**Supporting SEN - Observing Learners**

**Introduction**

Observation of learners, particularly those with SEND, provides a foundation for assessment of, and planning for, tasks and activities that will meet their needs and impact on their progress. There are many different types of observations that can be used in schools and settings and it is important for teachers and practitioners to use a variety of observation methods to give a holistic picture of learners’ needs.

Observation is key to understanding a child’s development. Practitioners should plan to supplement their general day to day observations with more focussed observations of a child’s strengths and areas for development. In schools, observations of learners with SEND could be completed by class teachers, Teaching Assistants or SENCOs, inside and outside the classroom in one to one, group or whole class situations. Although formal observations by subject teachers may not be possible, there are a number of observations that they, teaching assistants and learning mentors can make which can be useful to SENCOs and Inclusion managers when writing support plans and targets.

This resource is intended to support Early Years practitioners, teachers, Teaching Assistants and SENCOs in finding ways of observing learners who have, or may have SEND, although the methods apply to all learners.

1. **Narrative Observation**

Several periods of 5-10 minutes across different activities, times of the day and days of the week, are planned for where the observer watches and records everything the child does. These observations will show what a child does when they are not being directed, whether they are able to make a choice of activity and how long they focus on something they have chosen to do.

1. **Structured Observation**

For periods of 5-10 minutes, across different activities and times of the day, the observer looks out for a particular behaviour and marks each time the child performs this focus behaviour. This could be starting a conversation with an adult, taking turns or changing from one activity to another. The record will show the frequency of a particular behaviour, for example, a child may only initiate conversation with one particular adult in the setting.

1. **Spidergraphs**

The observer sketches a plan of the setting or classroom with all activity areas marked. Over a period of 5-10 minutes, they mark the child’s journey around the setting, noting how long they spend at particular activities. The record will show where a child chooses to go, if they are engaging fully in anything and if they are avoiding particular areas that might require a particular skill, for example the graphics table or the reading corner.

1. **Incidental notes**

These could be sticky notes, incident records or home/setting diaries which help to identify patterns in behaviour or common circumstances. It can be helpful to sort notes by different criteria such as time of the day, day of the week, adult-led or child-initiated activity to provide information to form a more holistic picture of learners which can easily be missed.

1. **Anecdotal Record**

This focuses on what is significant and is recorded in sequential order after an event has occurred. The observer records what the learner has said and done and can include direct quotes. It is a useful method for recording significant actions or events that provide information about the child’s skills, abilities, interests and needs.

1. **Running Record**

A running record, not to be confused with a running record completed whilst a child is reading, gives an account of a child’s behaviour by detailing everything a child says over a period of 5-10 minutes or during time increments, for example, every 3 minutes over a half hour period. They provide in depth information and are useful in determining why a child is behaving in a particular way, for example, refusing to read or becoming upset in Maths lessons.

1. **Sociogram**

This technique can be used across all age groups and involves the observer mapping a child or young person’s interactions or friendships within a group during social times such as break times or lunch times. It provides a clear indication of whom a child prefers to socialise with and if they need support with social skills.

1. **Time Sample Observation**

This involves the observer recording the occurrence of a particular behaviour throughout the day with a tally and a note of the time and length of time that the behaviour occurred. It could be used to reduce negative behaviour by giving an insight into why and when it occurs during the day.

1. **Event Sample Observation**

Short observations of a child’s response in a situation. The observer records the child’s behaviour pattern which gives an indication of why the behaviour is happening. If antecedents and consequences to the behaviour are identified, strategies are likely to be found to support the child more effectively. For example, stress triggers could be identified for an autistic child and strategies put into place to remove or reduce them, which could have significant effects on the child’s learning.

1. **Observation Checklists**

Observation checklists allow teachers to record information quickly about how students perform in relation to specific objectives and outcomes. Written in a yes/no format with space for any additional notes of observations not covered in the checklist, they can be used to assist in observing student performance as an individual or in a group. Before using an observation checklist it should be made clear to students what information will be gathered and how it will be used. They should be dated to provide a record over time.

Guidance for using an observation checklist

1. Determine specific outcomes to observe and assess.
2. Write down criteria or evidence that indicate the student is demonstrating the outcome.
3. Ensure students know and understand what the criteria are.
4. Target your observation by selecting four to five students per class and two or three specific outcomes to observe.
5. Share observations with students, both individually and in a group. Make the observations specific and describe how this demonstrates thinking and learning. For example: "Ben, you contributed several ideas to your group's design plan. You really helped your group finish their task within the time limit."
6. Use the information gathered from observation to enhance or modify future learning.

**Summary**

Observation of learners, particularly those with SEND, provides a foundation for assessment of, and planning for, tasks and activities that will meet their needs and impact on their progress. Different types of observations can be used for a variety of purposes and for different age groups and are an important tool in the toolkit of all teachers and practitioners. No single observation of a learner should be relied upon, but a combination of different types of observations of the learner in different contexts can be very useful in building a holistic picture of their individual interests and needs from which future targets and plans should be based.

**Further Reading**

Aussie Childcare Network: Observations in Childcare <https://bit.ly/2GdSsoS>

Scholastic Observing Students Informal Strategies for Effective Assessment <https://bit.ly/36mkJ7t>

A Practical Guide to Child Observation and Assessment Christine Hobart & Jill Frankel (2004) <https://bit.ly/2TSIPDZ>