

# การสังเกตอย่างใคร่ครวญในฐานะเครื่องมือเพื่อส่งเสริมการ ไตร่ตรองตนเองของนิสิตมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาการศึกษาปฐมวัย

## Contemplative Observation as a Tool for Self-Reflection Enhancement of Early Childhood Graduate Students

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### บทคัดย่อ

ทักษะสำคัญสำหรับครูปฐมวัย คือ การเป็นผู้สังเกตที่มีไหวพริบ งานวิจัยนี้เป็นโครงการที่เกิดขึ้นในประเทศไทย มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผลของการนำวิธีการสังเกตอย่างใคร่ครวญมาใช้ในการพัฒนากระบวนการไตร่ตรองตนเองของนิสิตสาขาวิชาการศึกษาปฐมวัย อันจะนำไปสู่การเสริมสร้างทักษะการสังเกตและความสามารถในการไม่รีบตัดสิน ผู้เข้าร่วม คือ นิสิตปริญญาโท สาขาวิชาการศึกษาปฐมวัย จำนวน 8 คน ระยะเวลาในการวิจัย 13 สัปดาห์ ประกอบด้วยการฝึกปฏิบัติในการสังเกตอย่างใคร่ครวญ 2 ลักษณะ คือ ก) การสังเกตตนเอง ได้แก่ การเดินรำ การสงบนิ่ง การจัดดอกไม้ การระบายสีน้ำ การปั้นดิน และการวาดมันดาลา และ ข) การสังเกตสิ่งภายนอกทั้งสิ่งมีชีวิตและไม่มีชีวิต ได้แก่ ก้อนหิน ต้นไม้ และเด็ก นิสิตได้รับมอบหมายให้เขียนบันทึกสะท้อนประสบการณ์ประเด็นการตระหนักรู้ในตนเองที่เกิดขึ้นจากการฝึกปฏิบัติ ใช้การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกรายบุคคลก่อนและหลังการทดลอง การสังเกตอย่างใคร่ครวญอาจเป็นตัวช่วยครูในการไตร่ตรองไปสู่การตระหนักรู้ที่สูงขึ้น และนำไปสู่ความเป็นธรรมในการสังเกตและรับมือกับเด็กในชั้นเรียน

**คำสำคัญ:** ปฐมวัย/การไตร่ตรองตนเอง/การประเมิน/การสังเกตอย่างใคร่ครวญ

## Abstract

Being an astute observer of children is a primary skill for early childhood teachers. This paper reports on a project conducted in Thailand that investigated the use of the contemplative observation method as a tool for developing the ability of being non-judgmental. The aim of this study was to improve the processes of self-reflection of early childhood graduate students in order to build the quality of their observational skills for practice with children. Eight female early childhood graduate students were assigned to practice observation across 13 weeks involving two major types of contemplative observation practices: (a) self-observation comprising dancing meditation, still meditation, flower arrangement, painting, clay modeling, and mandala drawing, and (b) external observation comprising awareness of non-living as well as living things such as stones, plants, and children. Associated activities of journal writing were assigned to reflect learning experiences focused on awareness of the self in relation to the practices including in-depth interviews both before and after the study. Contemplative observation might assist teachers in moving from aspects of reflection to greater self-awareness, and achieve greater fairness in their observations of and dealings with young children in classrooms.

**Keywords:** early childhood/self-reflection/assessment/contemplative observation

## Introduction

Teacher's self-reflection is important for assessment practices in early childhood education as well as at later school levels. In assessing young children, teachers are main tool for gathering data. Therefore, they need to be conscious and mindful during observation to reach the effectiveness of the assessment. Self-reflection processes and methods help to achieve the kind of self-awareness or practice of introspection recognized as an important dimension of teacher's inner development (Isikoglu, 2007; Davidson, 2014). As Krishnamurti (2005)

suggests, the most effective education involves self-aware teachers who understand themselves well, who do not have a rigid mindset, and who are able to practice more precisely as well as exhibit fair decision-making.

Because young children cannot fluently communicate their inner world or perception, early childhood teachers need to be able to observe precisely and respond appropriately according to each child's needs. Moreover, early childhood teachers need to have the ability to make prudent decisions based on reflection, responsibility, ethics, creativity, and



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caring (Baum & King, 2006). Self-reflection is a key to enhance the quality of teaching and assessing young children. At the early childhood level, authentic assessment is an appropriate appraisal which relies very much on teachers' commitment to fairness and quality in the process of gathering, interpreting, and using data.

Observational assessment is a non-formal mode of assessment which is nevertheless very important as it provides a basis for decisions which influence a child's future. Effective observational assessment relies very much on teachers being aware about their own prejudices, their pet peeves, and the stereotypes they might hold when recording the behavior of young children or evidence of learning. It also involves interpreting data without letting personal biases interfere (ASCD, 1999).

Reflection is a part of the learning process which involves cognition or thought about experience and activity (Jones, Jenkin, & Loard, 2006). It is usually combined with other types of educational or psychological assessment in early childhood contexts where learning needs and behavioral problems are being evaluated (Davidson, 2014). Early childhood teachers rely on this exclusively in their decision-making as they do not do formal assessment in the way that primary and secondary teachers do. However, inadequate self-reflection can result in a lack

of fairness and awareness of prejudice. This may negatively influence a child, especially where pre-service or novice teachers are yet to fully develop their professional ability and experience. As Isikoglu (2007) suggested using Dewey's framework of reflection, different aspects and key levels or stages of reflection are especially important for early childhood pre-service teachers in terms of their professional development. His notion that the self-reflection process involves the three modes; routine, technical, and critical reflection is especially relevant to applications of evaluation, problem-solving and awareness-raising. In such terms, journal writing is thus well-known as a useful approach for reflective practice by teachers and especially new teachers. Moreover, as their ability to reflect is not an innate ability, teachers need guidance and supervision as well as feedback from different sources (Mann, Gordon, and Macleod, 2009; Gün, 2010; Nolan & Sim, 2011; Perez, 2011)

Contemplative observation is one method of teacher education which brings teacher to the sacredness of ordinary teaching and learning. This method was developed by Early Childhood professor from the Naropa Institute who has been worked with young children in Buddhist-inspired school for several years. This kinds of observation focus not only what is happening in the environment, but also what is simultaneously



occurring within the observer. It also required disciplines of precise attention and descriptive recording of inner and outer experiences of the observer. Outcomes of Contemplative observation such as rediscovering senses, clarifying intellect, emotional intelligence, and compassion and knowledge (Brown, 1999). It will bring different to the relationship between teacher and child in the classroom.

This paper reports on a project investigated the using of a contemplative observation method to help improve early childhood graduate students' process of self-reflection in order to encourage greater fairness and accuracy in the related processes of observational assessment and decision-making. Contemplative observation has been applied as a practice to assist early childhood teachers using aspects of Buddhist mediation. Such an approach to self-reflection synchronizes the observer with a particular learning environment as a basis for clarifying perceptions, thoughts, and emotions as well as developing knowledge and compassion. Contemplative observation is a practice for promoting attentiveness both internally and externally (Brown, 1999).

### **Method of the study**

This study aimed to investigate the related processes of contemplation, self-reflection, and self-awareness in early childhood graduate students. Self-awareness

is regarded as a key to greater fairness as well as effectiveness in assessment (Khayankij, 2012). Eight female early childhood graduate students who enrolled in 2012 in an Assessment of Young Children's Development and Learning course were assigned to practice observation for thirteen weeks using the contemplative observation method applied to some related activities. All of them were informed about the project and agreed to participate. The details about Contemplative observation practices including data collection and analysis of self-reflection were as followed;

#### **a) Contemplative observation practices including data collection**

In order to develop observational assessment awareness, the course was designed for early childhood graduate students to practice self-reflection in various observation contexts. Journal writing was assigned as a main tool for them to reflect on their learning experiences.

Two major types of Contemplative observation practices assigned during a 13 weeks were as follows: (a) inner self observation including dancing meditation, stillness meditation, flower arrangement, painting, clay modeling, and mandala drawing, and (b) external observation including awareness of non-living as well as living things such as stone, plant, and child. An associated



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activity of journal writing was assigned to reflect learning experiences focused on awareness of self in relation to the activities. Guidance questions in group dialogue<sup>1</sup> and journal writing were provided to prompt master students with the process of reflection-such as How are you feeling? How do you understand yourself from this

experience? How are you aware of your thought? What does this experience mean to you? Give examples of how you are aware of your feeling, thinking, and action.

Table 1 shows three settings for the learning context and related practices-the university classroom, preschool classroom, and at home. It further outlines a range of

**Table 1**

*Settings of the learning context*

Contemplative observation practices	Learning context		
	At university	At preschool	At home
Inner self observation	Dancing meditation (20 mins)		Mandala <sup>2</sup> drawing (30 mins)
	Stillness meditation (10 mins)		
	Flower arrangement (15 mins)		
	Painting (30 mins)		
	Clay modeling (40 mins)		
External observation	Stone (15 mins)	Child (3 hours)	Plant (30 mins)

<sup>[1]</sup> Dialogue is a freely-flowing group conversation in which participants attempt to reach a common understanding, experiencing everyone's point of view fully, equally and nonjudgmentally. It is a way of observing and uncovering the values and intention underlying our behaviors. And then can lead to new and deeper understanding (Bohm, Factor, and Garrett, 2012).

<sup>[2]</sup> The mandala is a circle, represents wholeness and can be seen as a model for the organizational structure of life itself. Jung discovered that drawing, painting, and dreaming about mandalas is part of a natural individualized process. Making a mandala can bring mindfulness, attentiveness, and self-observation as well as self-awareness and spiritual growth (Fincher, 2010).





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related practices which teachers are encouraged to do in each of these settings.

Table 2 shows the weekly schedule of the practices arranged during the course. Details of each activity were recommended as stated below:

*Inner self observation*

This typically starts with Dao De Xin Xi dancing meditation which follows the instructions from a video presentation. After dancing for 20 minutes, then all of the graduate students were invited to take a seat and followed their breath accompanied

by a meditation song in the activity called stillness meditation for 10 minutes. These kinds of activities are done every week at the beginning of each session.

Artistic work such as mandala drawing, flower arrangement, painting, and clay modeling were also assigned. The mandala drawing and flower arrangement was done weekly at home. The involved graduate students also needed to arrange to have 'tranquility time' with no distractions before drawing mandalas or doing related activities. White A4 paper, 15 inches template of circle, and artistic instruments such as crayons,

**Table 2**

*Types of observation practices*

Activities	w1	w2	w3	w4	w5	w6	w7	w8	w9	w10	w11	w12	w13
Self-observation	dancing meditation												
	stillness meditation												
	Flower arrangement												
	Painting												
	Clay												
External observation	Mandala drawing												
	Stone												
	Child												





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color pencil, water color, etc. were used to create mandalas with no topic. Each of them drew mandalas as a mode of free expression. Flower arrangement was done over a period of two weeks before alternating to the related activity of observing plants using Mokichi Okada's method<sup>3</sup>. Participants needed to follow the instructions of flower arrangement. Firstly, they were required to observe and select one flower, then observe a nearby vase. They then were required to pour some water in the vase. Following that they should, observe the flower again, then trim it and put it into the vase. Additional activities such as wet-on-wet painting and clay modeling were linked to a formal process of child observation which done within an actual class situation.

#### *External observation*

This supporting process involved observing both non-living and living things. It typically starts with the regular process of reflection focused on a stone for two weeks, a plant for four weeks, and then observed a child for three weeks as a last stage. All of the eight graduate students observed the same child at a preschool setting. The child was chosen by homeroom teacher. Permission from his parent was obtained before observation period. The three week child

observation was done according to the procedural guidelines. This was followed by dialogue about the child for four weeks from week 9 to 12. This process is called 'child study'-an in-depth look at a particular child whom the teacher is concerned with at a specific point in time (Mindes, 2011).

The data collection for the study, mainly elicited from graduate students' reflection journals, was combined with semi-structured interviews and classroom observation field notes. This was further triangulated with the data interviews of the graduate students. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes. It involved such questions as: What you think about this course? What are the key learning experiences you gained from this course? Do you think you have changed from this? How and what do you learn from each of the activities? Finally, to what extent have you increased your sense of self-awareness? The data was analyzed using content analysis. It was also subject to peer reviewing with a co-lecturer who assisted with the process.

#### **b) Analysis of self-reflection**

In order to answer the question "How did graduate students reflect themselves?" Two aspects were analyzed-4-level of self-reflection and 3 outcomes of reflection.

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<sup>[3]</sup>Mokichi Okada's method was the simple flower arrangement that can build honest interpersonal relationships and encourages appreciation of beautiful things (MOA, 2011).



#### *4-level of self-reflection*

The researcher developed and applied a 4-level model of self-reflection by integrating two concepts--reflection and contemplation. Reflection focused on how the teaching practice begins at the surface level of perceived experiences and further proceeds from in relation to related feelings and thoughts. On this basis, teachers as practitioners then proceed to a mode of contemplation focused on the construction of personal insights (Surbeck, Han, and Moyer, 1991; Sim, 2006 cited in Nolan & Sim, 2011).

Contemplation is a concept therefore linked to a quality of presence or self-awareness. It also involves several related modes of knowing linked to the inner development of a person. As indicated, this starts at the physical level of perceived experience and then moves to a reflective phase. On this basis, contemplation moves in the direction of a higher level associated with independence from feelings, thoughts and sensory perceptions (Drake & Miller, 1991). Contemplation then becomes a basis for self-reflection which builds on the process of reflecting on prior experiences. Self-reflection then may be linked to new experience and information as a process of moving to a higher and also deeper mode--as well as from external to internal modes of consciousness.

The resulting four-level self-reflection

model also links the process of reflection to the awareness of personal bias:

Level 1. Experience-focused reflection: Describe events or activities or just review what has been happening or has been done. This level focuses on the inner feeling or stories about oneself.

Level 2. Emotion-focused reflection: Describe feelings or states emerging from learning experiences. This level still involves subjective observation; the observer cannot separate oneself from the observed object.

Level 3. Intellect-focused reflection: Describe states of being mindful. Also, acknowledge and try to let go of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. This level seeks to pause automatic reactions to outside stimuli. The observer can occasionally separate oneself from the observed object.

Level 4. Self exploration and self awareness: Identify one own's biases, weaknesses, habits of mind or pattern of behaviors. This level involves suspending spontaneous reactions and judgement, and achieving awareness of one's own prejudices.

#### *3 outcomes of reflection*

The researcher applied framework of outcomes derived from the use of reflection process in daily approach toward work. The outcomes including changes in behaviour, changes in the learner's affective state, and



changes in perspectives (Nolan & Sim, 2011).

*Action outcomes* involve a new way of doing things, development of new skills, commitment to action and or readiness for application.

*Affective outcomes* involve a change in attitude or emotional state. It involves a positive attitude towards learning in a particular area, greater confidence or assertiveness, or a changed set of priorities.

*Perspective outcomes* involve changes in perspectives and beliefs and values.

### Research Findings

#### 4 levels of self-reflection

By practicing contemplative observation, all of the eight graduate students showed

development in their levels of self-reflection and progress towards improved self-awareness. Table 3 indicates the improvement of self-reflection generally resulted from reflective journal writing. Two of the eight graduate students were able to reach aspects of level 4 reflection during the three months of the research process. Four of them indicated progress to aspects of level 3 in the second month, while another two showed this in the third month. All of them generally started at a lower level and then gradually showed improvement in the second and third months. After guidance on how to reflect and feedback was added, each graduate student gradually demonstrated a better understanding of the process. The fifth week was a key stage in this. By the end of the

**Table 3**

*Levels of self-reflections emerging from reflection journals*

Weeks	First month				Second month					Third month			
	wk1	wk2	wk3	Wk4	wk5	wk6	wk7	wk8	wk9	wk10	wk11	wk12	wk13
M.A. student													
1	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	3	3	3	2
3	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4	1	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	4	3
5	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	4	3	3	4	3
6	1	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
7	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	2	-	3	3	2
8	1	3	1	2	1	2	4	3	3	2	3	3	3

three months period all had demonstrated aspects of level 3 or 4.

The reflective journals of graduate students #2 and #7 involved short narratives which mostly reflected their feelings toward each activity. Both of them at the end reflected that they were getting better at 'letting go' of their thoughts and feelings. Graduate students #1, #3, #6, and #8 seemed to be aware of their feelings and thoughts. They reflected more consistently an ability to 'let go' of their thoughts and feelings by the end of the second month. Graduate students #4 and #5 demonstrated higher or more consistent aspects of mindfulness and self-understanding. This assisted with the suspension of bias. As illustrated in graduate students #4's journal "...when I realized that I was obsessed with my thoughts, I tried to let it go and be aware". As graduate students #5 also wrote "...sometimes the thought about the child popped up into my mind while observing him. For instance, I thought that this child was cute. I suddenly realized that I put too much personal thought about him. This bias prevented me from the precise observation that should be, I then let that feeling go and try to look at the child with non-judgmental mind".

### *3 outcomes of reflection*

All of the graduate students reflected that they gradually gained a better under-

standing of themselves as well as the ability to introspect over the three month period. By the end of the course, they all said that they had become more aware of themselves and especially so in relation to any biases they may have had towards children in their classroom. Self awareness achieved from contemplative observation clearly can be an important technique to assist teachers working with young children. The related fruits of contemplative observation emerging during the course include mindfulness, concentration, self understanding, self acceptance, and self development. For our present purposes, a distinction between action, affective, and perspective outcomes is especially useful.

#### *Action Outcomes*

The graduate students further reflected that they gained a new capacity in putting thoughts into action. This included being less reactive, more mindful and an improved ability to handle stressful situations. Five of them reflected that they were better at suspending their judgement, and had become more aware of then letting go of their judgmental thoughts.

#### *Affective outcomes*

The students reflected that they had changed their attitudes towards themselves and towards children. Moreover, five of them reflected that they developed greater empathy including tenderness towards the child they observed.



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*Perspective outcomes*

The students reflected that they had new perspectives on seeing things, had become more optimistic, and were ready to try to develop more self-understanding. Three reflected that they had a lot of expectations which they realized they needed to ‘let go’ if they wanted to become better teachers.

**Discussion**

Self-reflection is an important key to encourage self-awareness in early childhood graduate students in order to help them achieve greater fairness in their dealings with children, and especially in relation to the practice of observational assessment. Learning how to better apply different modes and stages of reflection helps teachers to reinterpret biases and make decisions more consciously and with less distortion (McAlpin, 2009). It is a process which can assist all teachers and indeed all professionals.

*Strategies to promote self-reflection*

Reflection journal writing was a key tool for each of the graduate students to develop greater self-reflection through a range of observation activities. The posing of questions and feedback during dialogue in the classroom enhanced self-reflection. As graduate student #8 put it: “...from feedback during dialogue after observing this child at preschool, I see myself clearly that I am not a good observer, I am the person

who quickly jumps to judge the child without knowing what he really is. I learn how to be patient with observation, suspend my judgment, and collect information on various aspects of the child.” Self-reflection through journal writing could also complement aspects of reflection achieved through dialogue with either the group or in interviews. A sequence of guided questions could further assist the graduate students to gradually explore the roots of their feeling, thought, or action (Mann, Gordon, & Macleod, 2009; Gün, 2010; Nolan & Sim, 2011; Perez, 2011). Moreover, it also help promotes good relationships with others in a safe, more trustworthy and more relaxed learning environment.

*Awareness in the classroom including child observation*

All activities designed in the project were focused on promoting the process of self-reflection. This was to assist the participants to be more aware of themselves while observing preschool children. Their authentic observations were gradually developed during the 13 weeks practices. Their senses were opened up. It could be obviously seen that they became more mindful, and could let go of their thoughts easier. As illustrated by graduate student #4’s interview reflection; “..it made me pay an attention to myself quite often, and made me realize that I am judgmental person which



I have never knew before.”

Preschool classrooms can be distracting environments. When graduate students are able to cultivate and transfer aspects of contemplative observation into the preschool classroom, this can definitely aid their general awareness as well as observations of and engagements with particular children. Such awareness is not just focused on external events and actions but also able to recognize and engage with the inner world of children-their feelings, thoughts, expectations, and prejudices. In this way, the practice of awareness is able to support related qualities of open-mindedness, caring, loving, kindness, and compassion for themselves and for the children they observe and interact with (Brown, 1999; Stanley, 2007). This can be very important when teachers are dealing with very young children in diverse classrooms. As graduate student #3 put it in her journal: “Dialogue is a group sharing moment, everybody who observed this child shared their information in the moment of mindfulness and attentiveness. I experienced the feeling of caring and compassionate to this child... I also understand that assessment is not judging the child but rather the way to support child development from many different points of view. Teachers need to be aware of their biases either toward themselves or the child.”

While observing the child, they had to be aware of spontaneous thoughts and feelings that simultaneously occurring within themselves. Yet they need also to engage with the child beyond the particular fleeting images held. Such awareness then also allows a greater sense of respect and acceptance as well as empathy and understanding. Four of the eight participating master students reflected on how they had developed greater empathy with the observed child leading to better respect and understanding. One commented on how her awareness of bias was overcome in this way. Contemplative observation cultivates mindfulness, start with attentiveness and gradually let go of the ego-chatter in ones’ mind. This leads on to a greater level of awareness of connectedness to a particular environment and of what happens within that. Teachers who practice mindfulness will develop sensitivity, compassion, and an awakened heart (Drake & Miller, 1991). As stated in Stewart & Alrutz (2012), practicing reflection and contemplation activities can help to increase a general state of mindfulness.

*Fairness both in classroom and observational assessment*

Prudent decision-making is an ability of teachers who are able to integrate related capacities of reflection, responsibility, ethics, creativity, and caring (Baum & King,



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2006). Teachers who work with very young children need to be conscious of the elements which form their decisions. This is because young children cannot speak for themselves. To be fairer in any contexts of teaching practice and especially in the process of observational assessment, teachers need to be more aware of their biases, expectations, and prejudices. They should also be able to suspend judgement during the process of observation. Moreover, being more open, non-judgmental and sensitive in dealings will also promote feelings of empathy and greater authenticity in interactions between mindful teachers and the children in their classrooms. Kremenitzer (2005) emphasized the usefulness of reflection journaling linked to group interactions and experiences. This process helped many of the early childhood graduate teachers to monitor and evaluate their own behaviors in order to be better role models for young children.

The more that graduate students can use the process of self-reflection to cultivate general awareness and focused mindfulness, the more they can recognize and avoid bias in their dealings with children. This can also help them deal more constructively with any behavioural issues which may develop. In

this way observational assessment in preschool classrooms might be conducted in a more reliable way.

## Conclusions

Fairness in observational assessment should involve the ability to better interpret behaviors, actions, or words without prejudice. Contemplative observation is a tool for early childhood teachers to practice the ability of being non-judgmental, to have greater awareness of one's own biases, and to be able to be fairer in their dealings with children. Attentive observation involving both internal and external modes of awareness can strengthen the relationships between teachers and the children in their early childhood classrooms-especially in preschool. This paper has reported on a project investigation of how strategies and related activities of contemplative observation might assist teachers in (a) moving from aspects of reflection to greater self-awareness, and (b) on this basis, achieve greater fairness in their observations of and dealings with children in the classroom-especially in relation to the importance of observational assessment for young children's development and learning in the preschool context.



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### ผู้เขียน

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