Karen Hope:

What are some of the strategies educators could use, or think about, when collecting information about a child, or children, that might provide a richer context for the observations they collect?

Mary Holwell:

Karen, I had to think a little about this question and what it's really asking me. I think it's asking me, what can an educator to do to be confident that they have, or that they know, and understand a child, or the children in their care? What experiences have these children already had? How have these influenced them? What are their dispositions? What is it that makes them tick? And what kind of learners are they? I think we need to consider this question, by reference, to the idea of holistic assessment. Holistic assessment is assessment that involves exploring and assessing different aspects of children's learning and development in different contexts, environments, and relationships. The purpose of holistic assessment is to gain a clear and comprehensive picture of children's learning and development so that you can plan appropriately across all the learning and development outcomes.

Mary Holwell:

This leads me then to the idea that I think educators need to know and understand a lot about children and they can use this knowledge to make sense of particular observations. By this I mean that sometimes educators need to connect different observations, to make sense of a new observation. For example, who does the child usually play with? I think it's worth observing for this. How does the child respond with different peers or adults? Who do you see the child watching? Who are they interested in and why do you think that might be so? Do they see skills in other children that they might like to have, but are not confident to engage with these children? Do they like helping others and are inclined to engage with children who are not going to push back on the ideas that they might be wanting to develop?

Mary Holwell:

How do you find out who children are interested in within their group? And there's lots of ways you can do that. For example, you can have little wooden dolls with photos of children's faces. You can cut out little figures of children, or photographs of children. You can take face photographs of children and put a whole collection of them at the painting easel and children can paint themselves by pasting their face and then drawing their body, or paint their friends, or create a group of friends. And this will give you a lot of insight into who the children are interested in, because often it will not be the children who you think are their friends. They might include someone else who they want to know more about. You can do it through discussion with families. Are you gathering evidence that supports your assessment? Is the child demonstrating evidence of learning in different contexts, such as the home environment?

Karen Hope:

What I hear coming out quite strongly there, Mary, is that it really does start with a strategy of questioning, doesn't it? That these are strong connections to being curious and a questioner of things.

Mary Holwell:

I think that is right Karen, thank you for that prompt because I started to lose my thinking a little bit. I got caught in the idea of examples and struggled to take myself back to the question. So yeah, I think that idea of the child who is curious, who is a questioner, is critically important for educators to notice and identify. Because those kinds of dispositions are the dispositions that will create... strong learners isn't necessarily the right term, but certainly effective learners. Children will be able to follow their interests and demonstrate to others, or provide evidence to others, that they're interested in something, in exploring something more. The other thing that I think educators can do that takes me back to that list of examples that I was thinking about is, where does the child choose to spend a lot of time? And I think it's worthwhile talking with the families about this, is it that the child is choosing a familiar place that's kind of safe for them? Or are they choosing places to play and engage that they don't usually have access to, and are therefore showing that real sense of curiosity.

Mary Holwell:

We need to connect this with experiences the child might have had outside of the setting, in their family, or their broader community. And here an example of this might be, what are the occupations, or the particular interests of the parents of the children? And how might they influence the child's knowledge? And could they act as a lever to make learning opportunities that you plan more meaningful for the child? We can look beyond the immediacy of these everyday interactions and consider what the Australian Early Development Index data tells you about the children in your community. This would give you a broader context and might help you consider some collaboration with other providers, or services, in your community to partner for projects that improve outcomes for young children.

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