

# Reading Assignment

*Teacher Planning: Are You Skimming the Surface or Digging Deeper?*



# Teacher Planning: Are You Skimming the Surface or Digging Deeper?

By Beth Marshall

*After participating in HighScope training, the teaching staff in a preschool classroom (let's call them "Classroom A") are very conscientious about observing children, recording child anecdotes, and meeting daily to make plans for the next day based on those anecdotes. Today at work time, Chi'ann, one of the teachers, records this child anecdote:*

*July 6, 2017— At work time, in the block area, Matthew, Nani, and Pedro worked together to make a block ramp and drive their small cars down it.*

*At their daily planning session, Chi'ann shares this car-driving anecdote with her coteacher, Sara. Their conversation goes like this:*

*Sara: That gives me an idea for recall time. I'll have my group use the steering wheel. The children can*

*drive to something they used in their plans. Then they can tell us what they did.*

*Chi'ann: Okay, and what if we sang "Bumping Up and Down in My Little Red Car" (to the tune of "Little Red Wagon") as part of large-group time?*

*Sara and Chi'ann then move to another work-time anecdote.*

## Planning: Is That All There Is?

Those of us who have worked in HighScope early childhood classrooms know that scenes like this one are common. Clearly, in their careful efforts to observe children's actions and make classroom plans that build on children's interests, these teachers are doing their best to encourage each child's learning and growth. And while there is absolutely nothing wrong with either idea the teachers came up with... is that all there is?

## Teacher Planning: Are You Skimming the Surface or Digging Deeper? (continued)

To see what more these teachers could have done, let's look back at our anecdote. Yes, the children are working with cars, so on the surface, the teachers' plans seem right on target. But there is more to planning than just this surface look. To explain what we mean, we first need to briefly review the team planning process. Then we will revisit Sara and Chi'ann's planning time.

### What Is Daily Team Planning?

For those not familiar with daily team planning, the following quick summary is likely to prove useful. Throughout the day, classroom adults record anecdotes (brief verbal “snapshots” of classroom incidents that document what children are doing and saying). After the children leave, the adults sit down together, discuss the day, and share the anecdotes they have collected. These anecdotes then become a valuable resource both for understanding

children's interests and for assessing each child's development using the HighScope key developmental indicators (KDIs) and the Preschool Child Observation Record (COR). Based on the insights gained as they refer to these resources, teachers plan ways to support the children in the future; for example, adding new materials to the classroom, adjusting adult-child interaction strategies, developing ideas for small- and large-group times, and so forth.

### Strategies for In-Depth Planning

At first glance, this team planning process might seem quite simple. But just going through the motions of daily planning will not guarantee meaningful plans. The depth of the plans comes from the quality of the inquiry—how well teachers consider the “whys” of children's actions and the “hows” of supporting each child. To bring more depth to your daily planning, consider the following strategies:

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**Remember, anecdotes are just the beginning!** Anecdotes are only meant to capture the gist of what happened, to provide a memory aid for the full discussion you will be having later. An anecdote is the “snapshot” rather than the “video” of the experience. So, at team planning time, don’t share just the few words you wrote down; instead, be prepared to discuss the events and issues surrounding the anecdote. In this way, you will get beyond the anecdote’s surface.

**Be involved in children’s play.** Join in the children’s activities! Get down on the floor, observe what children are doing, and get involved yourself.



*To know how to build on this child’s play, we can’t make assumptions about what she is doing. We need to dig deeper with our questions: What engages the child about the play dough and scissors? Is her main interest exploring the dough? Rolling and cutting the dough into pieces? Fitting the pieces together to create something? Does she have a pretend play scenario in mind? Will the play become social? Is this a new activity or does it build on play from a previous day? What KDIs are occurring?*

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When you are part of the play, you have a better understanding of what is really going on. Then, during daily team planning, you can ask yourself: What led up to this play? Were these same children working together before or after it? What seemed appealing to the children? Were they doing similar things in other parts of the day? What KDIs were happening?

**Look for individual variations within the children's play themes.** Use the KDIs as a guide. Don't make quick assumptions about what the child's real interest is. Just seeing Brian working with cooking pots in the house area doesn't tell us what actually interests him about the pots. Specifically, what is he doing with them? Is he preparing a meal for his hungry family (**43. Pretend play**)?

Does he like to fit the pots together with their lids (**36. Measuring**)? Or is he really enjoying banging the wooden spoon on the bottom of the pot (**41. Music**)? The KDIs can help you decide if a specific imaginative play theme is emerging or if the child is more interested in direct exploration and use of the materials. Be open to the possibility that what you see in a child's play at first glance might not actually be that child's emerging interest!

**Keep in mind the developmental level of the child.** When we look at the child's capabilities, we can formulate ideas to support that child at his or her specific developmental level. Many planning ideas will need to be modified or adapted to meet the developmental levels of all of the children in your group.

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For example, if you decide to use the steering wheel for recall time, your plan might be to ask the children to “drive” to an area where they worked and tell you what they used. You would need to consider how you might introduce this to the child with limited language, the child who is new to the

classroom and doesn’t know what recall is, and the child with limited mobility. This strategy could be used successfully with all these children — thinking it through ahead of time can help their experience be a positive one.

### Favorite Play Activities: Find Out More!

Just knowing that a child is consistently interested in a particular play activity or theme does not tell us all we need to know to develop appropriate support strategies. We also need to consider the child’s developmental level and the variations in his or her repeated play. Consider the story of Jordan:

*When Jordan started in the program at age three, he often pretended he was a dinosaur. He spent most of his early days in the program under the*

*table, growling, occasionally taking a swipe at a passerby’s legs. Over time, Jordan’s interest shifted from being a dinosaur to carrying around a classroom dinosaur figure, to playing and pretending with the figures, to creating three-dimensional dinosaurs out of paper, tape, and crayons, to finally drawing and dictating stories about dinosaurs, adding some of his own writing. At each step along the way, Jordan’s teachers understood and supported his level of development and the many different forms his interest in dinosaurs took.*

## Teacher Planning: Are You Skimming the Surface or Digging Deeper? (continued)

**Use field trips and classroom visitors.** When child-initiated play themes do emerge, use field trips and classroom guests to give children concrete experiences that will support further development in their play. After the children in the Demonstration Preschool played Limbo with jump ropes at small-group time, teachers noticed that, at outside time, children were using jump ropes to play Tug of War. They also enjoyed using ropes and masking tape like lasers during work time.

This rope and tape play continued for several weeks. As they discussed how to follow up on this rope-related play,



*After teachers observed much rope- and tape-related play, they remembered that a parent, a construction worker, had volunteered to demonstrate the basics using rope and lasers as measuring tools. During the tape and measuring play, the teachers used words like tall, short, thick, thin, heavy, light, and strong with the children.*

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the teachers remembered that one of the children's fathers was a construction worker. They invited him to the classroom to demonstrate how he uses ropes, lasers, and measuring in his job.

**Create lists of words to use around an emerging interest.** Research shows that children develop vocabulary through repeated exposure to new words, so the recurring themes and interests you observe in children's play are an opportunity to help them expand their vocabularies in meaningful contexts.

In HighScope classrooms, we can extend the vocabulary that we use with the children by generating word lists. Either with your team members or with the children themselves, create a list of words around children's interests. The word lists don't have to consist of "big words," but rather, everyday

### Sample Word Lists Created Around Children's Interests

**For children interested in cars:** Wheel, steering wheel, seat belt, safety, tire, tread, door, handle, window, fast(er), slow(er), speed, speedometer, miles, distance, gas or gasoline, gas station, fuel, pump, highway, lane, traffic, traffic light, red/green/yellow, stop sign, patrol car, ticket, mechanic, garage, brake, gas pedal, trunk, hood

**For children interested in cooking:** Stove, oven, burner, microwave, temperature, recipe, ingredients, teaspoon, tablespoon, heat, freeze, broil, fry, bake, stir, beat, whip, roll, slice, chop, utensil, rubber spatula, wooden spoon, dinner party, serving dish, dishwasher, sponge, detergent (Note that cooking-related lists can also include names of common foods.)

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words related to the topic. Longer words are fine, too, if they are the kind that would occur in a normal conversation. If you need help generating word lists, looking in a thesaurus can help. Post these lists near the particular areas where children are doing their theme-related play; the lists can then serve as ready reminders of words to incorporate naturally and repeatedly into your conversations and play with children.

Using the strategies described in this lesson, daily team planning can go far below the surface of a brief anecdote. The classroom benefits for in-depth planning speak for themselves. Let's go back to Classroom A and take a look at how the teachers' conversation about the car-driving anecdote might go if this in-depth approach were used.

### Daily Team Planning — Another Look at Car-Driving Play

**Chi'ann shares the anecdote with Sara, and they discuss what it means from each child's perspective:**

*Sara: You know, I don't remember seeing these three play together before.*

*Chi'ann: You're right. It was interesting because Matthew and Nani were working with the blocks, and then Pedro came over. You know Pedro always has a car in his hand! I'm not sure how it came about because I was "the customer" at the beauty shop in the house area, but the next thing I noticed, all three were working together.*

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*Sara: I was with them later, when the ramp was all built. Nani called it her “road,” but Matthew always called it a “ramp.” Later, at outside time, Nani filled a bucket with sand, took it to the other side of the sand pit, dumped it, and smoothed it out. She asked me if I wanted to help her make better roads. I have another anecdote for her filling and emptying the sand bucket and working with me [KDIs 1. Initiative, 12. Building relationships, 43. Pretend play].*

*Chi’ann: It’s interesting — the city is doing major repaving. Do you think she was more interested in the street-building part of the work-time play?*

*Sara: I hadn’t thought of that, but it sure fits. Let’s talk to her grandma and see if their street has been done yet. (Sara makes a note on the “to remember” part of the plan.)*

*Chi’ann: I noticed on my way into work today that they are doing the street two blocks down. What*

*would you think about going on a walking field trip at outside time to watch the work?*

*Sara: Yes! That would really give Nani and the other children a very concrete experience with road building. Should we go in two days? That would give us time to put a sign up to notify the parents.*

*Chi’ann: Sure. I’ll stop on the way in tomorrow and check to make sure they will still be working there.*

*Sara: AND warn them that we’ll be coming! (They laugh.)*

*Chi’ann: At my small-group time, we worked with the trains. Matthew loved moving his really fast around the track. I wonder if what appealed to him most was the speed — making things go really fast.*

*Sara: I think you’ve hit the nail on the head! He squealed when he got a car to go fast down the ramp.*

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*I know — let’s do large-group outside tomorrow and take the parachute out. We could hold on to the handles and run around the parachute at different speeds. Let’s remember to make a list of words for fast and slow and we could try to use those different words as we play with the parachute.*

*Chi’ann: So, we’ve got Nani focused on building roads, and we think Matthew is more interested in speed, what about Pedro?*

*Sara: I think Pedro just really wants to play with someone. He’s starting to move from parallel play [playing with the same materials next to another child but not with that child] to wanting to play with others. Tomorrow at the beginning of work time, I’ll try to go where Pedro is. If he seems to want to join others in their plans, I’ll try to help him.*

*Chi’ann: Pedro is in my group at planning and recall time. I’ll try to elicit a more detailed plan from*

*him by asking “what” questions instead of “where” questions. Let’s see, I still need a recall strategy... Well, Pedro does like cars. I wonder... looking at KDI, 43. Pretend play, we’ve seen him pretend with the car, but I can’t remember ever seeing him do any role playing. For recall time, I’ll use the steering wheel. The children can drive our small group to something they used in their plans. I’m curious to see how Pauli will respond to this — it’s like he’ll be role-playing that he’s driving a car!*

As you can see in the examples of Sara and Chi’ann’s planning time, when the adults dig deeper and share the “whys” behind children’s actions and the “hows” of individually supporting what they are doing, team planning reaches new depths in supporting children’s interests and abilities.

Adapted from: Epstein, A. S., & Hohmann, M. (2012). *The HighScope Preschool Curriculum*. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.