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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from The Formative 5 in Action, Grades K-12.

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OBSERVATIONS: BACKGROUND AND BASICS

As you consider classroom-based formative assessments, the Observations technique is your “first stop” in the everyday application of the Formative 5. By **observation**, we mean directly observing student and class progress on particular mathematics activities. You watch, and you notice, but the intent here is to consider how you will use daily observations to inform your planning and teaching. In our work, we often find that Observations, while perhaps the most informal and readily used of the five formative assessment techniques presented (Modules 1–5), is both taken for granted and, at least to an extent, the least understood of the five techniques.

Observations have been supported as a research-based practice for decades. Freudenthal (1973) indicated that “we know it is more informative to observe a student during a mathematical activity than to grade his papers” (p. 84). Observing students as they work can reveal qualities of their thinking that are not tapped by written or oral activities (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 1995). When observations are applied continuously in every mathematics lesson, such short-cycle assessments (William & Leahy, 2015) allow you to determine and monitor the focus of what’s being taught as well as continually update student progress.

Observation is about paying attention to what you see in the classroom and spending time anticipating what you might notice or observe. It’s a form of **professional noticing**—“a set of interrelated skills which include attending to children’s strategies, interpreting children’s understandings, and deciding how to respond on the basis of children’s understandings” (Jacobs et al., 2010, p. 172).

So, let’s get started! As indicated in the previous module, our intent is to engage you in both thinking about and preparing to use the Formative 5 techniques. Complete the What About You? activity that follows. If possible, share your comments with a teacher colleague.

INSIGHT
Observing is what you already do every day, all day long.



What About You? Observations

1. Think about a lesson you have recently taught. What was the mathematics content focus of your lesson?

2. What did you observe? Briefly describe a few (three or four) observation “snapshots” you recall from your lesson.

3. What did you notice about these observation snapshots? For example:

a. Which of your observation snapshots were about your students being engaged in the mathematics they were learning? What did you observe?

b. Describe something you observed that you actually anticipated. Were you in any way surprised by what you observed?

c. Which of the observation snapshots would be described as observing student behavior, rather than observing students engaging in doing mathematics?

d. What was the most interesting or surprising thing you observed?

Ponder This: You observe your students all day long. How do these daily observation snapshots influence each of the following?

- Your ongoing assessment of your students
- The feedback you provide your students, and the timeliness of the feedback
- Your planning for the next day



Video—Planning for Observations



Video 1.1

<https://bit.ly/3gLKhWZ>

Jon Wray introduces the importance of planning for observation in terms of specific mathematical thinking and behaviors you are expecting to observe. Jenny, a seventh-grade mathematics teacher, and Anne, a special education teacher, co-plan their observations for their next lesson. Notice how Jenny and Anne answer each of the four planning questions based on their task of creating windows for the wall of the house. Then respond to the following focus questions:

1. What did you notice about the detail and precision with which Jenny and Anne plan for their observations?

2. How does determining the lesson target influence what they plan to observe?

3. What else do you notice about their conversation as they plan for their observations?
