Book Review:

School-Based Observation:
A Practical Guide to Assessing Student Behavior

by Amy M. Briesch, Robert J. Volpe, & Randy G. Floyd
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This book ushers the reader in with a lovely distinction on the difference between seeing and observing, quoted from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s (1892) short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia”. This provides a very apt setting in which to begin, considering North American culture is now firmly implanted within a mediated digital age. It could be said that we ‘think with our eyes’ more than ever before. And observation, in search of being true, demands both seeing and observing in minute and accurate ways.

This book is divided into three main sections. “Part I: Key Concepts of Direct Observation” contains four chapters on the topics of the role of observation in school-based settings, the foundations of direct observation, the results from observation and guidelines for improving data quality. “Part II: Use of Specific Observation Codes” examines how observations are conducted, how classroom environment is observed, how these observations can be extended to non-classroom settings, how observation supports functional assessment and finally, how to create a novel or hybrid coding system. “Part III: Using Assessment Data to Inform Decision Making and Intervention” provides instruction on interpreting and sharing observation results and contains a robust section of very helpful appendices.

The strengths of this book include its consideration of the pros and cons of each assessment tool, and its considerations of where each tool would be best used. This is unique, and it combines many assessments into a concise and clearly explained text with accompanying recording forms for readers. It also considers pre-advice and knowledge on how to begin, how to think about
assessments, and how to write up reports in meaningful and professional ways. In the sense of assessment, it has much to offer.

It is also valid to note that I am deliberately not providing a great deal of information on this text because educators really need to own it to use it. Since many of today’s students appear to be displaying more needs related to ADHD, anxiety, and other attention disorders, this book is a very helpful resource.

However, on a philosophical and reflective note, as a seasoned elementary and university educator, my only concern with any diagnostic tool is that it may induct new teachers into a pattern of fitting the student to a label: finding proof for a problem they see occurring rather than seeing the student as a whole life being who is affected on many fronts—both inside and outside the classroom—and more as an element that is robotically assigned to a code. Part II of the text deals with facets of this idea to some extent, but the book does not really raise the question as to the why of this behaviour occurring in the student. I saw no evidence of the student being part of that conversation. Maturity and confidence in students are also considerations.

Is there a benefit for a new teacher to ask the student why they are choosing to repeat certain behavioural patterns and not try new ones? I have found there to be a benefit. I raise this because it is easy for an educator to see a student’s external behaviour as being the problem when perhaps the teacher and the teaching of the content is also a primary cause. Difficulty at home may also be producing a change in behaviour in the student. Some of these considerations are the fallout of living life, and as students mature or circumstances change, so might behaviour. Perhaps it is time to change the tests to align with a digital native population, or to change the system to be more aligned to such an age.

Education appears to be the only profession that is quick to consider behaviour problems as seen predominantly in the behaviour (not the character) of the student, labelled and revealed by an analytical tool, without considering the student to largely be the product of how professionals within an education system endeavor to teach.

If this school behaviour is difficult for a teacher in a classroom setting, it is also difficult for a family and painful for a student in other settings as well. A test confirming a behavioural problem is a good thing, but more so in the context of consideration of all other possible factors as well. I was happy to see some of this concern mentioned in the second section. However, there is room for larger parameters to be further explored to include social, technological, and familial connections or to consider more social partnership as a pre-cursor to the testing being done as well as including ongoing consideration that behaviour can change over time. A child diagnosed in the early years may not be the same child by puberty. This consideration as to the why concerning behaviour is an insight that could be a valuable part of the assessment process. Hence, I would suggest advocating for a more intentionally worded, well-rounded, team approach to both assessment and intervention of student behavioural concerns. All of education is relational.