |                      |
| Differentiates between numbers and letters           |               |                        |                      |
| Recognizes numbers 1-10                              |               |                        |                      |
| Tells time in terms of morning, afternoon, and night |               |                        |                      |
| Recognizes the concepts of big/small and up/down     |               |                        |                      |

Comments:

**Language Skill Development**

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Age<br/>Appropriate</b> | <b>Needs<br/>Support</b> |
|--|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Follows oral directions                              |               |                            |                          |
| Listens to stories                                   |               |                            |                          |
| Able to recall/recite a short poem or song           |               |                            |                          |
| Able to understand a story that is read aloud        |               |                            |                          |
| Knows how to hold a book                             |               |                            |                          |
| Knows to turn pages from front to back               |               |                            |                          |
| Begins to recognize letters and sounds               |               |                            |                          |
| Begins to explore making marks and drawings on paper |               |                            |                          |
| Begins to attempt to write letters and/or words      |               |                            |                          |

Comments:

**Personal Characteristics**

How would you describe the child's personality, maturity, confidence, humor, and other traits? Please comment below.

**Signs of Learning Disabilities**

Does the child show signs of a learning disability? Please circle your answer below.

Yes

No

Does not know

What do you observe in the child that makes it difficult for her/him to learn? Please comment below.

### Child Protection

Some children suffer from malnutrition, neglect, and or abuse. It is difficult to detect some of these areas of neglect. However, it is also important to be aware of:

- Situations that children may find themselves in that need immediate attention
- Some of the indicators that children might exhibit.

If you suspect abuse or neglect, please speak with your head teacher, health clinic and/ or hospital.

|                                   | Yes | Somewhat | No |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----------|----|
| Is depressed and anxious          |     |          |    |
| Is withdrawn                      |     |          |    |
| Is hungry all the time            |     |          |    |
| Is aggressive                     |     |          |    |
| Throws temper tantrums often      |     |          |    |
| Has bruises, bite marks, pain     |     |          |    |
| Has lost a lot of weight recently |     |          |    |
| Is listless and has little energy |     |          |    |

Comments:

**Health**

It is important to also consider areas that might affect a child’s learning such as vision, hearing problems, and other health issues. Please speak to the parents and confirm if they also observe these signs. Speak also to your head teacher, health clinic and or hospital.

|   | <b>Yes</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>No</b> |
|---|------------|------------------|-----------|
| Does the child seem to always have teary eyes?  |            |                  |           |
| Does the child constantly cover one eye to see? Does the child constantly hold objects close to the eyes?                       |            |                  |           |
| Does the child have difficulty recognizing people or objects from a distance? Does the child trip over objects in their path?   |            |                  |           |
| Do the child’s eyes cross, turn in, turn out or move independently from each other?   |            |                  |           |
| Does the child frequently have colds and infections?  |            |                  |           |
| In terms of hearing, does the child respond when called? Does the child speak loudly all the time? Does she/he pull their ears? |            |                  |           |
| Does the child seem unusually tired and fatigued?   |            |                  |           |
| Has the child been immunized?   |            |                  |           |
| Are there other areas you observe that the child has difficulty with? Please explain below.                                     |            |                  |           |

Comments:

**Concluding Observations**

**Please** record your concluding observations below.

**The child is doing extremely well in:**

**The child needs more support in:**

**I will focus on supporting this child by:**

**Teacher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_



*At the beginning I didn't know this child and I think now, because we've built that relationship ... I've got to know him a bit more ... At the beginning Johnny was like a book that I had never read ... and as it's gone on I feel as if I have read that book so many times and I sort of know what is in each part.*

*(Alicia, teacher)*