



Universal PreK (UPK) Café Issue 3 - November 25, 2024

Early Education Team Purpose Statement

Each and every young child and their family are diverse in culture, language, geography, values, beliefs and circumstances. To support individual growth, development, and continuous learning over their lifetime, the AOE is committed to fully including each and every child in a continuum of high quality, evidence-based early learning experiences from birth through grade three.

Back-to-Basics

Back-to-Basics is the theme selected for this school year UPK Café issues. When we speak of getting back-to-basics, we mean the core teaching practices of high-quality developmentally appropriate education including lesson planning, intentional teaching, observation techniques, assessment (data collection and analysis), teacher reflection (feedback loop), supporting children at risk of, with and without disabilities and Early Multi-Tiered System of Supports response plans. The Early Education team hopes that early childhood educators and support staff will find the Back-to-Basics issues helpful and supportive of continuous improvement of their teaching practices.

This third issue covers observation techniques for collecting child progress assessment documentation, reflection and analysis for informing instructional practices for each and every child. The companion UPK issue 4 will dive into assessment data collected from observation. High-quality and effective early childhood teachers utilize childhood observation techniques and practices for continuous improvement, and to meet children where they are at developmentally. The following information will support those teachers who are new to observation and serve as reminders for seasoned observers.

Relationships and Observation

Building relationships through observation is something all teachers unconsciously do on a daily basis. We observe a normally carefree child is unusually sullen and quiet during the day, and we intuitively know something is not right. If the child's expression does not change, and we observe the child having difficulty with others, we will gently ask the child some questions about how they are feeling. This is building trust between teacher and child and fostering the relationship. Intentional observation, however, is much more than just observing. It is thoughtfully planned, targeted observations, and recording of a child's development and learning to inform the teacher's practice.



Teacher Bias

Teacher self-awareness includes reflecting upon **implicit bias** (unconscious discrimination) and **explicit bias** (action/verbal discrimination) that impacts relationships with all children, but especially those children “perceived” to have challenging behaviors. Being aware of personal biases is a very important part of being an effective educator. One recommendation is to let go of preconceived biases, and to instead focus on the positives about children whom teachers may have trouble connecting with. If teachers cannot observe with an unbiased lens this can lead to incorrect analysis and determination of children’s development to the detriment of children’s learning.

Child observations are **observable facts** about a child’s development, and for teachers to remain **impartial they should note just what they are seeing the child do** (i.e., Mary is standing in the drama center with Catie and Juan). Post reflections of observation notes are an important part of the process, but teachers need to be aware of their own biases when writing anecdotal notes of observations. During reflection of observation notes teachers should ask were the notes objectively or subjectively written. **Objective** is when the facts are stated. (i.e., Mary took the puppet from Juan). **Subjective** is when an opinion is stated. (i.e., Mary grabbed the puppet from Juan because she doesn’t like him).

Observation Components

Observation is a skill that all teachers need in their toolbox, and like other teaching skills, there are components that structure intentional observations. The four steps below are intended to support and structure child observations before and after observing.

1. **Setting and stimulus (before observing)** - Who and What are you observing. Give context for the observation.
2. **Observation (before observing)** - Method (in action or out of action) and techniques for capturing the notes. Remember to capture just the facts.
3. **Analysis (after observing)** - Post observation reflection on the observation notes.
4. **Recommendations (after observing)** - Post observation response and/or action.

The circle time observation example below offers observation questions for new observers.

Observation Circle Time

- What is the setting?
- What is the stimulus (routine)? Does the teacher ask or prompt the child?
- How does the child react?
- Does the child comply or resist? Complain?
- Does the child take the process seriously?
- How does the child handle himself? (clumsily, skillfully)

- Is the child’s ability/development equal to the task?
- Are the skills age appropriate or not?
- What skills/abilities does the child have?
- Are transitions built in between routines?
- What is the behavior in relation to the group? Withdrawn, Silly, disruptive?
- Did the teacher clearly state expectations?
- Does the child complete what is being asked?

“In the Action” versus “Outside of the Action” Scenario

“In the action” is a term used for observing children while interacting with them. “Outside of the action” is used for when teachers observe from a distance and are not interacting with the children. Below is a scenario from a teacher new to observing.

My first day of observing, I had a stack of neatly spaced, typed questions that I wanted to answer while observing from “outside the action”. I did not use any of them - not one! What I learned was that in order to get to know the child I was observing, I had to interact with him. I have since completed a handful of observations while being “in the action”. I can be part of the action and still observe, it just requires that I jot down brief notes after the exchange. Being “outside the action” works best when “C” is with a group of his peers or interacting with his teachers or parents. When I am “in the action”, I have trouble remembering exactly what happened, moment by moment, so instead I jot down brief highlights of the interaction, but the observation is not as in depth as it would be if I were “outside the action” observing.

It is recommended that teachers select observation methods and techniques appropriate to what the skills or behaviors they wish to observe before making the determination to be “in the action” or “outside the action”.

Observation Methods and Techniques

Listed below are several observation methods and techniques that teachers may utilize individually or a combination of techniques. Best advice for new observers is to pick the methods and techniques that seem “natural” because if the technique is not accessible, it won’t be used consistently.

- **Brief Notes** are used by many teachers because of the flexibility for observations when the teacher is “in the action” versus “outside the action” to jot down a note about a child or children.
- **Anecdotal Notes** are a collection of brief observation notes to be written out to provide more context and description.
- **Running Records** are used for “outside the action” detailed real-time narrative notes for targeted observation of an individual child.

- **Matrices/Rating Scales** are prepared charts inclusive of all children in the classroom listed by name with abbreviations for skill or behavior observed. Used often “in the action” observations. Example: A = active participation, P = participation, Q = quiet.
- **Tallies** like matrices and rating scales are prepared charts often inclusive of all children in the classroom listed by name with frequency marks made for skill or behavior observed done during a determined time period. Tallies are quick observations.

Once teachers have compiled observation notes on each child it is best practice to develop an organized system for record keeping. Observation notes are not useful if they are put in a drawer and forgotten! Creating an electronic (Teaching Strategies Gold) and a physical portfolio for each child in which to place observation notes and analysis, and documentation (photos, video, children’s work samples, observation notes) is best practice and a requirement of Universal Prekindergarten programs.

Notes from new observers

- *I went old school and used a notebook to write anecdotal notes, but this would be inefficient for observing multiple children. As I grew more comfortable, I included documentation by using my cell phone to take pictures, and I used sticky notes to capture brief notes to document the observation for each child’s portfolio.*
- *I used a combination of the following observation methods including, brief notes, anecdotal notes, running records, photos, video, and family documentation.*
- *Anecdotal notes worked well for when I was “in the action” and narratives when I was “outside of the action”.*
- *For documenting children’s progress along with observation notes I found taking pictures and videos very helpful as documentation evidence. I utilized brief notes, photos and videos for of groups of children. This way I was able to observe multiple children at once.*
- *I scheduled planned observation times with a co-teacher so that I could be “outside of the action” to observe.*

Reflection, Analysis and Assessment

Intentional teachers successfully utilize observations to track and document children’s developmental growth overtime to support new learning opportunities, universal supports and accommodations for individual children. Reflection and analysis of observation notes and documentation informs teaching practice, curriculum and/or the learning environment. Intentionality of practice begins with early learning standards as stated in the lesson plan objectives through the assessment which incorporates

observation methods, techniques for capturing the data and documentation, and utilizing an assessment tool like Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG). TSG supports teacher reflection and analysis process through developmental domains aligned with the Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS).

Reference: [UPK Café Issue 2 Back to Basics: Lesson Planning. October 31, 2024](#)

Summary of Observation

Observation is not just watching children and writing down a few notes. Having the knowledge of observation methods and techniques is important to a teacher's practice and most importantly, how to apply it to support the developmental growth for each and every child. It is important to remember that observations are done over a period of time to gain a baseline of a child's developmental growth.

In the next UPK Café issue 4 on child assessment we will cover the use of multiple assessment measures that allow children to demonstrate what they know different ways, and a deep dive into the UPK approved assessment tool, Teaching Strategies Gold.

Reference: Jablon, R., Dombro, A.L., and Dichtelmiller. M.L. (2007). *The Power of Observation Birth to Age 8*. (2nd edition). Teaching Strategies and National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) Education

Due to the holiday season, the next issue of the UPK Café will be sent in January 2025.

We wish all of you a happy and safe holiday season!

Thank you,

Tammy, Katie, Amy, Wendy, Michele, Teresa and Thalia

Resources

[Act 166 Universal Prekindergarten: Changes to Prequalified Program](#)

[Universal PreK Program Handbook](#)

[UPK Cafe](#)

[VELS Manual](#)

[Vermont Agency of Education Early Education webpage](#)

[Vermont Universal Prekindergarten \(padlet.com\)](#) includes teaching best practices, Early MTSS and Teaching Strategies Gold information and resources.