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Assessment for learning: theoretical perspectives and leading pedagogy

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Chapter Objectives

This chapter focuses on:

- The ideas of key theorists and the implications of this body of knowledge for your own practice.
- Leading pedagogical approaches and the use of these approaches in your own practice.

Why is it important to include a chapter on theorists, theories and leading pedagogy? As a practitioner, you might question the relevance of theory to your own practice. All you really want are 'tips' that will help you to do your job better. However, there is a significant difference between being a practitioner and being a reflective practitioner. It is vital that you have knowledge of the underpinning theories upon which your practice is based. This helps to articulate your practice more effectively, and, more importantly, knowledge of the underpinning theories helps you to know *why* you are doing *what* you are doing. Clearly, within one chapter it is not possible to cover all the theories and this chapter does not seek to do this. Instead, this chapter focuses on a small selection of ideas that have the potential to have a major impact on your practice.

Leading approaches and theories

This section does not attempt to focus on all the approaches and theorists who have relevance to early years education. Instead this section provides a brief synopsis of well-known approaches to early years practice and key learning theories which underpin effective practice. The relevance of these approaches and theories to assessment will be highlighted.

The Montessori approach

Montessori was born in 1870. Montessori emphasised the importance of children learning through their senses through practical tasks, which children worked through individually. She introduced a range of self-correcting teaching apparatus, which enabled children to correct their mistakes. You may have seen plastic trays for sorting shapes into specific compartments. This is an example of the Montessori approach. The role of the adult within this approach is to observe children and guide them through their misconceptions. Careful assessment is therefore central to the Montessori approach.

The Steiner approach

Rudolph Steiner set up his first school in Stuttgart in 1919 for the children of the cigarette factory workers. Steiner emphasised the importance of nature in early education. He believed that children should be encouraged to play in the mud and sand and that they should explore the properties of water. He emphasised the importance of children learning through their senses and the importance of rhythm, song and rhyme. Steiner believed that the formal process of learning to read should begin after the age of 7. He stressed the importance of learning through play, especially imaginative play, and the importance of cookery in the curriculum. Steiner emphasised the importance of play that is unstructured by adults.

The role of the adult within this model is to act as a guide and mentor to young children. Therefore adults may play alongside children and children will learn through imitation. Thus, in an art activity a practitioner might work alongside children creating their

own painting. In this example, the adult models key skills discretely and the children absorb these, thus moving their learning forward. The adult acts as a mentor within the Steiner model and this has implications for assessment.

It is not difficult to see elements of this approach interwoven in the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. Therefore, as a student it is important that you plan frequent opportunities for children to learn in the outdoors and that you value the learning which takes place through play. The role of the adult within children's play is also important within this model. Steiner believed that adults should not direct or control children's play. He believed that children should set their own agendas for their play. However, within this model, practitioners should support the play and children will then learn through imitation. You may be familiar with the term *child-initiated, adult-supported learning* and this is an application of Steiner's model.

〰 Reflective Activity

Imagine that a group of children are engaged with fantasy play based around the Gingerbread Man. You observe their play closely and you notice that some children are not using expressive language and not taking turns in their communication. You ask the children if you can play with them and you decide to be one of the characters in the story. You start to model the use of expressive language. You speak in a similar way to the characters in the story and you model turn taking in communication.

- How important is the assessment process in this scenario?
- How did the practitioner support the children's learning?

Reggio Emilia

Loris Malaguzzi (Malaguzzi 1996) was the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach. He believed that there are a hundred ways in which children learn and express themselves. Assessment should therefore seek to capture all the 'languages' of expression, and learning can be evidenced through a range of forms including play, language, art, drama and the written word. Within this approach it is the role of the practitioner to co-construct learning alongside the child. Assessment is used to identify where support is needed. There is no

written curriculum. Instead, the child is seen as the starting point for the curriculum. Practitioners can therefore use assessment to identify children's interests.

Te Whariki

Te Whariki is the national curriculum for early childhood in New Zealand and it was developed by Margaret Carr and Helen May. Literally translated, 'Te Whariki' means a woven mat on which everyone can stand. The mat represents central principles, strands and goals into which each setting is able to weave its own curriculum to meet local needs. The curriculum is mandatory in all government-funded settings. The broad *principles* focus on empowering the child and a focus on the holistic learner. Positive relationships and strong partnerships with families and communities form part of the core principles. The five *strands* include developing a sense of well-being, developing a sense of belonging, and making contributions to learning, communication and exploration. Thus, play-based learning and active learning are central to the curriculum. This approach draws on sociocultural theory, which assumes that learning is socially constructed between children and adults and between children and their peers. The role of the adult is to scaffold the child's learning. Therefore accurate assessment is necessary so that learning tasks can be pitched at the correct level within the child's capabilities. 'Minute by minute' adults are asked to listen, watch and interact with a child or groups of children. In addition, 'intelligent' observational assessment gathered over time, plays a crucial role in enabling practitioners to identify missing links within a child's learning journey. Appropriate intervention, scaffolding and support can then be provided to enable the child to progress. The curriculum is not fixed and through evaluation of provision and careful application of principles, the programme will be modified to better meet the needs of particular communities of children.

Vygotsky: a social constructivist perspective

Vygotsky proposed that children could reach higher levels of understanding if someone who is more able supports them through their *zone of proximal development*. This is the gap between what children can do unaided and what they can potentially do if they are

supported. Essentially, an adult or peer *co-constructs* the learning with the learner until the learner is able to complete the task independently. Vygotsky believed that children's development (cognitive, social and language development) is enhanced through social interaction. This contrasts with Piaget's views of the child as a solitary learner. Jerome Bruner used the metaphor *scaffolding* as an analogy to explain how adults or more able peers can support children's learning. The *scaffolder* supports the child by supporting, guiding, modelling and questioning until the child is able to complete the task independently. The role of the scaffolder is to co-construct the learning with the child until the child is able to function without the support. Learning in this way takes place in a social context and language exchanges facilitate learning. Vygotsky highlighted the role of language in learning and the importance of language as a tool for constructing thinking. He believed that social interaction is a vital part of the learning process.

What are the implications of this approach for assessment for learning? As a student on placement, it is essential that you plan tasks which are within the child's zone of proximal development. You need to know where children are in their learning (actual developmental level). This knowledge is derived from your assessments of each individual child. You therefore need to track children's progress against the EYFS framework. You need to plan challenging tasks that are pitched slightly above the child's actual level of development in order to move children through their respective zones of proximal development. You can do this by identifying the child's 'next steps', using the EYFS framework. Providing that adult or peer support is available you can then provide support to enable children to reach their proximal levels of development. The learning is essentially co-constructed between the adult and the child. This is a fundamentally different concept to the learning being 'directed' by a more knowledgeable other.

Reflective Activity

Your observations show that Matthew is able to select the correct numerals to represent 1 to 5. You now want to move him forward in his learning.

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- Use the EYFS framework to identify Matthew's actual development.
- Use this same framework to identify the next steps for Matthew.
- Think carefully about how you will support Matthew to reach his proximal level. How will you introduce the new concepts in a way that allows both you and Matthew to co-construct the learning rather than you directing the learning?
- How will you assess Matthew's progress?

Key Points

- Use observation and other forms of assessment to identify children's actual levels of development. Use the EYFS framework to plan their next steps. Plan activities to address children's next steps. Activities should be pitched at a level higher than the child's actual level of development to ensure sufficient challenge. However, some consolidation or reinforcement tasks will also be necessary.
- Observe children engaged in child-initiated and adult-led learning. Identify any misconceptions and provide appropriate support to enable children to progress through their respective zones of proximal development.

Case Study: Parents as partners: local authority context

Read the following case study of a local authority project. A local authority practitioner has written the case study, As you read the case study think carefully about how social constructivist theory has been draw on to support work with the parents. (As you may know, Petwari is the local dialect of Punjabi.)

The practitioner devised workshops for small groups of parents where they listened to 'sounds from home' boxes. Everyday cardboard boxes were filled with a range of different materials that could be found in the home: for example, pasta, rice, wooden pegs, stones, spoons and coins. The parents were encouraged to shake the boxes, talk about the sounds they could hear and make phonic links with the words describing the materials. No graphemes were introduced, as the point was to encourage parents to 'tune into sounds'.

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The parents became very enthusiastic about exploring sounds and linking them to words and a second workshop was held for them to feed back what they had done at home with their children. Examples of the learning points raised by the parents themselves were:

- 'B…b..b.. we've got bath and banana and books and bangles at home!'
- 'In English, it's r r r r rice but in Petwari it's ch ch ch chowel. My son knows both.'
- 'She put the stones and then marbles in a bucket and played with them in the garden.'

Above all there was a message for the parents about the importance of their involvement with their children at home. As one parent summarised:

'Now I know that this learning can be fun. It doesn't have to be boring and serious. Last night I sat on the bed with my son and we listened to the sound of the owl. We made the sound. Is that early phonics?'

Many questions are raised by this seemingly simple activity:

- How does this way of working with parents or carers draw on socio-constructivist theory?
- It is significant that the parents were supported to develop a language for talking about phonics and their children's learning in a way that was accessible and gave them confidence to express themselves. Can you investigate why language and communication is so important in social constructivist theory?
- Why is **doing** together and then **sharing** the experience so important for learning?
- How did the practitioner show that the learning at home was valuable?
- If you judged it to be the right time, how might you build on this enthusiasm and encourage the parents to document the learning at home?
- How might the information about children's learning at home be celebrated within the setting?

Piaget: a constructivist perspective

Piaget believed that children learn when they actively construct their own learning by interacting with physical objects in their environment. He stressed that children construct their own under-standings as a result of interacting with resources that stimulate their thinking. For Piaget, 'physical activity leads to mental stimulus,

which in turn leads to mental activity' (Morrison 2009: 116). According to Piaget, children take in (or *assimilate*) new learning. However, children must adjust existing thought structures before they can *accommodate* new information. Children may have difficulty accommodating new experiences if these are radically different from their past experiences, and as a result of this Piaget stressed that new experiences should relate to and connect with past experiences (Morrison 2009). This state is known as *disequilibrium*. If new learning is accommodated as reality, then *equilibrium* occurs. Morrison (2009) provides an example of this theory applied to practice. Very young children learn to recognise dogs and build up a mental representation of these (assimilation). When they notice a cat for the first time they may refer to it as a dog because it has four legs and a tail (disequilibrium). They must build up a mental representation of 'cats' which excludes dogs (accommodation) (Morrison 2009).

How might this model be used to help us understand children's misconceptions? How might approaches to assessment inform you about children's misconceptions? Piaget's work has not gone uncriticised, particularly his staged theory of children's development, which has led some scholars to argue that Piaget largely underestimated children's abilities (see the work of Margaret Donaldson, for example, in Donaldson 1978).

Schemas

The work of Piaget and his theories of child development influenced Chris Athey's work on schemas. Athey was interested in the development of different behaviours in early childhood. Schemas represent a set of repeatable patterns of action on objects. Therefore in the early years children learn to develop a 'sucking' schema and they apply this to a range of objects. As they develop, children start to use a wider range of schema. For example, they may develop a throwing or banging schema. Children may then start to apply different schema to specific objects in order to make generalisations about which objects can be sucked, banged, thrown, etc. The role of the practitioner in the early years is to observe children closely to see which schema they are using. The practitioner can then provide experiences that enable children to use their existing schema in order to extend the breadth of their learning. Children's patterns of play change and children will develop interests in different

schemas. Children may develop an interest in objects that rotate (rotation schema) or they may enjoy placing objects inside containers (enveloping and containing schema). Some children develop an interest in creating boundaries or working within boundaries (enclosure schema) and others may enjoy moving things about in different ways (transporting schema). Children may develop a range of schemas and practitioners should make use of careful observation to identify the specific schemas which children have developed an interest in. Practitioners should then extend the child's range of experiences within specific schemas.

The example below illustrates how children's schemas can be incorporated into the planning process. In this example the child is developing his understanding of the 'connecting' schema. In this particular schema, children develop a genuine interest in joining materials together:

> ### 🗁 Case Study: Joshua Nursery: 3 years and 6 months, aged
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> Joshua was frequently observed on the cutting and sticking table joining things together. He loved to use glue and he would spend a great deal of time cutting out paper shapes and sticking them onto paper. He loved to use PVA glue and he also enjoyed using the glue sticks. Joshua would frequently come into the setting on a morning with collages he had made. The practitioner was keen to extend Joshua's experiences of joining. She introduced staplers into the writing area and she modelled to Joshua how to use one. She showed him how to use sticky tape to join pieces of paper and she modelled how to use large needles to sew pieces of fabric together. Joshua experimented with the range of joining techniques and enjoyed the new learning that was taking place.
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> - How important was observational assessment in this example?
> - How did the practitioner extend Joshua's learning within the specific schema?
> - How did the practitioner take a lead from the child?
> - How might this schema be further developed in the outdoor provision – for example, using ropes and crates? Can you think of other ways of extending Joshua's learning within the connecting schema?

Some further scenarios relating to schema are described below.

📁 Case Study: Amy At Home: 1 year and 2 months, aged

Amy sat in her highchair watching what was going on in the room. She used her right hand to reach out and grasp a spoon. She banged it on the table and then released it. Her mum came over and said her name, 'Amy'. Amy reached out to her with both hands, her mum lent over, and she grasped her hair. Her mum released her hair. Amy then started reaching out and grasping the rattle toy, which was fixed to her highchair; she gurgled with delight as she did this. Over the next hour Amy repeatedly grasped at the rattle and picked up the spoon.

Amy is showing signs of a sensori-motor schema around grasping. How could you use heuristic play to provide Amy with a wider range of experiences? How important is assessment in this scenario?

📁 Case Study: Jamie children's centre: 3 years and 4 months, aged

Jamie sat on the floor with an assortment of objects and a variety of different containers. He picked up a small wooden car, and looked at it and put it down again. He picked up a large box and looked inside. He put the box down and looked around him at all the other objects. He picked up the box again and looked into it. He then picked up the wooden doll and put it inside the box. He looked into the box. He then started to collect a selection of the other objects and put them inside the box, looking in at them after each one (for example, a brick, a shell, a pebble, a wooden doll and a piece of string). He stood up and went over to the window with his 'treasures' where some children were looking out of the window. He stood behind them taking out objects from his box, looking at them and putting them back. After repeating this several times he took them over to his key worker, sat next to her on the floor, and got each treasure out and laid it on the floor, smiling at her after each object. When they were all out, the key worker said, 'What a lot of lovely things.' Jamie put all the objects back in his box and went over to the construction area, where he put his box down and started selecting bricks to build with. Later on that day, Jamie used a bag to carry around some pencils, crayons and objects from Small World play sets, such as toy cars and farm animals.

Jamie is showing signs of an enveloping schema. How might you extend the range of experiences which Jamie is exposed to develop further his learning within this area? How important is assessment in this scenario?

> 🔑 Key Point
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> - Observe children closely and extend their experiences within a specific schema.

Metacognition and metaplay

Piaget researched and theorised (or described) children's development of mental processing. He considered children's thinking as mental operations carried out in response to the environment in which the child finds him/herself. Building on this work, other cognitive psychologists have looked at how children process information and store it. Problem solving and memory development have been extensively researched, and this work can contribute to our understanding of learning and suitable methods of assessment.

Of particular interest is metacognition. This body of work aims to help us understand how we become aware of our own mental operations – our ability to process information, store it, retrieve it and use it to build new learning. Very young children can be supported to become aware of how they learn. Children process information and develop their understanding by 'doing' (as kinaesthetic learning), or by careful 'listening' (auditory learning), or by 'seeing' (visual learning) – if not a combination of all three. Provision for multi-sensory learning is a fundamental recommendation of the EYFS Practice Guidance (DCSF 2008b), and the growing awareness and control of these channels supports the assessment for learning process.

If children can be aware of themselves as conscious learners, then their conscious self-assessment becomes possible. This ongoing, formative assessment recognises children as competent learners from birth and requires adults to observe carefully, not only for the skills and knowledge children acquire but also *how* they are acquired. When we assess how children learn it follows that their understanding of their own learning processes (strengths and limitations) and active selection of particular approaches should be part of our assessments (and in turn our planning for provision). Assessment for learning is not a 'bolt on' but an opportunity for 'the learner to judge for him or herself how things are going' (Carr 2001: 93). This active involvement challenges the deficit model approach (what doesn't this child know?) and becomes 'a narrative about confidence and optimism' (Carr 2001: 103).

This layer of thinking about thinking can be seen when children are immersed in their play. As the theme for the role-play unfolds, children may step back and structure what has happened and what will happen next, who will be who, where the play will be situated, and how issues could be resolved. This metaplay (see, for example, Trawick-Smith 1998) shows how children actively direct their learning through ongoing assessment of what has gone before (learned already) and how the play could be extended in the future.

Discourse theory

More recent theories associated with terms like 'poststructuralism' and 'critical theory' may perhaps seem irrelevant to the practical realities of everyday practice in an early years setting. Why would you want to consider these theories when studying the assessment of young children? Surely it is the individual children that we as practitioners need to understand rather than the wider structures in society implied by these theorectical petitions

Early years practitioners work in diverse settings with children who live in and contribute to a multiplicity of diverse communities. Every practitioner in the setting has the power to shape the child's development to a greater or lesser extent. How we understand this diversity can have a significant impact on our ability to assess children's abilities and needs fairly. We also find ourselves considering what 'best practice' in assessment should look like. We may even have in mind what a 'good' child looks like and should do. Sometimes the criteria for such judgements seem clear and sometimes our assessments are made on the basis of assumptions, apparent common sense and received wisdom.

When we talk about children and their development, a framework of feelings, values and understandings of what we believe to be true helps us to decide:

• What to say and do.

• What to see as normal.

• What to see as different.

This complex framework or guide, built on our use of language, ideas and ways of doing things, is termed *discourse*. For some theorists we are *subject* to and at the same time contribute to the dominant, most popular discourses. These in turn determine what and how we think, feel and understand. For others, each of us can *select* from a range of discourses and contribute to their formation and currency. Either way, discourses together produce 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980) that guide our practice.

Why would this be relevant to the assessment of babies and young children? You will have heard people discussing someone – a particular person associated with a group who is 'other' than us. Perhaps the topic has been whether someone is doing the right thing or how a particular group of people always seems to behave in a certain ways. Probably the conversation will draw on a collection of ideas (discourses) as the person being discussed is essentially judged and allocated an identity in the social world.

These ideas about identity are passed on through the media, and through conversations, just like the ones you might overhear or, indeed, take part in! It seems like incidental chatter. However, other conversations are much more important to us and influence how we are able to form our identity and live our lives. Doctors, midwives, Sure Start workers, researchers, early years practitioners, teachers and lecturers all use discourses to organise their thinking and their work. Discourses, it is argued, influence how we look at children, what we understand to be their needs and their strengths, how we prioritise what is important for them to learn, and what it is that we should take the time to assess.

Why are discourses any more interesting than stereotypes and metaphors? Surely we all need these shorthand ways of making connections between the known and unknown? 'Knowing' things means having some power either over yourself or over other people. Professional knowledge can sometimes mean that you will make life or death decisions for other human beings. If those decisions are determined by truths that have evolved to ensure power and status stay with in a certain group in society, then there is a lack of fairness and equity for others.

Being aware of these theoretical propositions should support you to reconsider your thinking about children and your assessment

routines, both formal and informal. It is not just an interesting exercise, completed in the abstract as part of an academic assignment. Sometimes in early years, discourses can guide our behaviour in such a way that injustice or discriminatory practice occurs. Children may be excluded or misjudged and, as a result, may have limiting learning opportunities or be subject to disrespectful care routines.

MacNaughton and Williams (2009) write very practically and in detail of specific teaching techniques that enable practitioners to challenge the stereotypes that build up around certain discourses. Your assessment priorities should reflect your thinking about children's learning. This thinking should be informed not only by social constructivist theories (Vygotsky, for example) but also by the transformational theories from which discourse theory is drawn. The message is that through a deeper understanding of children's lives (voiced by children, families and practitioners), you can make informed choices in your work and avoid injustice wherever possible. In this way each child may be nurtured be each their potential.

Reflective Activity

Gather together a range of advertising aimed at adults but marketing products for children. You may find material that relates to formula milk, baby foods, nappies and toiletries. What have you been able to find relating to toys for babies, toddlers and young children?

Consider your chosen images carefully.
What language is used?
What images are used?
What do these images suggest?

Perhaps it seems as if babies are cute and that if adults apply the right product in the right situation, all will be well. One 'truth' could be that you can assess or diagnose, apply the treatment or buy the solution off the shelf and the desired outcome will automatically result. This is a modernist, scientific way of thinking that implies you can always link cause and effect. Another 'truth' we may glean from advertising is a sense of what normal families look like and do.

Can you list what the adverts tell us about 'normal' families? Do you ever compare yourself to the images you see? How do you feel? What are the links to assessment? You want to assess and take the

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right professional action to meet the child's needs. But what are the assumptions that underpin assessment methods?

- What does a 'normal' child look like?
- Who decides what is developmentally appropriate and why?
- What is it important to assess (and then plan for)?
- Who does the assessing and why?
- How does our understanding of 'difference' impact on assessment?

Any theory is only a tool for thinking and systematically explaining aspects of our world. A theory is only a possibility, yet it can be argued that some hold greater sway than others. How might the power of some theories have an impact on your assessment practice?

Key Point

- Use theory to ask questions about your assessment practice so that you and your team arrive at ways of understanding and working together that give space for the technical and the statistical, but also the richness of relationships and learning. Above all, assessment practice should be just and inclusive and not close down other ways of looking at and listening to young children.

Leading pedagogy

This section provides an overview of some key pedagogical approaches that underpin effective early years practice. Links to the importance of assessment are made within the sections.

Heuristic play

Elinor Goldschmied and colleagues (Goldschmied and Jackson 2004) developed this particular approach to supporting the learning of very young children. The word 'heuristic' is derived from a Greek word 'eurisko', meaning 'I discover' or 'I find', and heuristic play sessions are specifically organised times of the day where groups of children (usually between the ages of 10 and 20 months) are offered particular conditions for discovery learning and concentration. The area for play will

be sectioned off and resourced with a range of natural and manmade materials that can be arranged on the floor area or offered in sturdy 'treasure' baskets. Space to shuffle, crawl or 'toddle' and select objects is important. Sufficient quantities of objects should be available to ensure disputes arising from sharing are kept to a minimum.

Adults have a very particular role in this play. Their closeness and alertness is important so that children feel settled and safe to explore. Unobtrusive rearranging of objects to support the uninterrupted flow of thinking is also helpful. Unlike most other times of the day, adult talk is not a feature of these sessions. Observation is vital. The practitioner needs to build a picture of the type of thinking the child is using and the concepts being explored. This assessment then enables the practitioner to refine the selection of objects made available to the children.

For the child, there is no right or wrong way to handle the objects: there is only the opportunity to decide how to explore, with what actions and other objects. The sessions can last for 40 minutes, with children deeply engrossed in almost silent exploration. Children develop their own 'learning tools' (Stroh and Robinson 1998, in Hughes 2006: 60), and it is their own appreciation of the effectiveness of their actions (using these tools) and their developing understanding of certain concepts that give children a sense that they are in control of their own learning.

Heuristic play is potentially inclusive and anti-discriminatory. The assessments made through patient observation are unique to each child. The practitioner resources and structures the session carefully beforehand, but the children self-assess, regulating their own learning, and practising how to think and explore.

Voice of the child

The contemporary view of children recognises children as citizens with their own rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed by the UK in 1990. Article 12 provides children with the right to express their opinion and to have their views acted upon. This has implications for assessment. Effective practitioners should seek children's views about their learning and involve them in self-assessment. As practitioners, we must not underestimate

the voice of the child in either the planning process or the assessment process. We must ensure that children's voices are heard, that we regularly consult them and see them as competent individuals who have a right to express their views on all aspects of learning. The *Every Child Matters* agenda emphasises the importance of the voice of the child, and the rights of children to have their say and have their voices both heard and acted upon are now enshrined in legislation. Involving children in the assessment process will empower children to take control of their own learning. A key challenge for practitioners will be to develop the means through which children with profound disabilities can be consulted in the planning and assessment processes.

Planning from children's interests

The children's interests are the best starting point for your planning. Within the Reggio Emilia approach from northern Italy, the child's interests are the starting point for an 'emergent curriculum' (Rinaldi 1995: 102). This approach is gaining popularity across the world, and some settings have adopted the High Scope approach where children plan their daily activities with a practitioner. How important do you think assessment is within this process? It is important that you tune into children's interests. Some of these interests will emerge through their play and it is therefore important that you observe children in a range of contexts in order to find out about their interests. You need to spend time talking to children about their interests. You also need to spend time discussing children's interests with parents or carers. Planning the curriculum around the interests of the children will ensure that they are motivated, interested and engaged in the learning opportunities that you provide. Effective practitioners will use the children's interests as a starting point for developing and enhancing provision areas within their setting.

Key Point

- Spend time observing children's interests and try to take account of these in your planning.

Learning journeys

Throughout this text we refer to the use of learning journeys to document children's achievements. This approach allows practitioners to document evidence of learning in a range of ways, including the use of long and short observations, photographs, samples of children's recorded work, and discussions with parents and children. Children should be allowed to select some of the material that is included in the learning journey, and the voices of the parent and child should also be privileged and given pride of place within this record. Children, parents and all practitioners should be given free access to the learning journeys as well as being able to add information that they feel evidences significant achievement. Effective practitioners find ways of involving parents or carers with assessment and believe that the learning that takes place at home is as valuable as the learning that takes place inside the setting. The learning journey builds on the Reggio approach idea and challenges practitioners to document evidence of achievement in a range of ways in order to capture the multiplicity of ways through which children are able to express themselves.

Margaret Carr (2001) describes an approach called *learning stories.* According to Carr, learning stories 'are observations in everyday settings, designed to provide a cumulative series of qualitative "snapshots" or written vignettes of individual children' (Carr 2001: 96). Carr suggests that stories can be used to document children's attitudes and dispositions, such as levels of interest, being involved, persistence, ability to express an idea or a feeling, and taking responsibility or taking another point of view. Carr refers to these as *domains* (p96). The role of the practitioner in this approach is to document 'critical incidents' (Gettinger and Stoiber 1998) that highlight evidence of achievement within each of these domains. Children's stories can be kept in a portfolio and Carr suggests documenting the learning through the use of written narratives of critical incidents, photographs, copies of children's written work and drawings, and the use of comments from the children. Carr's approach offers real potential for collecting rich qualitative data about children's learning. It is possible that a learning story could evidence achievement in several domains, and Carr refers to this as *overlapping* (p97). It is likely that a child who is interested in a task will be more involved in the learning and thus this evidences achievement in two domains. Learning stories can include extracts of dialogue between children

and should be easily accessible. Carr's approach requires practitioners to document learning within the domains over a range of contexts. Practitioners therefore need to be committed to observational assessment. Assessment in this model is seen as integral to teaching and learning, and not as a bolt-on. Practitioners need to have a secure understanding of each child's next steps in learning so that they capture the correct critical incidents.

> **⊙══ Key Point**
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> - Learning takes many forms and can be documented in a range of ways. Document children's learning through observations, photographs, samples of work, videos and audio recordings.

This chapter has reviewed key approaches to learning and teaching and the early years and has provided an overview of key learning theories. Ultimately, you will approach your practice with your own set of values and principles and these will shape your pedagogical approaches. All practitioners should be aware of different approaches to early years education and key theories. This will ensure that your personal philosophy of how children learn is informed, underpinned and therefore grounded.

Further Reading

Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories*. London: SAGE. Chapter 6 is very useful as it includes information about the use of *learning stories* in assessment.

Cary, S. (2007) 'Reading the Signals: A Case Study Taken from Research on: Developing the Adult Role Within Children's Play', *Early Childhood Practice*, 9 (2): 50–63, for an application of the theoretical concept of 'metaplay'. The author of this case study is able to use detailed observations (and assessments) to 'bridge' children's thinking and play skills so that metaplay is nurtured alongside a growing awareness of the needs of others. This journal is an extremely accessible publication that includes a range of practitioner-led action research.

Hughes, A. M. (2006) *Developing Play for the Under Threes: The Treasure Basket and Heuristic Play.* London: David Fulton. This is an extremely effective handbook on how to practically organise heuristic play sessions and what to look for when making assessments of children's developing conceptual understanding.

Willan, J. (2004) 'Observing Children', in Willan, J., Parker-Rees, R. and Savage, J. (2004) *Early Childhood Studies.* Exeter: Learning Matters, (pp. 87–97). These an accessible chapter on observing children that begins with Bronfenbrenner's view of the child living within a series of interconnected contexts, all of which impact on development. The theoretical perspective adopted by the observer (or assessor) is seen to have a distinct impact on what is seen as worth observing. Deciding what observations mean is also seen as being framed by the theoretical perspectives that we work with.

Yelland, N. (ed.) (2005) *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Education.* Maidenhead: Open University Press. For a wide-ranging series of challenges to some long-held beliefs in early childhood education. 'Critical' can be taken to mean crucial, and through a variety of authors you are encouraged to re-examine what is crucial or fundamental to your practice.

Useful Websites

www.unicef.org/crc/

- You can access the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on this site.

www.educate.ece.govt.nz [accessed May 2009]

- 'A collaborative space where early childhood educators can share, reflect on and be inspired by quality teaching practice', and follow the links to Te Whariki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum policy statement.