1 Background to the early years curriculum

We can be inspired by some whose ideas came – as it were – before their time but yet were not reticent in articulating or realising their ideas.

(Nutbrown et al. 2008: 181)

Chapter objectives

• To consider theorists and how observations have informed their practice
• To explore the legislative and research background of the early years curriculum in England

Chapter overview

In this first chapter I go right back to the beginning of the rich heritage we have of observing children. This has evolved over the years as we try to understand children’s thinking and learning, so this chapter contains a selection of key influential theorists from historical and contemporary times. I have highlighted the theorists’ different views on observation and methods.

I then go on to examine some of the research and circumstances that have influenced the formation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for England. The current curriculum became statutory in 2008 and was reviewed and revised in 2012, but there are still echoes of the theorists in today’s curriculum. Finally some of the terms that are used throughout the book are explained.

Heritage of observing children

Adults have not always observed children and tracked their newly emerging skills. In fact, childhood as a construct is a relatively modern
phenomenon, developed in the last few hundred years (Aries 1962). Prior to this children were considered to be small adults and were involved in all aspects of the adult world.

More recently however, there have been many educators who have investigated child development by observing their own children and children in their care. I use the word ‘educator’ because the theorists discussed here come from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, not just education. For example, Dr Maria Montessori trained as a medical doctor while Jean Piaget was a professor of psychology, sociology and philosophical studies (Pound 2005). The thing they all have in common is that they were interested in how children learn and how knowledge about children’s learning may be used to improve young children’s lives.

**Froebel**

Friedrich Froebel was years ahead of his time. It was more than two hundred years ago that he first suggested that the early years were the most important time of a child’s life. He was one of the first people to suggest educational toys and to demonstrate the sort of educational uses these may have. Froebel was inspired by Pestalozzi’s philosophies, after teaching at a school in Frankfurt that followed Pestalozzi’s ideas. In 1839 he opened the Play and Activity Institute, which he later renamed ‘kinder-garten’, meaning ‘a garden of children’ or ‘a garden for children’. At the time, his ideas were considered very liberal and the Prussian government banned his kindergartens. He is probably best known as an advocate for learning through play. He also designed and developed his own educational toys for children in his care, which he called ‘gifts’, and a series of activities, which he called ‘occupations’ (Weston 1998).

Froebel believed the role of the adult was to observe the children and understood that the support needed by children in their early years is different to the support required later on. He was very child centred, famously saying, ‘a child’s play is his work’ (Pound 2005) and he was well known for listening to children. Kindergartens are established around the world and his name is still synonymous with play.

**Mason**

Charlotte Mason was born in 1842 and regarded an education as being essential for all children, regardless of class. She believed it was equally important to inform parents about their children’s educational needs and set up the Parents’ Educational Union in the late 1800s. Her educational philosophy was that ‘education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life’ (Shafer 2007) and she pioneered home education. She was a great
believer in children learning through their senses and that a parent’s role was to ensure that there were plenty of opportunities for children to be able to do this. A prolific writer, she wrote about educational practices for a range of ages as well as geography books and religion.

She believed that children should be assessed by ‘narration’ (Mason 1923), which involves children telling others about their learning, either orally or in written or drawn form. The child must be able to understand and synthesize their learning, then be able to communicate this to someone else. This is a high order of understanding required from a child and, in modern day terms, would be described as one of the highest cognitive domains as defined by Bloom (1956).

**McMillan**

Margaret McMillan worked with her sister, Rachel, in London in the early 1900s. Her particular area of interest was children’s basic health and hygiene. She had seen children in Bradford and in London who were suffering from disease and malnutrition. In her book *The Nursery School* ([1919] 2009), McMillan talks of her vision of primary schools welcoming happy and healthy children into their classes, without the ‘welter of disease and misery . . . which makes the doctor’s service loom bigger than the teacher’s’ (p. 292).

Her treatment of children and close observations of the effects on them proved that children’s health could be improved by simple measures, such as allowing them to sleep outside and play freely in the garden. She wrote and lectured about her experiences, hoping to persuade others about the benefits of outdoor activity, freely taken by children. She would not have been able to make such a strong case for outdoor play without her detailed observations.

**Montessori**

Observations were the basis of Dr Maria Montessori’s interest in child development. She first observed children in asylums and noticed how their development depended on the adults and environment that the children were in (Mooney 2000). In her Casa dei Bambini Montessori observed how the children’s development was significantly improved when given appropriate objects to play with. The adults were expected to observe the children and their play at all times. It is from these observations that the Montessori method was formed (Pound 2005).

In modern day Montessori settings, Montessori teachers are still expected to observe children at all times, although the observations must not interfere with the children’s work, and particularly not criticize it (Stoll Lillard 2005).
Piaget

Jean Piaget first became interested in how children learn through his work with intelligence tests, where he noticed that there were patterns in the way that children got the answers right and wrong. This made him curious about the way children constructed their knowledge of the world. He made detailed observations of his own three children as they grew up, and the children of his friends. Based on these observations he formed his theory that children develop intellectually and sequentially through four distinct stages – sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operations (Piaget and Inhelder 1969).

However, Piaget’s techniques have been criticized because his early observations were centred on his own children and it was felt that there had been no consideration of social learning or context. For example, one of Piaget’s tests used mountains (a normal sight in Switzerland, where Piaget lived) but this seemed to confuse other children, not familiar with mountains, who did not seem to understand the task. Once mountains were replaced with barriers however, children did much better on the task (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2010).

Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky was seen as ‘an alternative to the influential concepts of Piaget’ (Gindis 1999: 32) because he considered learning to be a social and contextual process. He believed that the observation of children was more important than test scores and that it was essential for teachers to be vigilant observers, so they could better support the children’s development and learning. Only by knowing through observation at what level the child is at could the zone of proximal development (ZPD) be established. This information could then be used to plan suitable activities which would challenge and stretch children (Mooney 2000).

Isaacs

Susan Isaacs is considered a modern day pioneer of naturalistic observations. These are observations of children while they play, with no interference or hindrance. The children are allowed to choose their activities freely while the practitioner observes, supports and scaffolds the learning. This, arguably, most accurately reflects the world that children grow up in (Mukherji and Albon 2010). At the school she set up, Malting House School, Isaacs encouraged written observations of everything that the children did or said. In her book Intellectual Growth in Young Children she states that accounts should be ‘verbatim records and full objective records of what was done should be given’ (Isaacs 1930: 1). Although this
sounds very familiar to contemporary thinking it was a departure from mainstream thinking at the time; in fact Grenier (2009) believes that any approach that relies on observation based assessment is drawing on the legacy of Susan Isaacs and her beliefs.

**Malaguzzi**

Loris Malaguzzi developed the pedagogical approach in the village of Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy, after the Second World War (Edwards et al. 2012). He believed that children should be given the opportunity to express themselves in as many ways as possible. This includes art, drama, 3D models, light and shadows. He called it ‘The Hundred Languages of Children’. It is documented through written observations, verbatim transcripts, photos, video, drawings and paintings. Recording and documenting observations made by practitioners is particularly important in this approach, because the representation of the child’s thinking may be a short dance or a shadow displayed briefly on the wall.

**Hutchin**

Vicky Hutchin has written extensively on observing and assessing young children (Hutchin 1999, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2012a). Her later writing is closely linked with the EYFS and gives some useful and practical ideas for using observations effectively in an early years setting. In particular, her book *Tracking Significant Achievement in the Early Years* (2000) has many examples of observations made of children at different ages and their significance for assessment purposes.

**Carr**

Margaret Carr is best known for her development of learning stories. She describes four processes, where ‘describing’ (Carr 2001) is the first process and is based on observations. Carr believes that observations should be focussed on credit. That is, the observations should be about what the child can do, not what they can’t do. She also details how observations should be part of a structure, so practitioners can start to make connections and assess where children are in the domain of learning dispositions, or their attitude to learning (Carr 2001: 123).

**Bruce**

Tina Bruce describes how practitioners can use observations as a variety of ‘lenses through which to tune into and understand the child’s development and learning’ (Bruce 2005: 204). She also describes how observation can be used to inform themes and the planning of activities for children.
Athey

Chris Athey is closely linked with schema. A schema is a particular way that children explore and examine the world, by making connections between experiences and objects. For example, a box, a drawer and a zoo cage all ‘enclose’ and will support an ‘enclosure’ schema. Alternatively, a handbag, a truck and a post van all ‘transport’ objects and would support a ‘transporting’ schema. Athey’s (1990) definition of a schema is ‘patterns of behaviour and thinking in children that exist underneath the surface feature of various contents, contexts and specific experience’ (p. 5). Her research during the Froebel Nursery Research Project at the Froebel Institute from 1972 to 1976 (which resulted in the book *Extending Thought in Young Children: A Parent–Teacher Partnership*) is a master class in observations of all descriptions. During this project Athey and her team observed children playing, drawing, making models and interacting and listened closely to the children’s explanations for their creations. These were carefully documented and recorded, resulting in over 5000 observations. From these observations the links and connections were made, resulting in the theories of schema learning.

One of the great strengths of this project was that the family was also involved. This included the family in making observations at home of the children’s play and discussing this with the Project team. This gave observations context and a rounded view of the child’s cognitive development.

Nutbrown

Cathy Nutbrown extended Athey’s work on schema in her book *Threads of Thinking* (2006). It also draws on a multitude of practical observations to vividly illustrate points about child development. Nutbrown maintains that ‘Adult observation is an essential strand of the curriculum’ (Nutbrown 2006: 123) and the method by which practitioners (or educators) can learn about the child’s schemas in order to extend them.

Just as Athey does, Nutbrown also uses drawings, emergent writing and story telling in her observations. The exact words and phrases used by the children are recorded, along with their ages, so the reader really gets a feel for the children’s play. Without these detailed observations it would be almost impossible to make the links necessary to understand schematic play.

Wall

Kate Wall’s area of expertise is children with special needs. She maintains that during observations of children with special needs, their particular condition or need is secondary. The observation should focus on the child’s ‘current skills, strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes’ (Wall 2011: 115).
She also believes that observations should be shared with parents, so a holistic picture can be created for each child. It is likely that these sorts of observations will be shared with outside agencies, so may need to be written with other professionals in mind. Wall also highlights the importance of having a clear purpose for the observation, using the appropriate observational methods and being clear on how the outcomes are disseminated.

**Comparison of the theorists**

From these pioneers we can see how observing children has grown from its early beginnings. Observations first identified children’s basic needs and equipment to support their development (Froebel, Montessori, McMillan). They have evolved to underpin the more complex philosophies of children’s holistic learning (Piaget, Malaguzzi, Athey). Interestingly, each pioneer has been able to draw different conclusions about how children learn from their own observations. In addition this is linked to their personal experiences, backgrounds and individual methods. For example, Froebel’s mother died when he was very young and he only experienced a caring environment ten years later. This affected his views on how children should be cared for. Piaget only used a small sample of select children, but he drew generalized conclusions from his observations (Gray and MacBlain 2012).

**Discussion box**

Do this experiment with a colleague. Both observe the same child at the same time during a free play activity. It can be indoors or outdoors. Make individual notes in your own style and do not confer during the observation.

After five minutes, compare observations and note the differences and similarities.

- Have you both noticed the same things?
- How did the style of recording differ?
- What areas of development did you focus on?

You may find that some practitioners prefer a purely factual style, e.g. ‘held bat in right hand’, ‘could balance on left foot’, whereas others will focus on the social aspect, e.g. ‘asked if he could join in the game’, or physical aspect, e.g. ‘could easily run the length of the garden’.

- Why do you focus on a particular aspect?
- How do you think this affects your views of child development?
- Which educational pioneer does this link with most closely?
The development of the EYFS in England

The EYFS has grown out of a range of policies, strategies and research in the early years. In 1998 the National Childcare Strategy was introduced (and updated in 2004) by the then Labour Government, to tackle child poverty, increase partnership and to break down the division between ‘care’ and ‘education’ for young children and their families (Wall 2011). The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA/DFEE 2000) supported practitioners working with pre-school children. There were a number of early learning goals (ELG) that set the expectations for children’s achievement.

In 2002 The Education Act introduced the Foundation Stage Profile, replacing the baseline assessment. The Foundation Stage in the Act was defined as the time between the child’s third birthday and the time they first receive primary education, other than nursery education (Education Act 2002, section 81).

However, there was still no guidance for the very youngest children, so *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES 2002) was developed to address this. The stated purpose was to ‘provide support, information, guidance and challenge for all those with responsibility for the care and education of babies and children from birth to three years’ (p. 4). In addition, nurseries and settings also had to be mindful of the *Full Day Care National Standards for Under 8s Day Care and Childminding* (DfES 2003a). This document (‘the red book’) detailed 14 standards and represented ‘a baseline of quality below which no provider may fall’ (p. 1).

Consequently, at that time, practitioners working with children from birth to 5 years old were expected to work under these three different frameworks – *Birth to Three Matters*, the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*, and the *Full Day Care National Standards for Day Care and Childminding*. To complicate matters even further the *Birth to Three Matters* and the Curriculum Guidance did not dovetail together, the former having four ‘aspects’ and the latter having six ‘areas of Learning’. For practitioners looking after children from birth, this meant a whole set of new documents when the children reached 3 years old.

At around this time there were also two seminal pieces of research being completed. The first of these was the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al. 1997 to 2004), the largest European ‘longitudinal investigation into the effects of pre-school education and care’ (Sylva et al. 2010: 1). The research investigated a range of influences on children’s development, such as home learning environment, parental employment and the quality of the child’s pre-school. The aims were to measure the effectiveness of the pre-school on a wide range of children from different backgrounds and to then identify which
characteristics of the pre-schools made them ‘effective’. For this research the criteria for effectiveness included identifying the benefits of different pre-schools and how quickly these faded over time. The research concluded that the quality was higher where settings integrated both the educational aspects and care aspects, and that the benefits of attending a quality pre-school remained evident throughout Key Stage 1 at school (Sylva et al. 2010: ii).

The second piece of research was Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY), which was commissioned by the DfES in 2002 (Siraj-Blatchford 2002) and was based on the EPPE data set (p. 9). It was developed to study, in particular, the pedagogical strategies or instructional techniques which enable learning to take place. This included the setting’s learning environment as well as community and home learning environment. The research showed there were concerns about transitions (nursery to reception and reception to Year 1 in school) (p. 14) and that in those settings where there was ‘continuity of learning between the setting and the home’ (p. 15) the cognitive outcomes for the children were far better.

The results of both these pieces of research can be seen reflected in the EYFS. The combination of care and education comes from the EPPE, so instead of purely educational learning goals the EYFS also stipulates that a key person is statutory and that ‘no child gets left behind’ (DfE 2012a: 2). The continuity of care and documentation is improved by having one curriculum that goes from birth to 5 years old, which the research suggests improves cognitive outcomes. Some of the practices that were displayed in high quality settings, such as ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Sylva et al. 2004: vi), have also been incorporated into the Development Matters section of the EYFS, hereafter referred to as ‘Development Matters’ (Early Education 2012: 7).

So we can see that the EYFS was founded on the best parts of the Birth to Three Matters, Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage and Full Day Care National Standards for Day Care and Childminding (DfES 2008). Since its inception in 2008 the EYFS has been reviewed (Tickell 2011) and republished with some alterations (DfE 2012b). It has retained the principles of each child being unique, positive relationships, enabling environments and that children develop at different rates – principles underpinned by the EPPE research, REPEY research and the Every Child Matters (ECM) framework. Observation is still seen as a crucial tool for informing assessment and is part of the statutory requirement (DfE 2012b: 10).

The ECM framework, which was launched in 2003 and became highly influential, is worth a mention as it brought with it a raft of changes and five outcomes for children across the range of children’s services and
paved the way for a more integrated way of working in early years. Its five outcomes were (DfES 2003b: 6):

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution
- economic well-being

The ECM agenda has changed many aspects of education and has been called ‘arguably the most significant document to reach our desks’ (Wall 2011) and ‘a major piece of legislation’ (Sylva et al. 2010). At its heart are universal services, working together with families and communities, to ensure that children can maximize their potential and are protected. The emphasis of having the child at the centre is clearly reflected in the EYFS, with the ‘Unique Child’ at the centre of effective learning (Early Education 2012).

**Other curricula in the UK**

This book is centred primarily on the early years curriculum in England, the EYFS. There are separate curricula for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However there are a number of similarities between all four curricula. For example, they all mention children learning through play, the importance of social development, emotional development and security, as well as a holistic environment (Scottish curriculum, p. 3), first-hand experiences (Welsh curriculum, p. 4) and opportunities through experiences (Northern Ireland curriculum, p. 6).

However there are also some notable exceptions. The Welsh curriculum ‘The Foundation Phase’ includes children from the age of 3 to 7 years, the Scottish curriculum ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ includes 3-year-olds to 18-year-olds (supported by the pre-birth to 3 guidance) and in Northern Ireland the age range is from 4 years to 6 years for the Foundation Stage, with Preschool prior to that.

**Discussion box**

Sometimes it is easy to get stuck with the idea that there is only one curriculum – the one you are currently working with. It can be useful to review other curricula, to find the similarities and differences, so you can make an informed judgement about the curriculum you are working with.
The cycle of observation, assessment and planning

In this book the focus is on the interlinking elements between observation, assessment and planning, bringing these three things together as a cycle rather than three disparate elements.

There are some excellent books on assessment, on observation and on planning. However, the missing pieces are the most important in practice. It is no good being excellent at observations if you then can’t interpret them. Similarly, insightful assessments are just a paperwork exercise if they are not used in the planning process.

Therefore in this book there are explanations of different types of observations, but the majority of the book highlights how to use these to inform assessment. The aim is to answer the ‘why?’ question. Why have you come to that conclusion about that child from that assessment? Why have you planned that activity from that observation? This is done through links to learning theories and examples of practice.

As the practice guidance for the revised EYFS, Development Matters (Early Education 2012: 3), states ‘on-going formative assessment is at the heart of effective early years practice’ and should be based on observation. The cycle of observation, assessment and planning should commence at ‘observation’. In addition it is suggested that summative assessment is shared with ‘parents, colleagues and other settings’ (p. 3).

Some definitions of terms

There can be confusion around the meanings of the various terms that are used within early years, often interchangeably. Below are some phrases with explanations of the way that they will be used in this book.
Practitioner

There has been, and no doubt will be, debate about the term used to describe the hardworking, dedicated adults who work with children. Nutbrown uses a variety of terms, including ‘professional educator’ (2006: xiv) and Montessori used ‘directress’ (1965). In this book ‘practitioner’ has been used to describe all those professionals working with children, including childminders, nannies and teachers. This does not prejudice against those who have good practice, but, for one reason or another, do not have qualifications.

Child initiated

A child-initiated activity is one that has come solely from a child’s idea or interest. This may be from a conversation that the child has with the practitioner or from an artefact that a child has discovered. These are likely to be spontaneous activities.

Adult initiated

An adult-initiated activity is one that has been planned and conceived by the practitioner. This may be based on children’s interests or observations of children, but the suggested activity has come from the adult. Is likely to be a pre-planned activity.

Adult led

Adult-led activities can be either child initiated or adult initiated. The significance is that the adult is leading the learning, through scaffolding, support or direct input into the activity. It is the adult that is leading learning and taking the activity in the direction they would like to see it go.

Child led

In a child-led activity it is the child who is directing the learning. The adult is there to observe, ensure safety and give some support. The activity goes in the direction that the child wants.

Sustained shared thinking

There is a formal definition of sustained shared thinking given by the EPPE team, which is: ‘an episode in which two or more individuals “work together” in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008).
In this book I shall be using the term sustained shared thinking in the broadest form. So this will include short conversations that give some sort of insight into the child’s thinking. These may be verbal conversations, but will include ideas that are shared through doing activity together, such as building a 3D model. It is the sort of conversations and activities that go on all the time in settings, which skilled and experienced practitioners are used to having with their children.

**Key learning points**

The current EYFS in England has been forged from many different sources. The pioneers and educationalists have demonstrated the power of observing children at play, which has been built on by modern pioneers, such as Athey and Malaguzzi, who have put a whole new light on the complexity of children’s play. Contemporary research has highlighted the difference that a ‘quality’ early years curriculum can make to children’s lives.

Each element of the observation, assessment and planning cycle is important in its own right. However, it is essential to be able to make the elements work together in a seamless cycle to support children’s learning and development.

**Reflective questions**

1. Can you identify any of the pioneers’ philosophies in the EYFS? Consider:
   - Where does play fit into the curriculum?
   - How does this compare to Froebel and Vygotsky’s theories?

2. Read the summary of the EPPE research. How has this affected the wording of the EYFS? Consider:
   - What elements of quality are now written into the EYFS?
   - What may be the shortfalls of the research?

3. Look at some other definitions of child-initiated play. Consider:
   - How do they differ?
   - Why is it important that there is common understanding of these terms in the setting?

**Further reading**

This in-depth book gives context and background material to Isaacs’ life, including her role in the world of psychoanalysis and her extensive contribution to modern educational methods.


This document contains some fascinating insights into the research and rationale behind *Birth to Three Matters*. This includes discussion on holistic development, continuity of learning and resilience, as well as an overview of educational theories and theorists.

Northern Ireland’s curricular guidance for pre-school education http://www.ccea.org.uk/


Welsh Framework for Children’s Learning for 3- to 7-year-olds in Wales www.wales.gov.uk