

Powerful Interactions

A Bridge between Teaching and Assessment

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Does assessment seem like an added burden to your teaching?

Do you puzzle over how to combine teaching and assessing?

Do you struggle with the task of observing and documenting children's learning?

In this article we describe how to use Powerful Interactions with children to gather data used to assess children and guide instruction. Powerful Interactions are those interactions in which a teacher intentionally connects with a child to extend his or her learning. Using a vignette from the classroom of Ms. Hinano and Ms. Sanchez, who teach 4-year-olds in Hawaii, we illustrate how they address the challenges described in

the questions above. We offer five tips to help you take advantage of Powerful Interactions to observe and document children's learning. Your teaching can be even more effective and your work more rewarding.

Ms. Hinano's story

Ms. Hinano and Ms. Sanchez use a system to ensure they have a Powerful Interaction with four or five children daily. At the same time they observe and document children's learning. Their weekly goal is to have at least one Powerful Interaction with each child and to add information to all of the children's assessment portfolios.

While Ms. Sanchez "floats" from center to center during the first half of choice time, Ms. Hinano has a few Powerful Interactions. (During the second half of choice time, they switch.)

Ms. Hinano goes through the three steps of a Powerful Interaction: Be Present, Connect, and Extend Learning. Notice how naturally she integrates observing and documenting during her interactions with children. Colored text will let you "read" her thoughts.

Ms. Hinano sees Kahali and Michael working with the Duplo™ bricks.

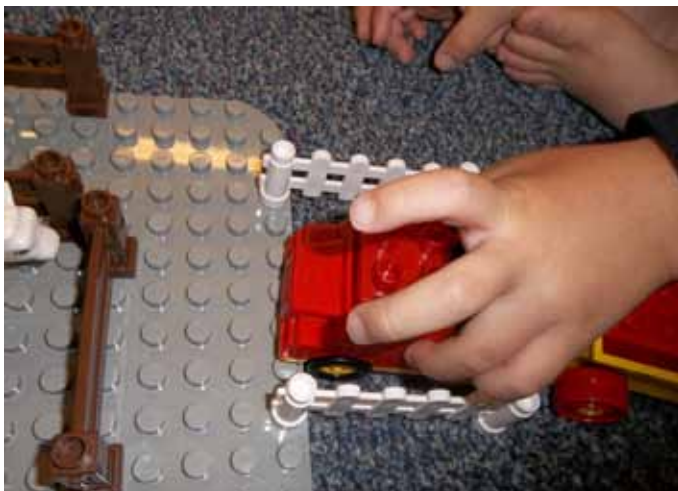
Before joining them, she pauses to quiet her mind and think about Michael, one of her focus children. This first step, Be Present, helps her to focus and prepare for the interaction and note taking. She recalls that Michael uses classroom materials in flexible ways, then reminds herself that he uses rich vocabulary and that she is often surprised by what he says.

Feeling ready, she approaches the two builders, ready to connect. She observes what the children are doing so she can tell them what she sees. Before she can say anything, however, Michael looks up to greet her and says, "Look at the fence!"

Ms. H: Michael, you and Kahali have built a brown fence all around the edge of the building base. I'm going to watch you for a while to learn more about what you're doing. *I've made a good connection. I let Michael and Kahali know that I see them, am interested in what they are doing, and want to spend time with them.*

Ms. Hinano gets down on the floor, with her camera and sticky notes ready, and watches silently for a minute. She writes: Michael building with Kahali – Duplos – 3/13/12

Ms. H: I'll use an "I notice" statement to increase children's awareness and model vocabulary. *I notice that you*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

made a building with farm animals inside the fence and that vehicles are moving around outside the fence.

M: It's a farm. (He points to a truck.) This truck brings food for the pigs.

Ms. H: Oh, I understand. The pigs need food, so the farmer calls someone up and they bring pig food in a truck. I wonder how the truck will get inside the fence where the pigs are. *Here's a chance to promote problem solving.*

M: We have to make a gate.

Ms. H: OK. While you two make a gate, I'll write a note about what you are doing so that I don't forget. (Michael looks up at her for a second, smiles, and turns back to the farm.)

Children feel proud that we want to write down notes about what they are doing. I used to think it took me away from children; now I see that it enhances our interactions.

The boys use white fence pieces to make a gate that opens and closes. As Michael moves the truck through the gate, Ms. Hinano continues to share her observations.

Ms. H: I noticed that you made the gate out of the white fence pieces and that it opens and closes. *They worked together to solve the problem. I'm going to jot this down.*

M: Now the trucks can deliver the goods.

Ms. H: Deliver the goods—that's interesting language, Michael. I wonder how you know about delivering the goods. Let me write that down.

Michael watches as she writes and she says each word out loud: You said the truck delivers . . . the . . . goods. This is great. I'm teaching literacy, helping Michael develop self-confidence, collecting observation notes, and having a Powerful Interaction!

M: Yup, that's what I see delivery trucks do at the store. Me and Mom talked about the trucks. She said the trucks deliver goods.



Ms. H: At my house, the mail comes in a delivery truck, too.

M: At school, the Lunch Bunch delivers lunch!

Ms. H (writing notes): I can tell you're thinking about other kinds of deliveries. Shall I write down your ideas? *If I call attention to his thinking, he knows I value it and it will lead to more thinking.*

At the end of the day, before filing the note in Michael's folder, Ms. H. refers to the learning outcomes chart posted nearby. She reflects on what she learned about him and makes notes on the anecdote.

- social—cooperative play (with Kahali)
- speech—clear enough to be understood
- vocabulary—farm, trucks, deliver the goods, delivery trucks
- reading—shows interest in words I write
- math—understands positional words (inside/outside)
- social studies—awareness of jobs of delivery people
- fine motor—manipulates Duplos easily

Here is Ms. H's note documentation, written in short phrases. These brief notes hold a wide array of information about Michael.

Michael building with Kahali – Duplos – 3/13/12

building base w/ brown fence around edge

building and animals inside

M: It's a farm. (points to truck) This truck brings food for the pigs.

T: I wonder how trucks get inside.

M: We'll make a gate. (They make gate that opens and closes.) Now the trucks can deliver the goods.

I comment on his words. M tells me his Mom said goods.

Watches me write.

delivery trucks to stores, lunch bunch delivers at school.

To Do: Follow up with him on other kinds of deliveries.

Tips for assessing during Powerful Interactions

Assessing during Powerful Interactions doesn't just happen. Here are five tips to discuss with colleagues and incorporate into your practice:

Use the three Powerful Interaction steps.

Be Present. Pause to prepare and quiet your mind. Being present lets you make more intentional decisions about what to say and do, what to record, and how to extend the child's learning in the moment and/or after the fact.

Connect. Let the child know that you see him and are interested in what he is doing. This reawakens the trusting relationship you've built with the child and makes him more available to learn from you.

Extend Learning. Encourage the child to take one or two baby steps by stretching his thinking, adding to his vocabulary, expanding his knowledge, or improving a skill.

Work as a team

Focus on four or five children each day. At the beginning of the week, decide who these children will be and post the plan.

Share responsibilities. Plan what each team member will do during each segment of the day.

Be flexible. If needed, confer at the end of the day and figure out how to observe a focus child on another day.

Find time to reflect together. Three times a week, spend 10 minutes together during naptime. Review the observation notes jotted down during interactions and make plans for learning extensions with individuals and small groups.

Use mirror talk to tell a child what you see or hear.

Mirror talk means telling a child what you see or hear her doing. It gives a child meaningful, informative feedback, rather than empty praise such as "Good job." It also helps you focus on the significant things that a child says or does so that you can record them.

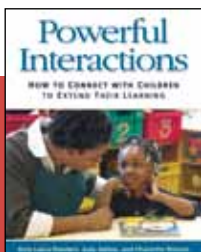
Be ready to document.

Put a pen and a pad of sticky notes in a pocket or carry a clipboard with a pen attached by string. Keep a small digital camera handy to capture children's learning by snapping a quick photo. After printing the photos, attach the observations notes. Record children's language and jot other pertinent notes on the back of their artwork.

Involve children in the documentation process.

First, tell the children you will be writing notes about what they do and say. Repeat the words aloud while writing them down. This lets children know you value their thinking and learning. It is also a way to model writing. You can ask, "Is there something else I should add to the note?" And invite the child to do a bit of writing!

As you begin trying to observe and document during Powerful Interactions, we're sure that you will have stories to share as well! Please share your stories either on the Powerful Interactions website www.PowerfullInteractions.com or the Powerful Interactions Facebook page.



The authors' book on this topic is available at naeyc.org/store.