Observation, of children and of teachers, is a crucial part of your early training. Firsthand observation can help you to recall what it was like, for example, to be an 11 year old who doesn’t understand the science lesson they are in. Observing children in an age range other than the one you plan to teach is also very informative.

Take every opportunity to observe teachers too. This is a privilege you have as a student teacher which is rarely repeated during the rest of your teaching career. Experienced teachers do a great deal almost by instinct, forgetting where they learned a particular technique or when they first tried a particular approach. It all goes into an enormous bank of experience which every good teacher develops, so that, although three or four approaches may normally be favoured, there are ideas and strategies to be summoned up to face almost every eventuality. But teachers are not always good at recognising and articulating their own skills, and may need prompting to explain why they behave as they do. So watch closely, note things down and, if you can, discuss what you have observed with the teacher afterwards.

Observation can sometimes be seen in a rather negative light: “Two whole days in school and all I’ve done is sit at the back of classrooms and observe.” Ensure that your observation time is well spent by being alert to all the little things that happen in a classroom, by joining in the lesson if appropriate and by adopting a particular focus at different times. This could be key points in the lesson, such as the start or end of the transition from one activity to the next, or it could be styles of questioning, words of praise or reproof, non-verbal communication etc.
Etiquette

Please remember that when observing other teachers you will need to be sensitive to their professionalism and feelings. You are there to learn about how lessons work. The questions below are to help you consider what might make lessons effective. Try not to make judgements – lessons involve a lot of complex human relationships as well as good planning and preparation. They do not always work fully as the teacher intends.

- When you are introduced to the teacher you are observing, make eye contact, smile and give a firm handshake. If you address the teacher in class, use their title, Mr X or Mrs Y.
- Thank the teacher for allowing you to observe. Ask if there is somewhere particular you should sit.
- Before a session, check whether it is appropriate for you to sit in with a group and become part of an activity, but make sure you know what is expected.
- Ask questions after the session, but at a time when the teacher is not occupied with students.
- Be prepared to comment on what you have found interesting, what you think looked good, and so on. Everybody responds well to praise.

What observers can look for in a lesson

Beginnings

Who arrives first?
How do students enter the room?
What are the teacher’s first words?
Can you detect rules or ‘rituals’ in operation?
How does the teacher secure attention?
How does the teacher respond to unco-operative students and to interruptions?
How does the teacher introduce the purpose and content of the lesson?

Groupings, tasks and resources

How are the students grouped/seated? Is there a reason for this grouping?
Are all students set the same task?
Is there any adult support in the lesson?
What resources does the teacher use for the lesson?

Transitions

What are the main parts of the lesson and how long do they last?
How does the teacher introduce transitions in the lesson?
What provision was made for early and late finishers?

Student response and praise

Do students react differently to negative and positive comments?
Do students co-operate with one another?
Preparing Yourself

The emphasis here is on preparing yourself (as opposed to preparing lessons or schemes of work). In those early lessons, how will you stand? What will you look like? When you open your mouth, what will your voice sound like? Will anything come out?

Acting experience can be helpful. You will have some idea of how your voice behaves under stress and of how difficult it can be to occupy your hands when all eyes are on you. On the other hand, teaching is not about taking on a different persona – children very quickly spot falsities in your manner or presentation. It is more a question of finding a different version of themselves when they are on the job, however they are feeling and whatever else may be on their minds. And they develop variants within that version, depending on whether they are counselling a distressed 11 year old, or talking to colleagues or to parent, or establishing control of a class of 15 year olds. It is a good idea to think ahead to the many different roles you will be assuming as part of your teaching careers.

Some things can be rehearsed in advance. Practice using your voice and your eyes, the two most important part of a teacher’s anatomy. Be conscious of how you are standing and where your hands are. Try to listen to yourself speak – do you have any mannerisms or repetitious phases? Does your accent need modifying if you are working in a part of the country where it will be unfamiliar?

- Do you tend to adopt a ‘closed’ or defensive body style, with arms clasped across your chest?
- Does one hand tend to fly up to fiddle with an earlobe or stand of hair?
- Does one hand fiddle with loose change or keys in a pocket?
- Do you find yourself standing on one leg, with the other one apologetically crossed behind it?
- Do your eyes tend to lose contact easily and flit around the room or raise to the ceiling?
- Do you have any other potentially irritating mannerisms which are likely to be exacerbated under stress?

If the answer is ‘Yes’ to any of these questions, practise alternatives, preferably in front of a mirror or on video camera.

- Try out different places to put your hands to keep them still unless they are required for emphatic gesturing (pressing finger tips together in front of you is a good way of controlling shaking hands).
- Get used to standing squarely on two feet, with your shoulders back and down and your head up.
- Consciously use your eyes to scan a wide view and also hold a steady gaze on something or someone.
- Get your voice working. Good posture and deep breathing and the prerequisites for good voice control which (certain medical conditions excepted) everyone should be able to achieve. Points to consider include:
  - Practice projecting your voice, preferably in a largish space, so that you increase the volume without shouting or getting higher in tone.
  - Cultivate, too, a quiet but authoritative voice.
  - Enunciate clearly, especially the beginnings and ends of words.
  - If you have a distinctive regional accent, decide how you are going to make sure you are understood.