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Infant Observation

International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riob20

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Gerd Randi Abrahamsen

To cite this article: Gerd Randi Abrahamsen (2020) 'When the eye begins to see and the ear begins to hear': Teaching infant observation at university level, Infant Observation, 23:1-2, 35-52, DOI: 10.1080/13698036.2020.1762702

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2020.1762702

INFANT OBSERVATION
2020, VOL. 23, NOS. 1–2, 35–52
https://doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2020.1762702

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'When the eye begins to see and the ear begins to hear'*: Teaching infant observation at university level

Gerd Randi Abrahamsen

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the author's work in introducing a modified version of infant observation as a requirement of a university course in Early Childhood Education, a qualification course for Nursery Teachers in a Norwegian University. The author explores her psychoanalytic ideas about how learning takes place after tracing the paradigm shift in Early Years Education in a north European country in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The author herself learnt a great deal about the Tavistock model of observation and in later work at the Tavistock Clinic. She emphasises the emotional component in learning, the nature of learning from a psychoanalytic perspective and on the countertransference (what is felt) along with what is seen and heard in observing young children. The expansion of nursery places in the author's country for three to six-year-old children led to an expansion in nursery teaching courses at universities and the opportunity to include 'learning form experience', along with other forms of learning, was taken. The paper also includes responses from questionnaires given to former students who had undertaken observations and their thoughts on its impact on their approach to their teaching work.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 April 2020
Accepted 27 April 2020

KEYWORDS
Infant observation; nursery teachers; learning from experience; early years; 1–3 year-olds

Introduction

In 1937, in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable,* Sigmund Freud claimed that psychoanalysis together with education and government were the three 'impossible professions' in which one could be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. Perhaps one might add that they are all very difficult and demanding professions.

CONTACT Gerd Randi Abrahamsen gerd.abrahamsen@uis.no Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Stavanger, 4036 Stavanger, Norway

*Part of a line from a poem titled, "In a Dark Time", Roethke (1968).

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Education has been my field of work. I have been teaching students in Early Childhood Studies at my university for over 25 years including 15 years of teaching infant observation to nursery teacher students. Although I agree with Freud about unsatisfying results, it is important, in my view, to point out that the results, satisfying or not, have a lot to do with teaching methods and the emotional climate between teacher and students.

As a teacher, I have always been interested in how people learn, how I learn, how my students learn and how children learn. In other words, what are the conditions which promote learning, and what may easily disturb them?

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a paradigm shift in the field of early childhood education in most universities and colleges in the Scandinavian countries. The shift was characterised by a cognitive and sociologically inspired model of childhood where the child was seen as a competent social actor having agency in his or her life. The notion of the 'competent child', a slogan presented by the Danish developmental psychologist Sommer (1997), became a part of a powerful discourse. The discourse contrasted the 'old fragile novice child' *with* the 'new resilient competent child'. A heated and critical debate developed; how was this conceptual construction to be interpreted and put into practice? Kampmann (2004), another Danish researcher, claimed that the notion of the 'competent child' was merely a 'compulsive idea' and not based on research findings.

Research based on systematic and daily observations in nurseries then emerged which challenged the over-generalisations of the then-current discourse of the competent child. Instead of finding 'old fragile novice' or new 'resilient competent children', the data showed both characteristics in the same children; they were eager to learn, competent and strong, but also vulnerable, immature and in need of close attention and care. In real life, most of us undoubtedly meet children who fit these characterisations (Kalliala, 2011).

There was, however, a real danger of defining normality in a new way which reflected established values more than the reality of what children are actually like. Emphasising and perhaps exaggerating the children's competence might well obscure our understanding of the genuine helplessness and vulnerability of young children. In the face of that, there is an inevitable asymmetry in the relationships between adults and children of all ages; the younger the child, the clearer this pattern is. In other words, a move from concentrating only on the child, a one-person view, to include the child's relationships, a two-person view, seemed necessary. Recognition of this turn took its time in the educational field. The old and new paradigms lived side by side for a long time. Implementing the relational view, as part of the nursery teachers' training seemed, in my view, very important (Abrahamsen, 1997)

In order to understand what young children's daily lives are really like in nurseries, first-hand knowledge through observation is necessary. However, Nursery Teacher students at the university had mostly learned *about* the development of infants and young children and not so much *from* them, although they had

regular field experience throughout their training. Lectures and book learning were, at this time, still the dominant model of learning in Norwegian higher education.

Time set aside for observation and discussions of the students' own observations during their field practice had sadly lapsed over the years. The emphasis was mostly on learning the ropes, the structures, rules, activities and procedures of everyday life in nursery etc. Work done on individual observations in seminars or small groups, as part of their learning process was almost non-existent, although the students had regular supervision during their many weeks of field practice. The students had mainly been taught objective methods of observation, putting aside personal feelings and involvement lest these interfere with seeing and noting 'objective truth'. The emphasis was on causality, the relation of cause and effect. They had learned to look for observation material that might support or test their theory, in a deductive approach.

My own approach was to look at widening the scope by using a different kind of observation, perhaps as a supplement to the objective observation methods. I thought training in a modified version of infant observation might bring in something new. I wanted to encourage the students to see what there was to be seen and not to look for what they thought should be there as Reid (1997) so deftly puts it.

I had trained in infant observation, the Tavistock model, organised at a mental health centre in the capital city, while working in Child Psychiatry as an Educational Therapist in the 1980s. The training had given me a profound learning experience. It had made a great impact on my professional work and on my way of thinking about teaching and learning. Introducing the methodology of this observational approach to nursery teacher students would, in my opinion, be very useful.

I wanted to encourage the students to develop an ability to observe the children's many experiences in a thoughtful and receptive manner, gradually developing an eye and an ear for details in the children's daily life in nurseries. I wanted to enable the students to pay attention to everything that was going on throughout an observation hour and to record it in writing for reflection only afterwards. What I was hoping for was that learning would take root at a deep level; an emotional learning process as a sustainable development helping them in their future work as nursery teachers. The paradigm of the competent child and a one-person model, were, in my view, damaging the professional culture and learning about early childhood care. The question was how to implement a relational (two-person) view and heighten the students' awareness of the emotional factors, which enter into the process of observing. What I was searching for was an approach that placed emphasis on what is 'seen, heard, and felt' by the observers.

My thoughts on presenting the Tavistock observation approach as a model of learning for nursery teacher students had been on my mind for a long time. The question was how to connect this view to a consideration of teaching infant

observation in an adapted form as a part of Nursery Teaching Qualification at my university; the question was also, 'Why now?' Children under three had eventually become a focus of attention for my government. Starting school in my country had changed from the age of seven to the age of six. Because of this, the government sought to expand nursery places for children under three, which meant more early years practitioners. The universities got more funding for expanding education programs for courses focusing on the Under Threes to secure updated knowledge about this age group.

Things were indeed looking up. I now thought I stood a good chance of presenting my proposal to introduce training in a modified version of infant observation as a learning method for nursery teacher students wanting to work with the Under Threes. I took courage and asked for a meeting with my Head of Department, which turned out to be surprisingly constructive. Perhaps she realised during our meeting that observational training and practice had sadly become underused and perhaps under-valued over the years, but then again, perhaps it was just that the timing was right. Anyway, the meeting proved to be a step forward. A small group, in which I was included, was set up to look into the possibility of setting up and delivering observational training for nursery teacher students who wanted to work with the youngest age group in day nurseries.

Beginning

Changes to the curriculum take time; it is a slow-working process. Establishing and designing a new course is demanding and time-consuming. However, a modified application of infant observation as part of the Early Years Teaching qualification course at the university where I worked was developed. It was to be an annual optional specialisation course for no more than 30 students in their third and final year of the bachelor's degree programme in Early Childhood Education; it was to be evaluated after three years. The aim of the course was to create increased accessibility to the very young child's perspective through a combination of theory and practice. Theoretical seminars in plenary groups and observational seminars in small groups to discuss each student's weekly observation in turn formed the central parts of the course.

The intention of including the observation groups as part of the training was specifically to enhance the students' sensitivity in their future work as nursery teachers. The aim was to deepen their awareness and understanding of the children's way of seeing the world and their non-verbal communication. This is, in my view, a core value for working professionally with infants and young children. The issue of how relationships are formed and sustained between the young children and the nursery staff, in the context of playing and learning, was to be a central theme. I wanted the students to learn through a participant learning process. In my view, learning through

observation, learning from experience in Bion's (1962) terms, is without doubt a foundation skill for nursery teachers' day-to-day work.

All through the 15 years that this application of infant observation was a part of the curriculum, there was a mild pressure from the administration to expand the number of students on the course because of its popularity. I repeatedly had to explain why this would be harming the students' learning process. I was listened to, although reluctantly, and the student number of 30 remained the same each year. At the end of the first three years, the course was evaluated as requested. The students' written feedback from each of the three first years confirmed that learning to observe and learning from observation had made a deep impact on them. It became obvious that introducing observation as a learning method had been a success. However, the learning process had also been painful for the students, as some feedback illustrates:

> Through the observational process, I have realized how many details one might miss if one does not observe on a regular basis. Through my observations, it has become plain and clear how important the staff's emotional availability is for the children, perhaps especially for the 'under threes'. However, it has also made me realize my own shortcomings in this matter.'
>
> 'I experienced seeing more and more in each new observation. Actually, I saw almost too much. I now wonder whether I will be able to observe in this manner in my future nursery work.
>
> It is very painful to observe in this way. I observed some things I wish were not true. I have learned so much, no doubt about that, but I do wish that the learning process had not been so painful.

The administration was pleased with the students' evaluations and with my own annual reports; so, the course was to remain in the curriculum. I continued to present reports from the course together with the students' feedback. There were never any discussions over the years about removing or changing anything. It remained popular, and students from other universities and colleges started to apply for the course.

I, however, felt the heavy weight of responsibility in maintaining a high professional standard for the students. I updated their reading list on a regular basis for their theoretical seminars. I invited guest lecturers from other universities who presented other ways of observing in day nurseries (using film or video recording for example) for discussion and learning. I felt such a deep sense of responsibility for the course that I sent a written request to the Head of my Department about funding an annual visit to the Tavistock Clinic, in London for inspiration and professional updating. I needed to sit in on observation and theoretical seminars, and to use the Tavistock Library, with its wealth of psychoanalytic literature. Surprisingly perhaps, my request was granted without further questions. In the remaining years, I got enough funding each academic year to stay for up to two weeks at the Tavistock. In addition, I obtained two

generous British Council Research Grants enabling me to stay as a guest at the Tavistock for two months learning about the institution and the professional work done there. These visits, together with the Conferences for Teachers of infant observation, held at the Tavistock every two or three years, along with this journal, *Infant Observation,* became, in many ways, my professional lifeline. Together they inspired me, enabled me to refresh and renew my own learning and development, deeper insight and understanding of the theoretical framework behind Esther Bick's stroke of genius, infant observation.

Organisation of the course

The students who began the observation course had previously accomplished a great deal academically. Now they needed to develop an emotional awareness of relational phenomena between the very young and the nursery staff, a challenge for them. Their task was now to slow down, change pace, as it were, and pay attention to details, to the emotional atmosphere, and to reflect on what it might mean to the children, and about its impact on themselves as observers.

Learning something new in a new way is painful and sometimes provocative. A redefining of the observational role was perhaps the hardest for the students to accept. It was especially challenging because it did not belong to any familiar role known to the students, not professionally, nor as a parent, relative or friend.

They were not to take notes during their observation hour, and they all protested. What was the point? They would never be able to remember what they observed. Would I not like to have a detailed and correct observation report? It was as if I was deliberately taking away their intellectual competence, requesting that they do things differently, which involved the difficult process of unlearning (Pateman, 2002). I realised that many of them actually went through a period of mourning in the first few weeks, as they were, I believe, trying to let go of their strong attachment to their former ways of observing before they were able to take on the new method and make use of it. My job was to trust the process rather than forcing it, on them. Although I found it quite challenging and demanding, gradually they became more receptive, looking, listening and remembering, without responding to the urge to act or to take responsibility for the child. Nonetheless, over the years, there was always a great range of difference in the observational stance among the students. I divided the 30 students into five small groups. Each group joined me for their observation seminar once a week over a whole semester (Norwegian academic terms are always two semesters not three terms).

The observation setting was in the day nursery context and not the children's homes. Norwegian day nurseries include children from 1-5-years old, often divided into age-specific groups, 1-3-year-olds and 3-5-year-olds. Each student was to observe the youngest child among the 1–3 years old in their nurseries. Most students observed 1-year-olds. Fortunately, there were never any

difficulties in finding nurseries willing to have an observer. On the contrary, most of them seemed interested and curious about infant observation. I therefore gave the students copies of a letter of introduction for the nurseries, and also provided each nursery with an outline of what training in infant observation meant, stressing that it was part of the students' own learning process and not a diagnostic method. The students were free to choose nurseries for practical reasons, distance, transport etc. The only rule was that the nurseries they chose should not have previously been part of their earlier field practice or known to them in any other way. The anonymity of the different nurseries was preserved, and rules of confidentiality strictly kept. No student knew where the others observed and neither did I. The duration of their training was the whole of the spring semester (January to May) allowing each student 8–10 observations, sent to me every week by e-mail at least two days before each seminar.

We all know that when learning something new, it is important to make a good beginning. Much was at stake for me. I had worked hard at introducing infant observation as part of the curriculum and I wanted it to be a success, for the students as well as for their education in general. I started out with an introduction with the whole group. I wanted to get to know each of them better and to hear a bit about their thoughts and hopes for the course and to learn their names. I also wanted them to know a bit about me, and my own enthusiasm for infant observation and my experiences in its positive effects on learning and self-development. My aim was to establish a positive relationship with the students as a starting point for both teaching and learning in the group. I believe that the way relationships are formed and sustained between teacher and students, is crucial to the learning process.

Inspired by Sorensen (2003), I started with an introduction of the images on the screen of two paintings, Mary Cassatt's The *Boating Party* (1893–1894 https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46569.html) and Eastman Johnson's the *Bo-Peep* (1872). Both artists were American painters of everyday life between children and adults.

I started with *The Boating Party*. I asked the group to look at the painting for a few minutes. Then I gave the students six questions hoping to stimulate their own reflections on the painting. I encouraged them to take their time and not to discuss their own reflections and responses with the other students. My questions were:

- What do you see?
- How would you describe the mood of the painting?
- What does it make you feel?
- How do you understand what you see in the painting?
- Ask the child a question.
- Ask one of the adults a question.

They were all looking at the same painting and yet they noticed different things and they picked up on different moods in the painting. Together we worked through the questions and, after a while, a lively discussion started up on the variations in their reactions. The experience of no right answer was frustrating for most of them and, for some, a great provocation. However, further exploration began as they noticed more and more details in the painting. New possibilities emerged, and all of a sudden, there was laughter and teasing as well as curiosity and frustration. The group stayed lively and most of them were responding to what they picked up and thought about in response to the painting and the questions.

We all realised that one's own understanding is not always the same as others'; my truth is not your truth. Many preconceived notions emerged, especially about family life. This was interesting since preconceptions block more open-minded observation and careful thinking. Many of them formed an opinion about the painting without thinking; they jumped to hasty conclusions. For instance, one stated that she saw a family in the boat, a mother with her daughter on her lap, and father rowing the boat. Asking them how they could tell this was a family, new and extended reflections started up, enabling us to talk about hasty conclusions in general and the acknowledgement that an observer is never neutral. Context, assumptions, values and earlier experiences influence our observation, and what we imagine we see; an awareness of this is important although it is difficult and painful.

The painting conveyed a moment in time, and it was important for me to encourage the students to imagine what the three figures in *The Boating Party* might be feeling and experiencing. Asking questions to the three people in the painting revealed a great variation among the students. New and surprising perspectives appeared; reflections from one student gave rise to more reflections from others. New questions were put forward, and the students seemed to challenge each other in a benign and mostly humorous way. I tried to encourage everyone to participate by asking open questions underlining that there were always more to understand, more to know. It was important for me to take care that they did not shut each other down with strong opinions or assumptions affecting the learning atmosphere and the conversations I hoped to create in the seminars.

However, some of the students held back. It seemed difficult for them to express themselves. They were concentrating but, perhaps, felt uncertain about this new and unfamiliar educational setting, not knowing how to respond and reflect, searching perhaps for words that would enable them to give meaning to their thoughts. I think that their difficulty in putting words to their own heightened feelings about the painting was perhaps the most challenging part for all the students. I imagined that putting the feelings from their own private sphere into the group felt like exposure. However, to be able fully to take on this new observational stance, they needed to become aware of the

environment and the emotional climate in the nursery, of both verbal and non-verbal interactions and to become aware of the subjective nature of their responses to what they observed as well as their own emotional response.

These reflections at the very beginning of the training had many similarities with the reflective processes in the observation seminars which were to come. My hope was that this experimental introduction might ease the transition from looking for facts and reason to reflecting in a more open and mindful way. Asking them not only to observe what appeared to be happening in the painting but also to observe the effect it had upon themselves as observers were important. I hoped that underlining the emotional factors which were present when looking at the painting, would be a small step towards a deeper understanding of what the emotional learning process of observation could offer them.

Here is one student's feedback after finishing her training:

> Looking back at the discussions about the paintings and later about our observations in the seminars, I have realised that it has made me more aware of details in my own world. I learned over and over the importance of looking at the observations as through a 'magnifying glass'. Even though I did not see this connection then, I do not think that I would have been as observant as I am now without this observational element in the preparation and training.

Another student said:

> The awareness of and learning how to put words to my feelings was the most difficult task during the whole observation process. It seemed so private in a way.

Observation seminars

Seminars need to serve as a training ground for learning to become an observer. There is something about presenting detailed observation reports in a seminar, which focuses both the observer and the group. In their weekly observation seminars, the students took turns to present their written observations and their reactions and feelings about what they had observed. The main question from the seminar leader was always, 'How can we understand what was observed?'

Let us turn to an observation extract. It is part of Siri's sixth observation of Martin, 12 months old in the 1-3-year-olds' group.

> Nursery teacher Marit and Martin are in the bathroom. Marit has just changed Martin's nappy. He is now standing by a low steel sink with several water taps used for everyday washing of hands and faces. He starts tapping the top of the sink with his flat hand. He cocks his head, perhaps listening to the sound. He repeats the tapping with his flat hand several times. Marit keeps an eye on him while she is tidying up after the nappy change. Martin then crawls towards the closed pine door. He stops in front of it and starts hitting it with his flat hand. He cocks his head again, raising his eyebrows with wide eyes. He seems again to listen to the sound. (Was he surprised by it?). He looks at Marit. She smiles at him and says, 'Was that another sound Martin?' Martin smiles back at her and hits the door again several times. He then crawls back to the sink, pulls himself

> up, and taps the top of the sink again. He seeks eye contact with her each time he taps. Marit smiles and nods to him and saying, 'Yes, listen to the sound Martin.'

The reflection process in the seminar started with the question from the seminar leader, how can we understand what is happening between Martin and Marit? It did, however, take rather a long time before anybody broke the silence. After a while, Siri was invited to comment on the observation since she was the one who had presented it. She hesitated for a while then started by saying that she remembered the situation very well, but that she had not reflected afterwards on what had happened between Marit and Martin. Then she said, 'The situation is almost new to me now and bigger in a way, looking at it together with the seminar group'.

Siri's change in the way she felt about her own observation is a phenomenon which Judith Edwards (2008, p. 61) discusses. She points out ' … that reading out a previously written up observation, creates something, which happens again, and is not simply a re-presentation of what went on before.' She says that it, ' … possesses a new and added dimension in being recalled, digested and discussed in the seminar group'. I wonder if this is what happened to Siri, making it possible for her to experience the observation in a 'new and larger way'.

However, after Siri's comments, the reflection process in the group gradually picked up about the relationship between Marit and Martin and their ongoing dialogue. The group members went deeper and deeper into the observation material. It was as if the students held their breath. There seemed to be an emotional resonance in the group, perhaps seeing at depth what was going on between Martin and Marit. The group seemed to be lost in admiration and wonder at the way Marit paid attention to Martin and his exploration of different sounds. They held the experience, and Siri became more conscious about what she had seen and experienced in the nursery, although she repeated that she had not really taken in the experience while observing or afterwards writing it up. 'It makes me wonder why', she said.

The emotional atmosphere in the group was powerful and it suddenly reminded me of the well-known lines from Wordsworth's poem *Prelude* written in 1850,

> 'Never before so beautiful, sank
>
> Down into my heart,
>
> And held me like a dream.' (Wordsworth, 1907)

It became evident in the group that Marit's emotional and empathic receptivity made it possible for her to join Martin in his joyful, interesting and possibly new experience. He is a little researcher in his own right, and Marit supports him with her steady attention and careful comments, making his pleasurable discovery stand out as an important experience.

The following extracts from two different students may convey something of their own painful self-reflective awareness in connection with Siri's observation:

> I am amazed at Marit's sensitivity and her attention to what Martin was exploring. I would most probably have been more inattentive, too preoccupied with tidying up and perhaps hurried Martin into the playroom as soon as the nappy change was over.

> Listening to this observation I realise how busy everyday life in nursery is, perhaps far too busy. It is so full of activity that I now see how it can interfere with our willingness to pay attention, to listen and look and to try to understand what the children may want to convey. It makes me think of my great responsibility in my future work as a nursery teacher.

These two comments together with Siri's own wondering reveal an ability to look within, becoming aware of their own states of mind, studying themselves in response to what they have heard and thought. An introspection like this where the students start to examine their own thoughts and feelings is of course of immense value to their future nursery work.

Donald Meltzer writes in *The Apprehension of Beauty:*

> … an emotional experience occurs, which needs to be integrated within the mind in the form of a reciprocal symbol, such that its meaning may become known; but first a container must be found to hold the experience. (Meltzer & Harris Williams, 1988, p. 184)

I have wondered whether the careful reflection process in the seminar group had become the containing element which held the experience for us as a group? Did the holding on to the experience create an availability within the students in such a way as to give a new and deeper meaning to what happened in the situation between Martin and Marit? Did the experience of the relational process between such a young child as Martin and a nursery teacher go beyond earlier experiences and everyday knowledge about how the quality of relationships within nurseries between staff and the very young can be? Did the observation and the reflection process in the seminar make them aware that relationships can be something more than what they usually observe between staff and the very young children? An awareness of this was also, perhaps, too painful and might be the reason why the seminar group stayed silent for such a long time, and why Siri remembered the observation but had not reflected on it afterwards until she came to present it to the group.

The significance of the observer's live gaze

Marit's emotional availability and attention in her relating to Martin made a great impression on the seminar members. It highlighted the great differences in availability and responsiveness that they had observed among staff and children in nurseries. This became an ongoing topic for discussion and reflection

throughout their observation training, and it gradually led us to reflecting on the observers' own live gaze while observing.

Questions were raised about the influence of their own 'look' or 'live gaze', on the children and on the staff. Winnicott's (1971) writing had made them aware of the importance of both looking at and being looked at. They had learnt that infants and young children need to be seen, held and reflected in the eyes of someone, usually their parents. The importance of maternal mirroring was discussed and thought about in the seminars (see also Miller, 2002).

For a young child who goes to a day nursery, the busy staff are the child's emotional environment for many hours of the day. Nursery teachers have a complex, busy and demanding timetable. One question we discussed was whether the observer's eyes (and mind) can have an influence on the individual nursery teacher's own availability and mirroring process. Experience indicates that a sensitive and attentive observer, can, by her presence, underline and support the nursery teachers' own 'live gaze'.

Being present there every week over a long time, looking with interest and concentration at the relationships between the observed child and members of staff and with the other children, seemed to have an impact on the nursery's emotional environment. What we have experienced over the years is that in many nurseries, the staff have been inspired by the students' observation period, saying that:

> Noticing how you as an observer pay close attention to the observed child and her relationships during the hour you are here, makes us as staff more attentive and observing as well.

Some observers also reported that the children they observe often turn to them seeking eye contact and perhaps support and understanding in difficult situations, especially when left alone. The observer seems to represent something positive and attentive, stable and reliable. They have also noted that when the observed children are leaving the playroom to take part in an activity in another room, the children, more often than not, look back at the observer as if to make sure that they will follow.

The learning process

Every year I sought students' feedback on the learning experience from their observational training, writing observations and attending and presenting in the seminars. It kept me updated and was of great importance for my ongoing work as a seminar leader. However, as the years passed, I became more and more interested in the gains from doing observation when it came to their daily work in nurseries. Were they able to hold on to their learning experience and make use of it in their professional work?

Accordingly, I conducted a very small interview study, a pilot study really, with two groups of students who had taken part in the training, altogether 11

students (Abrahamsen, 2004). I was eager to explore whether the training had encouraged change and inspired growth. In other words, had the impact of the observational process created some lasting effects on their daily work as nursery teachers? I wanted to set up the interview as a conversation and informed them in advance about the issues I wanted to raise.

One group consisted of four newly trained students who had just started working as nursery teachers with the Under Threes. The other group consisted of seven nursery teachers having trained in infant observation seven years ago. Geographical proximity and my wish to get in contact with both newly trained nursery teachers and teachers who had worked in the professions for some years after their training steered my selection of the participants. The conversations in both groups were recorded with the students' permission.

I raised two subjects for reflection:

(1) To look back on their own learning during the training in infant observation.
(2) To reflect on whether the learning experience of the observation training did or did not have an impact on their daily work as nursery teachers.

I merely wanted to capture their spontaneous and impressionistic experiences. I did not ask for re-formulations or ask them to emphasise their views. Each group's dynamic together with my two questions was what steered the conversation.

Newly trained nursery teachers

Looking back

The newly trained nursery teachers all reported that the training in infant observation had made a great impact on them in unexpected and surprising ways. Another common feature was their pride in what they had learnt through the process and in the seminars. They felt they knew more and something quite different from students who had not trained in infant observation:

> My view on small children changed during my training in infant observation. I became humbler and more respectful. I also learned to put faith in small details, the children's facial expressions and their body movements.

Another said,

> It was hard to observe children being ignored by the staff. Is this why I had not noticed it before?

And this:

> I remember that I was rather quiet during the seminars. I was shy and afraid of making mistakes. I found it difficult to talk about my feelings to the other members of my

seminar group. I was in awe of the task and worried about my capacity to do something so new and challenging. It was also unusual for me that other people wanted to listen to me and hear my opinion. I have thought about this experience a great deal, and I think I have changed a lot since then at which I am pleased, although I still find it hard to be open and relaxed together with my colleagues. I am all right together with the children though.

Application of the training in their daily work

What was most difficult during the observational process was that I just had to observe and not being able to act or take responsibility. This has done something to me. I am now more able to think about painful and difficult aspects concerning the children I am responsible for, and in connection with the colleagues I supervise. I no longer gloss over or deviate from it, as I often tended to do earlier. I now approach it and try to do something about it. I have learned how important it is to put words to my own feelings and that of others about things happening in our daily work, just as we did in the seminars. I now see results of this among the children. One little girl cried a lot during the transition between home and nursery, and I tried to put words to what her feelings were. I had her on my lap every morning, comforting her and saying that I thought she cried because she was sad and longed for her parents. However, one day when she had a hard time separating from her mother, she did not cry, but instead she just kept saying, 'Sad, sad, sad'. It was truly wonderful for me to experience her development.'

Another said:

I did not think very much about my observation process during my training when I started my work with the Under Threes. Everything was new and challenging, and I had to learn all the ropes. However, with hindsight, I can see that I used my observation skill without being quite aware of it. I started to notice a difference between my colleagues and myself. What I realised was that I always tried to get a more complete picture of the children or the situation than what they did. I particularly noticed this while planning activities or discussing difficult episodes among the children. I tend to think that this had something to do with me having been part of an observation seminar, where we learned to wait until we had a deeper understanding of what was happening. In many of these situations, I was reminded of Winnicott's wonderful expression, 'the period of hesitation'. Anyway, I realise that I usually give myself some waiting time before acting or intervening until I have understood more or perhaps until I have a clearer picture of what is happening in the situation.

As is evident in what these newly trained nursery teachers say, there is a widening of their general understanding of the very young children and a personal strengthening which seems to influence their work, making them proud and inspired. They seem to appreciate the importance of waiting, listening and understanding instead of feeling under pressure to act or sort any problem immediately.

There is also concern about their own capacity to do something as new and challenging as observing in their daily work as nursery teachers, tolerating what

they might see and hear; for example, noticing children being ignored. Action can then easily be a way of avoiding the impact of what there is to be seen and heard. Not remembering details is perhaps another way of avoiding noticing painful situations.

Experienced nursery teachers

Looking back

> I still remember some intense eye-opening experiences during my observational training which has meant a lot to me ever since. During the training, I became more and more conscious about the importance of watching and waiting before acting. Nobody ever sees the total picture but being attentive helps a lot. When one experiences, as an observer, someone acting without having tried to make sense of the situation, I can assure you that sticks in your mind! It turns out so wrong both for the child, the member of staff and the whole situation. However, as an observer all one can do is to draw a lesson from it.
> What is even worse though, is that it made me think back and wonder how many times I had done exactly the same thing without trying to give myself enough time to make sense of a situation. I also remember some situations during meals and nappy changes which came out very wrong. I still remind myself of these experiences when I am tired or very busy.

And:

> What I remember most clearly from my training is that I became much more aware of the non-verbal communication of children and staff. I started to read their body language in a completely new way. I noticed more details in their facial expressions and their body movements. I experienced that it is not until one really learns to notice, reflect and remember, that one sadly realises how very few details one saw earlier. It was awesome!

Application of the training in their daily work

> I think I have developed into a better professional because I have acquired knowledge that I can use in my everyday work. I now much more link theory to practice and practice to theory. It has enabled me to watch and wait before I act or intervene. I am very pleased with myself about that. My colleagues notice it and comment on it. Before I trained in infant observation, I very often tried to prevent conflict or intervene when I thought that the conflict would escalate and cause harm. Now when I wait a bit longer, what I then see is that the harm I was afraid of, does not happen. The children find ingenious solutions themselves. Solutions that I would never had thought of. This excites me no end.

Another said this:

> I actually still use part of my observation reports from my training in infant observation as a help in my supervision of colleagues and of students during their field practice. What I have experienced is that the supervision process profits from it in many ways. The

> reflection process become more flexible, exploring and questioning serve as a good starting point for support and supervision in connection with their own nursery work.

All of the above comments are examples of the way the nursery teachers seem to go on thinking inspired by their training in infant observation; reaching for meaning and understanding together with a change in the way they feel about the emergence of what they now know. They observe patterns of behaviour in the children as part of reaching for an understanding of what the children may try to convey to them. They have become aware, they take notice and attend to it. Interest in what they see and feel seems to have deepened. We can also detect a spirit of optimism among them. They are clearly pleased with their own development. There is of course no way of knowing whether their optimism will have lasting effects and formative contributions to their self-understanding and everyday work in the nursery, one can only hope.

Concluding remarks

From the comments, both from the newly trained and the experienced nursery teachers, a picture slowly emerges of a different and new understanding of very young children, themselves and their daily work. Both groups seem to have taken some of what they have learnt back into their professional work and some of it into their personal lives through their self-observational capacity. There is, however, a variation in the comments between those with little reflecting ability and others who have developed an impressive capacity for it.

The main themes of many of the comments were:

- Thinking before acting (containing 'the urge to do').
- The need to observe, the importance of the context.
- The ability to reflect on the external as well as the internal.
- An increased awareness of young children's needs.
- An increased confidence both in themselves as professionals and in their daily work as nursery teachers.
- Enthusiasm about the training in infant observation: the seminars and the observational process. Proud of the knowledge they have acquired and the privilege of having learned from experience.

Over the years, my role as a seminar leader seemed to be to hold open the reaching for meaning, to encourage the students to go on thinking because it matters and makes a difference; living the question, as it were. The poet Reiner Maria Rilke makes a beautiful case for its importance:

> living the questions, embracing uncertainty and allowing for intuition. Being able to love the questions themselves and not seek answers will perhaps gradually lead into answers. (Rilke, 2016, p. 17)

Knowledge of the interplay between learning and emotion is important in daily nursery work. Infant observation is, as many readers will know, a profound learning experience in this respect. However, building on my experience over many years so is a modified version of infant observation. One must not forget the crucial role of the trainees themselves as well as the seminar leader, and the relationship which develops between them in the seminars.

The title of this paper. 'When the eye begins to see and the ear begins to hear' is a line from Roethke's (1968) well-known poem, 'In a Dark Time'. My experience over the years is that this is just what happens during the training. The observers' eyes and ears heighten in focus and receptivity, and their ability to reflect on what they see and hear develops as the training enfolds. Nonetheless, their ability to stay with uncertainty and not knowing was a challenge. It was perhaps the hardest and most frustrating thing for all of them to tolerate.

All this said and done, there is still an important question left: Why is it, that learning from infant observation seems so powerful?

I suggest that it has a lot to do with the methodology of infant observation in the three learning situations. The experience of observing without taking notes, the subsequent writing-up of the observation experiences and then the reflections on the written records presented in the seminar. Each observer gets the opportunity to re-imagine the observation experience three times, which has a strong impact. It is an emotional learning process where the observers have to work on their capacity to tolerate uncertainty; a training in refraining from the action and thereby widening their capacity to go on thinking about the meaning of what is observed and how it affects the observer. My aim and hope by introducing infant observation have been to broaden and deepen the quality of the observer's future professional work as nursery teachers. The training in infant observation has been acknowledged and valued in many countries and in different settings over the years and is often felt to be an eye-opening and influential process. I would suggest that some of my students' comments, although they are not pre-clinicians, imply exactly this and that maybe, just maybe, there is no going back afterwards.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Gerd Abrahamsen is Associate Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Studies at the University of Stavanger, Norway. She has a long-standing interest in the well-being of children under 3 in the nursery. Inspired by her many visits to Tavistock Centre and her own training in infant observation, she has developed an application of infant observation in a modified version

as part of a 30 ECTS course in the Under Threes: Nursery Teaching Qualification, which is part of the first-degree programme in Early Childhood Education in the University of Stavanger. She has written three books with a psychoanalytic perspective on issues in nursery practice (1997, 2004 and 2015) as well as many articles and chapters in textbooks exploring the relationships between children and nursery staff.

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