

Theories into Practice

Understanding and
Rethinking Our Work with
Young Children

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Chapter 1

Theories and perspectives

“Different theories about early childhood inform approaches to children’s learning and development. Early childhood educators draw upon a range of perspectives in their work ...” (EYLF p.11)

Early childhood educators see the words ‘theories’ and ‘perspectives’ used interchangeably in the *Early Years Learning Framework*. However, on the very same page where theories and perspectives are mentioned, the document also notes that educators are ‘drawing on a range of perspectives and theories’ – suggesting that these are somewhat different. In searching out definitions, it is possible to pinpoint how these two views impact on understandings of children’s learning and development and how these understandings influence practice when working with young children.

In the field of early childhood education and care, a **theory** is a group of ideas that explain a certain topic within the domain of children’s learning and development. Typically, a theory is developed through the use of thoughtful and rational forms of abstract and generalised thinking. In addition, a theory is often based on general principles that are independent of what is being explained. So, someone who considers given facts and comes up with a possible explanation for those facts is called a theorist. Some say that theorists come up with abstract ideas and beliefs and then spend their lives trying to prove them, because ideas can always be disputed until proven absolutely. What theories provide are ‘ways of knowing’ that influence thinking and impact on practice in particular ways.

A **perspective**, however, is the way something is ‘seen’. The meaning of perspective in this context will have something to do with looking or viewing – taking up a particular stance.

From theories, sets of assumptions are formed about how young children learn and develop, and what learning and teaching could and should look like. These assumptions influence the way educators think and act, and they have an impact on their ideas and beliefs (Raban et al. 2007, p. 16). Educators view the world in certain ways. They understand and explain what is occurring based on the prevailing theories they know about, and that resonate with their own experience, thinking and understandings. These are the theoretical perspectives – the views stemming from theories – from which educators operate daily when working in early childhood settings. These theoretical perspectives could be on societal views of childhood, how children learn, and the role of families and communities in a child’s development.

To choose a perspective is to also choose a value system and, unavoidably, an associated system of beliefs. In this sense, a *value system* is a set of principles or ideals that drive and/or guide a person's behaviour. For instance, if part of your personal value system was to protect the planet, you would act to install solar panels onto the roof of your home in the belief that this would reduce your energy footprint and, ultimately, stop the mining of coal and/or uranium, in an effort to reach a sustainable future.

The impact of theories on practice

As already mentioned, theories position children and their learning in particular ways which have ramifications for how educators teach, learn and understand child development. Courses designed to prepare educators to work in the early childhood education and care profession are underpinned by a variety of theories that relate to various aspects of child development and learning – such as emotional and psychological development, cognitive and physical development, language and social development, play, autonomy and independence.

In Western countries the major theorists can include Erikson, Bowlby, Ainsworth, Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, Bandura, Chomsky, Bronfenbrenner, Smilansky, Parten, Rogoff and Foucault (Palmer 2001). The philosophies of these theorists inform and guide educators' work with young children, families, and communities, as they provide conceptual understandings on aspects that otherwise are difficult to comprehend. Thinking deeply about one's practice and then linking this to the theoretical perspectives that inform that practice enables educators to act in a more informed way to change their practice. This leads to *praxis*, which is defined as reflection and action coming together and thus performing a transformative process of change.

Understanding the theories

All professionals develop a set of beliefs (which shape practice) that are passed down from generation to generation through training programs of all types. Unless these beliefs are carefully examined, unhelpful practice can be perpetuated in the name of professionalism. Many taken-for-granted beliefs still remain in need of critical appraisal because of a lack of such careful examination.

Theories do not simply arise and replace one another. Theories overlap, merging in places. Sometimes they give way in popularity to one another or fall out of favour, but they are rarely completely displaced. This can be seen with the 19th-century theorists and thinkers who continue to have an impact on 20th-century progressive educational theorists. What is acknowledged is that theories can be complex and intricate.

The *EYLF* (p.11) suggests that different theories ‘inform approaches to children’s learning and development’ and can be categorised in five main ways:

- developmental theories
- socio-cultural theories
- socio-behaviourist theories
- critical theories
- post-structuralist theories

However, any categorisation is inevitably both far from perfect and less than total since, as thinking developed and built on previous theorising, there is much overlap between many theories. Moreover, what seem apparently small differences in theory can cause theorists to dissociate themselves from other theorists, causing rifts through strong disagreements. An overview of the theories noting the main theorists, focus and implications for practice are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Main theories in the *EYLF* (p.11)

Theories	Theorists	Focus	Implications for practice
Developmental (Chapter 2)	Piaget Steiner Montessori Gardner	The discrete and/or continuous stages of development	Educators respond to and plan activities in relation to children’s developmental stages
Socio-cultural (Chapter 3)	Vygotsky Bruner Bronfenbrenner Malaguzzi Rogoff	Development and learning occurs in the context of children’s communities	Educators and more knowledgeable others scaffold and transform learning in response to children’s prior understandings
Socio-Behaviourist (Chapter 4)	Pavlov Skinner Bandura	The role of experience in shaping children’s behaviour	Educator-directed activities coupled with rewards and reinforcements
Critical (Chapter 5)	Habermas Freire	Curriculum can have hidden aspects which frame certain points of view and ignore others	Educators challenge assumptions about curriculum and query taken-for-granted practices
Post-structuralist (Chapter 6)	Foucault Bourdieu Canella	There are many forms of knowledge and no absolute truth	Educators explore many different ways of exploiting power relationships embedded in their practice that may privilege certain children over others

Developmental theories

These theories arose from the traditional base for child development – which was developmental psychology – creating the notion that there is a universal pattern of development and therefore a predictable pathway to development and learning for all children. Ideas developing through the 19th century focused on the observed changes in children as they grew older – maturation. These changes or ‘milestones’ have been articulated into distinct stages which are characterised by qualitatively different behaviours. Some developmental theorists view development as a discontinuous process. They believe development involves distinct and separate stages with different kinds of behaviour occurring in each stage (Jean Piaget’s stage theory; Maria Montessori’s planes of development; Rudolf Steiner’s seven-year phases; Kohlberg’s stages of moral development; Erikson’s stages of personal and social development). Others support a continuous view of development and suggest that development involves gradual and ongoing changes throughout the life span, with behaviour in the earlier stages of development providing the basis of skills and abilities required for the next stages (Darwin).

This second perspective has been less developed because of its possible relationship to a focus on genetic evolution and, therefore, racism with different gene pools dictating differences between abilities. However, more recent prominent continuous theorists include Howard Gardner (1983) whose theory of multiple intelligences led him to bring forward evidence to show that at any one time a child may be at very different stages, for example, in number development as opposed to spatial/visual maturity.

One outcome of developmental theories is *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP), where the focus is on a child’s learning and development as an individual, as opposed to the focus on acquiring specific knowledge. Working from this perspective, an educator makes judgments relating to an individual child’s development, often measured against developmental ‘norms’. Goals are then planned to best meet that child’s developmental needs. This planning is also often compartmentalised into specific developmental domains such as physical, social, cognitive, emotional and language.

In recent times, developmental theories have been challenged (Fleer 1995; Nolan & Kilderry 2010) because of their Western universal construct of the child that acts to marginalise children and families from diverse backgrounds. Developmental theories are criticised for not reflecting the lives of modern children and their experiences by not focusing on the social and cultural aspects that impact on development. They have been described as prescriptive and constraining (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999). It has been suggested that there are many equally legitimate childhoods not just one universal childhood.

There have also been arguments mounted on how developmental theories perpetuate a deficit view of children, as their differences to adults are judged and are seen as weaknesses (Silin 1998). Arthur and colleagues (2008, p.19) list some of the specific criticisms of child development theories:

- They focus on the individual rather than the child in social, cultural and political contexts.
- Developmental theories are viewed as ‘normative’ – if you don’t fit then you are abnormal in some way.
- Children are not seen as strong, capable, active agents in their own learning, but instead in the process of ‘becoming’.
- There is an implicit assumption that development is universal.

What is worth noting when considering developmental theories is how the early childhood education and care field has tended to draw on traditional versions of these theories rather than more contemporary variations that may perhaps better represent children of today.

In Chapter 2, meet developmental theorists Piaget, Steiner, Montessori and Gardner.

Socio-cultural theories

In recent years, socio-cultural theories have provided an important conceptual tool for rethinking much of the practice in early childhood education. They draw heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1962), and more recently Rogoff (1990). Socio-cultural theories propose that educators need to understand ‘the development of children in the context of their own communities’ (Rogoff et al. 1998, p. 228). Children are positioned as learning through the belief system to which they are exposed and through their interactions with others.

Hedegaard (2004) describes this view of development as the relationship between the child and society. This means viewing a child’s development in the situations of their communities, and as Flear argues, ‘culture not only determines the principles for defining development but frames the contexts in which the development of children is supported’ (2006, p. 8).

Vygotsky saw the social environment as being instrumental to a child’s learning. This means that learning with and from others is prioritised. Expectations of what children can do at certain ages become questionable as different cultural practices are reinforced through a child’s community. The following story helps to illustrate this:

An early childhood educator was travelling through Vanuatu, and stopped at a local village only to be greeted by a 2-year-old boy holding a small sharp knife. Through her Western eyes she was taken aback, thinking, who would allow a young child to run around and play with a sharp knife? He will cut himself. For this community, growing up with a knife was normal practice as Vanuatuan males perform many tasks with their knives every

day. This very young boy had been shown by many role models how to use a knife and so was in no danger of hurting himself or using the knife inappropriately. He was engaging in daily activities with his community and thereby being immersed in the cultural belief systems in a dynamic way (Gaskins 1999).

So, expectations of children's development need to be viewed not as universal but interwoven with the social and cultural worlds in which children are raised. As Rogoff (1990, p. 57) explains 'Development involves progress towards local goals and valued skills'.

There are different interpretations of socio-cultural theory discussed in the literature. These discussions centre around the degree of influence and impact of socio-cultural contexts on development. The socio-cultural perspective has major implications for early childhood education, with a key feature being that higher order functions develop out of social interactions. There are two noteworthy aspects of this theory. First, it is *fundamentally cultural* – and educators are agents of culture who perceive children's actions within a setting that is deeply informed by their own cultural knowledge and beliefs. Children in their turn are viewed as cultural apprentices who seek the guidance of more knowledgeable others.

Second, the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) reveals how developmental change is generated through adult support, or the support of a more knowledgeable other, being experienced over time, followed by independent child accomplishment.

In Chapter 3 meet socio-cultural theorists: Vygotsky, Bruner, Bronfenbrenner, Malaguzzi and Rogoff.

Socio-behaviourist theories

It may seem odd to group social and behavioural theories together as they are two highly divergent approaches. However, the significant differences on which they are based – their view of the child, their view of knowledge and their view of the role of adults – make them arguably more interesting when placed in juxtaposition than when separated. For behaviourists, knowledge is given to children by adults in bite-sized chunks, while for sociologists, knowledge is created as we experience life while interacting with others. The *behaviourist child* is a malleable, mouldable individual who can be shaped at will, entirely a product of the environment in which he or she grows up. The *social child* is curious and seeking, with a pre-programmed process of development which need not be slavishly exposed, but which can be tempered by shared experience with others.

This group of theorists focuses on the role of experiences in shaping children's behaviour. In fact these theories can be separated into two distinct approaches: *classical behaviourism* (Pavlov) and *social learning theory* (Bandura).

Ideas that characterise behaviourism include the belief that anyone can learn anything given the right reinforcement, and it is through this positive reinforcement that one is motivated to learn. Learning is therefore seen as being associated with social and physical conditioning. It is through the reinforcement of behaviours exhibited by the child or, in the case of social learning theory, by others or the environment that determines what is learnt. This means the focus is not on development but rather on learning and the conditions that enable or constrain learning.

It is a teacher-directed approach, rather than child-directed. Educators decide on the tasks to be learnt and then direct children to undertake these tasks. They make their decisions about what is to be learnt and then provide what is necessary in response to children's behaviour to ensure the learning occurs. The key motivators to this learning are seen to be rewards and reinforcements. Children learn through having their own behaviour rewarded and praised, and by imitating role models after observing how their behaviour has been received by others. Reinforcement can therefore be seen as direct (with educator-mediated rewards) or indirect (by the child themselves observing consequences of others' actions).

In early childhood settings, educators tend to reward positive, desired behaviour through recognition or rewards, and ignore less desirable behaviour in the belief that everything can be learned and also unlearned (DEEWR 2010, p. 54). There is a strong focus on managing children's observable behaviour and providing role models while making children aware of their own behaviour. In such a setting, children learn what acceptable ways of behaving are and what is considered unacceptable ways of behaving. There is a close connection between children's behaviour, experiences and environments (DEEWR 2010, p. 54). Children learn as a response to their environment through their interaction with it. As Arthur and colleagues point out 'the emphasis is on what people do (their behaviour) and the connection of this to the observable stimuli in the environment' (2008, p. 90).

In Chapter 4, meet socio-behaviourist theorists Pavlov, Skinner and Bandura.

Critical theories

Those who draw from critical theories question and challenge whose knowledge/s are being assumed, how they are being used and how they inform the early childhood curriculum. They are 'interested in creating a more egalitarian and democratic society' (Nolan et al. 2013, p. 28). As noted in the *Early Years Learning Framework*, 'critical theories invite early childhood educators to challenge assumptions about curriculum, and consider how their decisions may affect children differently' (DEEWR 2009, p.11).

Drawing from critical theories provides educators with other ways to think about their practice – for example, thinking about how to make changes to and improve practice (Arthur et al. 2008). Woodrow and Press (2007) caution that early childhood education and care settings are sites of potential cultural, political, and economic reproduction and, as Apple (2004) points out, left unchallenged, some practices might remain for no good reason. Critical theorising, Apple continues, can also expose educators to concepts such as the *hidden curriculum* which can be an outcome of political, economic or cultural aspects of teaching and learning. The ‘hidden curriculum’ is where policies and curriculum practices are ‘out of sight’, so to speak, and might advantage some groups of people while disadvantaging others.

Critical theorists understand education to be shaped by many different and conflicting beliefs and taken-for-granted practices. Educators working from a critical perspective are encouraged to question what goes on in their settings and for what purpose. They can ask ‘why’ questions such as ‘Why am I teaching this?’ And they go on to support the children they work with to also ask ‘why’ questions such as ‘Why am I learning this?’

By asking ‘why’ questions, educators can become more critical of their practice, aiming to ensure that it is regularly questioned and evaluated (Freire 1970). As McLachlan, Fler and Edwards (2010, p. 21) explain, ‘critical pedagogy is designed to disrupt and undermine the conventional forms of understanding’. This type of thinking opens up opportunities for educators to deal with issues of cultural difference and diversity, as critical theorists believe that ‘schools and curriculum are designed to legitimate some ideas and suppress others’ (McLachlan, Fler & Edwards 2010, p. 21).

Kilderry (in press) suggests that

critical thinking and questioning are helpful processes as they enable us to ask critical questions about theories and practices we know so well, enabling us to uncover issues that may not have come to our attention unless these common-sense understandings are challenged.

Kilderry encourages educators to ask the following questions:

- What theories and practices are dominant in early childhood education and care? Why is that?
- What everyday understandings about practice are left unchallenged?
- How do we view young children? For example, as ‘developing’, as ‘capable’, or as empowered people with rights? How does practice look different in each of these situations?
- Who decides what will happen in early childhood education and care?
- Which decisions about their day can children have input into?
- What aspects of the curriculum and practice are inequitable for some children and families?
- How does early childhood policy position children, educators and families?

By drawing on critical theories, educators are able to highlight taken-for-granted beliefs, understandings, assumptions and dominant and disempowering discourses that could be present in the teaching and learning decisions they make. And the language of critique used by critical pedagogues does have a purpose beyond just critiquing. This other purpose is to promote the language of 'possibility' (Giroux 1988) whereby new intellectual spaces are opened up for educators to rethink their pedagogical practice (Kilderry 2004).

In Chapter 5 meet critical pedagogues who draw from critical theory: Habermas and Friere.

Post-structuralist theories

Taking a post-structuralist perspective means believing that there are multiple and contested ways of learning. This means that knowledge is positioned as 'relative' (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007). There is no absolute truth but rather there are many truths. Meaning is not fixed by reference to positivist constructions of a simple, unmediated and directly observed 'reality'. Rather it is organised by the intersection of multiple relations that reflect and produce structures of regulation (age, gender, class, etc) constituting social realities. For example it is proposed that there is no such thing as one way of viewing children or childhood and therefore educators should hold a range of perspectives relating to teaching, learning, and development and these should be considered when planning work with young children. Educators need to be responsive and reactive to the different learning and development pathways for children.

Children are seen as having agency and able to influence their own lives. This questions other theories of socialisation and development. 'Children have complex and shifting identities as they move between and participate in different social groups' (DEEWR 2010, p. 57). However, educators' choice of which discourses – or frames of reference – to take up are restricted by those to which they have been exposed.

Discourses have a powerful influence (Macfarlane 2006) and some are more prevalent in our society than others because they have been supported by governments, institutions and the media. However, power is not necessarily possessed only by those in privileged social positions, but defines values underpinning different knowledge-bases used in early childhood settings. There are certain espoused discourses that have dominated the early childhood landscape and become seen as the 'truth', for example developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). These discourses dictate what teaching and learning looks like and how one needs to behave, think, feel, and act to be successful as an educator and as a child.

How we define childhood and children (our image of the child) influences how we work with the child, and every construction of 'childhood' is exercising power (Foucault 1980). It is only when these dominant

discourses are challenged that it becomes apparent how they have been restricting thought and acting to conform educators work with young children. As Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, p.29) point out, power 'achieves its goals through the *constraints of conformity*'. When thinking about post-structural theories the *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR 2010, p.55) suggests the following questions as useful to prompt thinking:

- Whose ways of belonging, being or becoming are valued?
- Whose are not? Why?
- What changes in pedagogy could be made in response to the answers to these questions?
- How do post-structuralist theories contribute to or limit ways of knowing children and supporting their learning?

With respect to gender, for instance, post-structuralists would argue that many equity strategies remain ineffective because they do not challenge the logic of female/male gender dualism which purports to define gender differences, or address the dynamic power relations taking place between boys and girls. Instead of assuming gender as a consistent aspect of human identity due to physical characteristics that babies are born with, it needs to be acknowledged that this dualism is not a fact, but is socially constructed.

In Chapter 6 meet theorists Foucault, Bourdieu, Cannella.

About this book

We now invite you to become familiar, or reacquainted, with the theories and theorists. Each of the following chapters (2–6) deals with a different group of theories, briefly outlining the major thrust of each group and what each might look like in practice. Some of the major theorists are then focused on in turn. Discussion Starter Topics follow each theorist to promote discussion among you and your colleagues on the main topics and threads of the theorist's thinking. This is followed by Questions for Reflection that relate more to thinking about the main concepts in relation to your own practice.

Chapter 7 presents information to help you to reflect on your practice, offering questions to prompt reflective thought. It supports you to reflect on how your beliefs and practices are shaped by specific theories. You will be able to draw clear links to specific theories, or a collection of theories, and this knowledge will help you understand your practice from a more informed perspective.

The final chapter of the book introduces you to the CD *Challenging Aspects of Practice (CAP)* that provides a practical way to map your practice across the different theories in light of current pedagogical concerns. Armed with a better understanding of why you do what you do in the way you do it, you will be better able to reflect more critically on your practice.

Chapter 2

Developmental theorists and practical implications

“Developmental theories focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children’s learning and development.” (EYLF p.11)

Developmental theory, with Piaget as the most prominent theorist, presents the idea that children actively construct knowledge as they manipulate and explore the world around them. Development is seen to take place in broad stages from birth through to adulthood, with each stage characterised by qualitatively distinct ways of thinking. However, some developmental theorists, in contrast to Piaget, place more emphasis on personal, social and emotional development rather than cognitive development and prefer to delay ‘academic’ experiences until later, for instance after the age of 7 years in Steiner’s theory.

A further distinction between developmental theorists sees some as holding a discontinuous theory of development. These theorists believe that stages are discrete and distinct, with children moving from one to the other in a clear-cut fashion, whereas others believe that the stages are continuous and overlap, with the child moving to and fro between them. ‘Developmental theories recognise both consistency and variability in child development’ (DEEWR 2010, p. 2).

The focus for early childhood educators is clearly on understanding each child’s development and then planning to facilitate the identified developmental needs. This will determine what the nucleus of the curriculum should be.

Developmental theories in practice

If you incorporate a developmental perspective in your work with young children you would:

- believe that young children need time to mature and develop knowledge of themselves in their worlds before starting formal education and that much damage can be done by ‘hurrying’ children into formal instruction
- support children’s interests and personal styles of learning, patiently letting them develop naturally and biologically
- adopt a hands-off approach to children’s growth and development, letting this naturally unfold

