Observation is a key tool in everyday school life. It helps us make sense of the processes and facts that we are presented with. In the experience we want to share with you here, observation has allowed us to fine-tune how we look at children and reflect and modify or expand upon the educational resources and materials we offer them.

"Listening means being alert in every sense of the word, in order to recognise how all the languages of childhood relate to the world."

(Alfredo Hoyuelos)

We understand education as an active process that implies a constant transformation of how we behave daily with respect to the children, our environment and other professionals in education. It is because of this transformation process that we believe it is important to reflect on our observations at school to bring new actions to educational practices and thereby generate new challenges for the children.

Pedagogical documentation is a tool that helps us observe and understand children's knowledge construction processes. It requires highly careful interpretation, without adults' prejudices or labels.

Gino Ferri’s definition of documenting ('a set of practices that support knowledge processes and educational action') gave us a starting point for our reflection on what we observed in the classroom and, more specifically, for identifying the motor needs of a group of one to two-year-olds.

As we focused our attention on this aspect and studied more closely the daily reality of our group of children, we became aware of how the children we were looking after were moving around, climbing up the variety of elements of all heights in the classroom. Once we had identified this area of interest, we decided to explore it further by reading related literature and researching several authors.

Based on Emmi Pikler's ideas on free movement, according to which the child is capable and competent from birth, we focused on how children assess the feasibility of their own movements through a variety of initiatives and spontaneous interest in everything around them.

Given children's need for movement throughout the day, we introduced changes and modifications to the classroom space. It was gradually transformed over the months, as we sought to offer an environment that provided a wealth of movement-inducing stimuli: furniture of different heights, hardness, touch, temperature, sizes ...

Based on the idea of observation mentioned at the beginning of this article, we were able to analyse how the children related to space, as well as to objects, time and our colleagues. It also helped us realise that, to advance further, we needed a series of points or guidelines in the form of open questions that would leave us plenty of margin for interpretation. As Gino Ferri said, "The quality of the questions we ask ourselves is important to enrich the way we view children."

We therefore drew a list of items to guide our thinking:

- How do the children experience space (as a challenge, a discovery, from afar, with caution)?
- What strategies do the children use to climb?
- What interactions are created between the children and the material, the games offered, structures and furniture?
- What relationship do they develop with their friends? (languages, imitation, initiative ...)
- What does the material help them discover or learn?

In addition to these questions, we thought a floorplan of the classroom might be helpful as a tool to facilitate our observations and documentation in order to visualise more quickly the trajectory that the children followed as we watched them.

By way of example we would like to share an observation we made of a seventeen-month-old child at the end of October in relation to the different areas of the room, more specifically to the different motor stimuli. It must be said that this observation was not the only one we made, since...
throughout the month of October we observed all the children in the group. We conducted these observations with both of us in the classroom for a wealthier overall experience and to be able to share, reflect and interpret them together.

In this observation, we evaluated space as a protagonist. We also prioritised the actions and relationships that took place in it. The motor stimuli consisted of a set of chairs arranged on a podium that could be accessed up a small ramp. On another level, we placed a table that the children could climb on. At first, we observed how the child was experimenting with her body, going up and down the ramp and on to the table. Later we observed how she used the play materials to interact with the room’s structures (letting pieces of wood slide down the ramp and carrying objects from the table to the floor). At that point all the items we had listed for our observations had come about, and we proceeded by offering more materials that triggered further experimentations with gravity and friction.

Some of the notes we made and that can be seen in the table are:
- The child looks for strategies to climb up as well as to climb down: she climbs up furniture, stretches to get down...
- She observes and assesses height before climbing. Once she feels confident she stands up on the highest pieces of furniture while looking around for the adult: she goes from lying down and looking at the floor to standing up and walking.
- She carries objects from the table to the floor. To do this, she drops the objects from the table onto the floor and then stretches down to the floor herself. Once she is on the floor she gathers herself up. She seems to find this exciting, as she begins to throw objects from other places: the top of the piece of furniture, the table, the ramp...

At this stage, after a few months of reading, joint and shared reflection, debates and training courses, we continue to observe and note all these relationships we are witnesses to on a daily basis in order to provide the children with new challenges and questions that fulfill their need for movement. The items that at first helped us down this path were revised over the course of the months. Each new observation, discussion and reflection has helped us fine-tune our viewpoint and adjust how we organised the stimuli, time and materials we made available to the children. All in all, we reaffirmed the concept of space as an educational environment in which well thought-out aesthetics and strategically located and carefully designed material aim to arouse thought, curiosity and the desire to discover, thereby triggering children’s actions and questions.

Our main goal without question is to open up new educational horizons for children.

Finally, we would like to highlight how valuable the reflection that preceded observation was as it led us to develop the aforementioned items. These items in the form of questions forced us to direct our gaze towards the children and their actual needs. Without a doubt, many aspects might have gone unnoticed if we had not stopped and looked closely, adjusting the spaces and the materials to the interests and needs of the children. Furthermore, all this has allowed us to see what strategies children use to find their own answers to the new challenges that arise. Because as Loris Malaguzzi said: “When your day’s work is over, you should ask yourself this: what have I learned today about this child?”.

Another aspect we consider essential is how we communicate our observations to the families and our colleagues. In this case, we documented the process and, among other things, published it in our classroom diary, showing photographs.

Maria Rovira López, early childhood school teacher, graduated in Childhood Education, with training on the pedagogy of the schools in Reggio Emilia. Coordinates the working group “Ethics and aesthetics of the schools in Reggio Emilia” in Rosa Sensat. Member of the “Reflection seminar on the Institute Pikler-Lóczy principles”, also in Rosa Sensat.

E: kilfa@hotmail.com

Maria Mercè Austrich i Comas, early childhood school teacher, graduated in Childhood Education, Postgraduated in Musical Education in Early Childhood Stage and course on musical language. Training on free movement and pedagogical documentation. Member of the working group “Art and literature” in Rosa Sensat.

E: mercelorent_6@hotmail.com