How Children Learn

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1 WHAT IS LEARNING?

This chapter aims to:

- highlight the importance of practitioners critically engaging with ideas and changing philosophical perspectives that frame their practice
- explore the influence that a number of celebrated philosophers, theorists and practitioners have had on our understanding of learning and how different approaches over the generations have contributed to current practice
- increase awareness of the need for practitioners working with children to have a clear understanding of the terms *learning* and *childhood* and in doing so explore how this can inform their practice.

INTRODUCTION

To critically engage in developing a fuller understanding of learning in the 21st century not only requires knowledge of the historical and cultural influences that have taken us to where we are today but also a recognition that current thinking and practice will change radically in the future. It is, perhaps more than ever before, the case that practitioners working with children need to critically evaluate their own thinking and practice and recognize that what they do is not only bound in time but has its origins in the ideas of a number of key historical thinkers who have laid down the foundations of current practice. Having greater knowledge and understanding of their ideas will assist greatly with the process of critical reflection and evaluation.

This chapter introduces a number of celebrated philosophers and theorists whose ideas, though located in their own times, have influenced the course of our thinking with regard to how children learn. To begin, however, we must try and conceptualize what we mean by the term *learning* in preparation for a fuller analysis of this concept in Chapter 2. We start with a rather challenging proposition offered by Howe (1999, p. 2) some two decades ago that, 'The fact that the single

term "learning" refers to a variety of mental events makes it impossible to have a single precise definition of learning'.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LEARNING?

It is important at the outset to emphasize that learning is not simply the act of acquiring new information and knowledge within the classroom. The concept of learning is far more complex, and readers will be invited throughout this text to consider learning not only in terms of its complexity but also in terms of the multitude of views that exist in regard to what the term actually means. Jarvis (2005, pp. 2–3), for example, has emphasized the complexity of this term as follows:

> ... when we pause and try to define learning in depth, we cannot help but be struck by the awesome breadth and complexity of the concept ... Does learning take place within an individual or is it an interpersonal process? Should we think of it as a set of cognitive mechanisms or rather as an emotional, social and motivational experience ... What should be the focus of learning, facts or skills?

It can be suggested that a key difficulty in defining learning is that much of the research in this area has been undertaken within the field of psychology, which, as Jarvis (2005, p. 3) points out:

> ... is not a unified body of knowledge and understanding but instead depends on a number of alternative theoretical perspectives or paradigms. Each psychological paradigm has the potential to offer a different vision of the nature of the learner ...

Students attempting to explore the nature of learning can, therefore, be left with more questions than answers about this very complex and challenging construct. However, this is not a bad thing.

In approaching our understanding of learning a useful starting point can be found in the work of Smith et al. (2003, p. 34) who have defined learning in the following way:

> Learning refers to the influence of specific environmental information on behaviour. Within a wide range of variation, the way an animal behaves depends on what it learns from the environment. Thus, individuals of a species may differ considerably in their learnt behaviour patterns.

It is of particular note that Smith et al. use the words 'environmental' and 'species' in their definition. Also of note is the fact that they use the terms 'behaviour' and 'behaviour patterns'. They also appear to liken humans to animals in their use of the term 'species'.

Employing these terms to refer to humans, and to learning, is very much in keeping with the *Behaviourist* tradition discussed later in Chapter 2 in that it places particular emphasis upon the notion that changes in behaviour are central to how we understand and define learning. More importantly, perhaps, Smith et al.'s definition directs us towards the notion proposed by the *Behaviourists* that learning can be adequately explained purely in terms of stimuli and responses, reinforcement and observable behaviours.

In an attempt to offer greater clarity regarding what we mean by the term learning, Fontana (1995, p. 145) has suggested that we give consideration to the notion of 'descriptions' of learning. In doing so, he offers an important distinction between the Behaviourist tradition (more directly, the notion of *Operant Conditioning*) and the Cognitive tradition (more directly, the notion of *Instrumental Conceptualism*):

> This somewhat intimidating title (Instrumental Conceptualism) is used by Bruner to define one of the most coherent and consistent cognitive descriptions of learning and still one of the most useful for teachers … Learning … is not something that happens to individuals, as in the operant conditioning model, but something which they themselves make happen by the manner in which they handle incoming information and put it to use.

This distinction is vital and introduces us to the notion that learning in children is an active process. Having greater clarity in our understanding and descriptions of learning, therefore, is very important, and particularly in relation to how we understand those underlying cognitive processes that drive behaviour. Unlike *Behaviourist* theories, *Constructivist* theories of learning such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky (discussed in Chapter 2) view learning in terms of the child constructing meaning through experiences gained from interacting with their environments. In particular, they see learning as an active, dynamic process in which the child generates new understanding through linking their existing knowledge to new incoming information.

We now turn our attention to childhood when the foundations of learning are laid down, and when most individuals experience the majority of their formal education. However, whilst the term *childhood* appears at face value to be one that is popularly agreed and understood, it nevertheless poses major difficulties for those trying to define it. These difficulties have been acknowledged for generations, as witnessed, for example, by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who some two centuries ago proposed that, 'Childhood is unknown. Starting from the false idea one has of it, the further one goes, the more one loses one's way…' (Rousseau, 1911).

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CHILDHOOD?

Definitions of childhood abound. Jenks (1996, p. 6), for example, has described childhood as a, '… community that at some time has everybody as its member'.

Less than 10 years before, Article 1 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child had stated that, 'A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (UNCRC, 1989, p. 314). A decade later James and Prout (1997, p. 245) suggested that, 'In everyday life age is used as a dividing line to legally exclude children from all kinds of "adult" spaces', whilst Buckingham (2000, p. 6) offered the following:

> The meaning of 'childhood' is subject to a constant process of struggle and negotiation, both in public discourse (for example, in the media, in the academy or in social policy) and in interpersonal relationships, among peers and in the family.

Others, such as Boyden (1997, p. 190) have viewed childhood as a stage and suggest that children are '… demarcated from adults by biological or psychological factors rather than social characteristics'. This notion of stages can be clearly located in the work of the theorist Jean Piaget (discussed later in Chapter 2), but viewing childhood as a stage brings problems and suggests, for example, that in doing so we may consciously or otherwise define this time in the lives of individuals in terms of dependency and lack of maturity, or, as Archard (1993, p. 30) has proposed, a '… state of incompetence relative to adulthood'. Any idea of childhood as a state of incompetence relative to adulthood, however, requires closer examination. One particular problem with this lies in the fact that we may, mistakenly, lower our expectations of children's abilities, and more importantly, their potential. Children develop differently and at vastly different rates, with some even demonstrating very sophisticated thinking and mature behaviours well beyond their age. Advocates of the notion of stages such as James and Prout (1997, p. 10) view childhood as biologically based and, therefore, '… essentially an evolutionary model', whereby, '… the child developing into an adult represents a progression from simplicity to complexity of thought, from irrationality to rational behaviour'.

It is certainly clear that the nature of childhood is changing dramatically with increased accessibility to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the media, and a substantial growth in materialism. Having established a starting position with regard to the complex nature of *childhood* as well as that of *learning* we now turn to the ideas of key thinkers who have influenced practice over the generations and who continue to do so. In particular, we focus predominantly upon a number of figures whose contributions to our understanding of learning have led to a much greater appreciation of those most important features of cognition and social and emotional development. We now begin three centuries ago with one of the major thinkers of his time whose ideas continue to inform practice in the 21st century.

Exercise

Consider the benefits to teachers and Early Years practitioners of having a clearer understanding of the concepts of *learning* and *childhood.* Why might this be especially important in the 21st century?

KEY PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL INFLUENCES IN OUR UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE WITHIN THE FIELD OF LEARNING

Early Influences

John Locke (1632–1704)

Born into a world characterized by superstition, ignorance and religious intolerance, John Locke is considered to be one of our most enlightened thinkers. Locke believed that our knowledge and understanding of the world is achieved through sensory experience. In taking such a view Locke can be described as belonging to those philosophers who have come to be known as the *Empiricists*. Central to *Empiricism* was the idea of 'empirical thinking', which lies at the very heart of the 'sciences' and in which we observe, gather and quantify data. Locke took the view that individuals should apply reason to their interpretations of the world in which they live and the events that they encounter and should resist accepting what they were told by authorities without question. In many respects he was reacting to the beliefs of the time, many of which were grounded in superstition and fear. Locke believed that when we are born we begin our lives as if we were a 'blank slate' (often referred to in the literature as Tabula Rasa), and it is upon this blank slate that our life experiences, gained through our senses, are written. Locke saw this process as being at the very core of learning and the manner in which all individuals acquired knowledge. Locke believed that our knowledge of the world and how we understand our world is achieved through sensory experience.

During the years between the first and second World Wars, *Empiricism* or the notion that we come to understand our experiences through observation and subsequent analysis of our behaviours, which result from our responses to external sensory stimuli, grew. This view developed particularly within the discipline of Psychology and contributed greatly to what became known as the *Behaviourist* tradition (see Chapter 2). In effect, Empiricism offered psychology, and in particular *Behaviourism*, a methodology at the heart of which was the observation, recording and measurement of behaviours (Gross, 1992; Smith et al., 2003). It is important to note that the Empiricist view is different from the Nativist view, which asserts that we inherit abilities.

Locke saw the primary purpose of education as being that of instilling within children a real and important understanding of the need for virtue, a consideration that currently lies at the heart of much of the thinking around social reform in the UK. Locke was also far ahead of his time in that he saw that learning should be enjoyable and that children benefit from being encouraged to learn how to learn. He also recognized the important role that language played in learning. Indeed, it can be said with confidence that Locke set out many of the basic foundations upon which our current understanding of learning has been built. Indeed, others such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey and Montessori who followed Locke shared much of his thinking.

We now turn to the work of another influential philosopher who, in challenging the thinking of his time, saw the importance of acknowledging the individuality of children and the potential they bring with them when they are born. In doing so, he not only advanced our understanding of learning but introduced us to new ways of conceptualizing childhood as that most important of times when individuals grow and develop socially and emotionally.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Despite being born generations ago, Rousseau's ideas still hold credence today. The dominant thinking of the time in which Rousseau lived was that we are born with 'original sin' and a primary function of education was to purge children of this sin and the associated guilt that went with it. In contrast, however, Rousseau believed that we are all born 'good' and that we inherit much of what makes up our individual potential. Nevertheless, he recognized that society also played an important role in influencing children as they develop. In particular, he recognized the potential harm that aspects of society could have on children in terms of perverting their thinking and behaviours.

Rousseau set out his ideas on education in his celebrated book *Emile* (1911) in which he introduces us to the life of a young boy named Emile as he progresses from infancy through to adulthood. At the time of writing *Emile* it was popularly believed that children were born with internal drives, needs and impulses, which if not addressed could lead to 'wickedness'. For Rousseau, a central feature of education, and especially the role of a child's tutor was to channel these drives, needs and impulses in a positive and purposeful way. He believed that the process of formal education should endeavour to follow the natural growth of the child as opposed to demands made by society. Rousseau viewed the role of the tutor, therefore, as extremely important and central to the process of developing positive and effective learning environments, particularly where the child is being introduced to new learning. It was through this process that Rousseau believed children came to know and understand the world within which they live. More specifically, he

believed that through this process children internalize greater understandings of such vital constructs as, respect for themselves and others, right and wrong, consequences of their actions, honesty and dishonesty, and humility and empathy. For Rousseau, the core function of education was, '*l'art de former des hommes*' (the art of forming men) and he viewed education as the mechanism through which children should not only be given information, but a means by which they could come to benefit society through, for example, learning how to positively and purposefully relate to one another.

Although writing some three hundred years ago, Rousseau recognized how children and young people pass through stages and in doing so recognized that learning is developmental. For Rousseau, the first stage that children went through was from birth to 12 when children were predominantly influenced by impulses and by their emotions. The second stage was up to the age of 16 when, Rousseau believed, reason took over and began to replace actions led by emotions and impulses. Following this second stage, the young person then moves into adulthood. It should be recognized that Rousseau's emphasis upon the innate development of human nature formed the philosophical basis for the views of future thinkers and practitioners, perhaps most notably, those of Pestalozzi.

We now turn to the work of one of the great giants of learning, many of whose ideas remain with us today to such an extent that they are experiencing a significant revival. Whilst most of Froebel's work pertained to early childhood, he nevertheless contributed significantly, as did Rousseau, to our understanding of how early learning prepares us for later development and eventually adulthood.

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852)

It can be said with confidence that Froebel has had an enormous influence upon the practice of teachers and Early Years practitioners over the centuries and continues to do so, even today. Indeed, Miller and Pound (2011, p. 64) recently commented:

> Froebelians continue to influence official documents in a behind-the-scenes way … from the Hadow report (1933) onwards, through to Plowden (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967); *Starting with Quality* (DES, 1990); *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfEE, 2000); *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2002); *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (CCSF, 2008).

Miller and Pound (2011, p. 64) have drawn further attention to the recent emergence of Froebel training, which they report as follows:

> … the Froebel Certificates have recently been re-established at Roehampton University and are developing in Edinburgh … the next generation of Froebelians is emerging, trained, in the practical apprenticeship way, in reflective practice through in-service training.

Practitioners owe much to Froebel's emphasis upon the importance of play and its role in education as well as social and emotional development. Whilst all practitioners now recognize the value of play this was not always the case, and certainly was not the case when Froebel was developing his philosophy of education and his beliefs around the value of play. Froebel felt strongly that young children could express themselves through play and the extent of his contribution to our understanding of play is today widely recognized. Tizard and Hughes (1984, p. 4), for example, commented as follows:

> The value of learning through play was first put forward by the German educationalist Friedrich Froebel … The kindergarten and nursery school movement which developed from his writings freed young children from the tyranny of sitting in rows chanting and writing ABC.

In essence, Froebel saw play as being central to children's learning and development. Because of his strongly held views about the importance of play he created a range of special educational *materials* that could be employed by practitioners working with young children. These *materials* or *gifts*, as Froebel called them, included, for example, a range of shaped objects such as squared blocks and spheres, which could be used with the purpose of stimulating thinking and learning. Froebel also believed that being active was central to children's learning and development and because of this he developed a number of what he referred to as *occupations*. In addition, Froebel recognized the important role that music could play in the learning of young children and, in particular, the value of children singing whilst they were playing.

Froebel has left us with not just an important way of thinking about education but also a legacy of how to work, in practice, with children. In many respects Froebel set the scene for those who followed to explore further, and in depth, the inner lives of children and, importantly, those emotional, creative and cognitive aspects that underpin learning and inform education and schooling. One such follower whose ideas, like those of Froebel, continue to influence practice today is Rudolf Steiner.

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925)

The influence that Rudolf Steiner has had on our understanding of learning and teaching has been substantial. This said, there are those who hold a less than favourable view of him and his work has caused, and continues to cause, controversy amongst some practitioners. He has even been referred to as, 'a maverick Austrian scientist' (Edwards, 2002, p. 2). Currently, there are more than a thousand Steiner schools, and over two thousand Early Years establishments around the world. Despite the original philosophy remaining constant, however, many of these schools have developed in different ways.

A central feature of the Steiner-Waldorf tradition is the belief that young children learn by imitation. Steiner founded his first school in the city of Stuttgart after being invited to do so by a leading industrialist, Waldorf Astoria, who at the time was the owner of a very large cigarette factory. The purpose of the school was to educate the children of the workers in the factory hence the legacy by which Steiner schools came also to be known as *Steiner-Waldorf* schools. A central feature of the Steiner-Waldorf tradition is the belief that young children learn by imitation. Miller and Pound (2011, p. 88) describe this perception held by Steiner-Waldorf practitioners thus, '… and whatever is happening around the child becomes part of that child as she absorbs not only the outer actions of the adults, but the inner attitudes too'. The nature of the relationship between the practitioner and the child is of the utmost importance and central to the learning of the child. Miller and Pound (2011, p. 92) have commented as follows:

> Steiner practitioners observe that young children are nurtured by the security of rhythm and repetition – within which their inherent skills and abilities can flourish … Having well thought through and repeated routines build habits that are useful (properly washed hands), respectful (creating a peaceful mood at the table) and comforting ('this is how we always do it here').

Steiner saw the function of education as that of responding to the changing needs of children and by this he not only meant their physical needs but also their intellectual needs and, perhaps most notably, their emotional needs. Underpinning the Steiner philosophy are the following key points. In the first years of a child's education up to the age of seven significant emphasis is placed upon the importance of play, drawing and art, and the natural world of the children, with important links made between science and art. Before the age of seven children are not formally taught reading, the reasoning being that children will come to read naturally if they have developed socially and emotionally. This is also the case with mathematics, with children being introduced to formal mathematics at a later stage than children in state schools. The Steiner philosophy also advocates that children are taught to write before being taught to read.

Children in Steiner-Waldorf schools are encouraged to sing every day and also to learn to play musical instruments. In addition, children are introduced to the practice of creating their own lesson books in which they are encouraged to write and illustrate. Assessment of children takes place mainly through the teacher's observation, with a particular focus being given to the children's social and emotional development. Where possible each child keeps the same teacher throughout their primary schooling until they are due to transfer to the post-primary stage. The thinking behind this is that children come to value the importance of relationships, and, in addition, gain from the knowledge that the teacher has of their social and emotional development.

A further characteristic of Steiner schools is that teachers employ a 'narrative' approach to learning. In doing so, they place significant emphasis on listening, with the children being encouraged to internally represent characters. In this way they develop their imagination. Once introduced to material by way of a story the children

may then be encouraged and supported in revisiting the content on the next day and retelling it. Here, the aim is to improve spoken language and, perhaps more interestingly, memory. As this process of listening and recalling are worked through children are then supported in writing down their stories.

Observation plays an enormous part in the practice of teachers in Steiner-Waldorf schools. Nicol (2010, pp. 85–6) has indicated some of the key principles that inform the practice of the kindergarten teacher working in Steiner-Waldorf schools who:

> … understands that learning and development is of course a continuous process, and may wait patiently to watch these unfold … uses insight rather than measurement: the question is: 'Who are you?' rather than 'What can you do?' … respects and refrains from hurrying the child's natural speed of development … meditates on the child, holds the child in his/her thoughts (a process termed as 'inner work') … is aware of and engaged in his or her own self-development.

It is worth considering some of these key principles within the context of current practice in primary schools and Early Years settings. Steiner-Waldorf schools are currently undergoing something of an expansion in the UK. In a recent article (2012) in the UK daily newspaper *The Guardian*, the journalist Jeevan Vasagar reported that:

> In England, Steiner education is on the brink of a significant expansion. At present, the academy in Herefordshire is the only one to receive state funding out of 34 Steiner schools in the UK. In September, it will be joined by a state-funded 'free school' in Frome, Somerset. Two more Steiner schools – in Leeds and Exeter – are applying for state funding under the free schools programme.

We now turn to the work of the McMillan sisters who were instrumental in addressing some of the major social injustices of their time. In looking at the ideas of these two sisters it is worth reflecting upon the view that much-needed social reform is still required to ensure that children are not growing up in poverty, that children are not facing neglect and abuse and that they all have access to learning opportunities that will allow them to properly develop their potential and abilities.

Rachel (1859–1917) and Margaret (1860–1931) McMillan

To properly understand the contribution that Rachel and Margaret McMillan have made to our understanding of learning requires that we also understand the social world within which they lived and worked. London at this time was a city of marked contrasts between the rich and poor. It was a time of much-needed social reform and like many other industrialized cities of the time was characterized not only by extreme wealth and privilege but also by extreme poverty, poor sanitation, high mortality rates in childhood, appalling housing, and some of the worst slums in Europe. Between 1831 and 1866 around 150,000 individuals died of cholera. Londoners living

during the 1840s could have expected a life span of 30 to 40 years, whilst by 1911 they could, on average, expect to live until they were in their fifties (Hall, 1998, p. 695). It has been estimated (Horn, 1997) that between 1900 and 1950 there existed within London around 30,000 homeless children who lived on the streets. These children were typically, undernourished, uneducated and unsupervised. It was not until 1899, 10 years after Rachel had moved to London to be with her sister and the first murders of the infamous Jack the Ripper had been reported, that school attendance was made compulsory.

After a sustained campaign the sisters were successful in their quest to have free school meals for children introduced, which followed the passing of the Provision of School Meals Act in 1906. It is interesting that this is now a topic under discussion by many local authorities in the UK. The sisters were also highly influential in having the government introduce medical inspections for children in schools, with the first clinic opening its doors in 1908. Rachel and Margaret were particularly outspoken in their insistence that the first years of a child's life were of the utmost importance and, true to their belief, they founded what was to become the *Nursery Movement*. As part of their determination to alter for the better the lives of children, they emphasized the benefits of open-air learning. In many respects this was in response to the overcrowded and filthy living conditions experienced by the thousands of children growing up and being educated in cities.

In 1904 Margaret published *Education through the Imagination*, and in her later years played an influential role in the training of teachers. She went on to found the Rachel McMillan College in 1930 for this purpose and as a means of improving the training of those wishing to work with young children in her nurseries. Like Margaret, Rachel believed that involving children in nurseries with caring for animals and plants was an important means of developing within them the important values of caring not only for themselves but also for others.

We now turn to the work of more modern philosophers and theorists who have directly influenced practice today and how we view learning in the 21st century. One such theorist is the Russian born physiologist Ivan Pavlov, who in 1904 was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work on the underlying mechanisms in the digestive system in mammals.

Exercise

Identify the contributions that early philosophers have made to our understanding of how children learn and consider whether aspects of their thinking continue to have any relevance for practitioners in the 21st century.

Modern Influences

Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936)

No student of learning can escape the name of Ivan Pavlov. A Russian physiologist born in 1849, Pavlov was the eldest of 11 children, six of whom had died during childhood. It is of particular note that despite being a physiologist Pavlov indirectly gave to the field of learning one of its most basic cornerstones, his work on conditioned reflexes, which led to *Classical Conditioning*, and which has been a major influence in the field of psychology and especially learning.

Although Pavlov is not commonly viewed as a philosopher or theorist in the field of education, his ideas and experimental observations have, nonetheless, provided us with a number of key insights into how individuals learn. Indeed, it would be fair to say that all teachers and Early Years practitioners employ, wittingly or otherwise, in their everyday practice principles initially determined by Pavlov. The principles on which he developed his thinking around learning remain relevant today and are much in use by practitioners working with children. In many respects his contribution to our understanding of learning has been considerable. Pavlov's work is discussed more fully in the following chapter.

At around the same time that Pavlov was developing his thinking in the area of conditioning a young American was developing his ideas on education and, particularly, schooling; these ideas were to influence the practice of countless teachers across the Western world. His name was John Dewey.

John Dewey (1859–1952)

Dewey's views on learning and education continue to influence thinking today though they remain highly controversial. The extent of the controversies surrounding Dewey's ideas can be seen in the following two quotations offered by the British philosopher Richard Pring (2007, p. 3):

> … when I came to Oxford in 1989, I was seated at dinner next to Lord Keith Joseph, who had been Secretary of State for Education under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. He accused me of being responsible for all the problems in our schools – because I had introduced teachers to John Dewey.

Here, he quotes the American philosopher Nel Noddings (2005) as follows:

> …not only has he [Dewey]*:* been hailed as the savior of American education by those who welcome greater involvement of students in their own planning and activity [but also] he has been called 'worse than Hitler' by some who felt that he infected schools with epistemological and moral relativism and substituted socialization for true education. (p. 3)

Dewey is frequently associated with the concept of C*hild-Centred Education*. However, it is a common misconception that Dewey advocated the notion of free and pupil-led education. In fact, Dewey saw structure as being important in learning. He did, however, also view the experiences of children as being central to their education and schooling. Dewey argued that children required direction and support with their learning in order to develop their potential and gain the maximum benefit from their learning experiences. Dewey persisted in his view that educators should take full account of the individuality and uniqueness of each child and though this emphasis upon individuality appears obvious now, at the time that Dewey was formulating his views this was far from the reality experienced by many children. In fact, Dewey believed that the individuality and uniqueness of individuals were both genetic and experiential.

Dewey held the view that children need to engage with the curriculum offered in schools in individualized and different ways, and he believed that school curricula should allow for, and embrace, such differences. Related to this was Dewey's belief that education had a wider purpose, that of preparing young people for becoming effective members of their communities and the wider societies in which they lived. To this end, Dewey viewed education and democracy as being intrinsically linked.

At the heart of Dewey's philosophy of education lay his beliefs, derived in large part from his 'Laboratory School', which he had opened in the city of Chicago in 1896 and which admitted children from nursery stage through to their twelfth grade. It was in this school that Dewey had subjected his own ideas about education and learning to scrutiny. The philosopher Richard Pring (2007, p. 16) has commented as follows:

> … behind Dewey's experimental school was a particular view of the normal young learner: someone who is curious and interested, but whose curiosity and interests had been sapped by modes of learning which took no account of that *interest* in learning …

At the centre of Dewey's philosophy of education also lay two further important ideas. Firstly, that schools were communities and should be viewed accordingly, and, secondly, adults involved in teaching children and young people cannot change those experiences that children and young people have already had. Educators, he argued, should involve themselves with the present and with the future, for it is in these two areas that they can have purposeful and meaningful influence. This, of course, is not to say that educators should disregard children's past experiences. In fact they can, Dewey believed, learn from these and take from their own learning of children's experiences ways in which they can work to promote positive change in their pupils. Pring (2007, pp. 15–17) has offered an overview of Dewey's views as follows:

> First, the school should be an extension of the home and the community … Second … the school should value manual and practical activity … Third, the interests of young people were to be treated as of importance in their own right, not simply as something that can be harnessed to the aims of the teacher for the purpose of motivating them to do things that they are not really interested in … Fourth … Their [school subjects] value lies in their usefulness… Fifth, a young person whose interests are taken seriously and whose teacher seeks to develop those interests … will be disciplined by the pursuit of those interests – making the regime of externally imposed discipline irrelevant.

Taking Dewey's views into account then it can be argued that young children's past experiences significantly affect how they experience events in the future and how they learn. Dewey proposed that it is what each individual draws from their experience that is important. Individuals experience events in different ways; what is of benefit for one individual may not be of benefit for another.

We now turn to one of the recognized giants in the field of learning, and especially the learning and social development of young children. Considered to be a key figure even today, elements of her thinking and practice can be observed almost everywhere.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952)

The contribution that Maria Montessori has made to our understanding of learning and child development is universally recognized. Maria was especially interested in understanding the needs of children with learning difficulties and, indeed, she had considerable success with many such children who, at the time, were frequently dismissed as being uneducable. Many of her original ideas on learning and child development remain with us today and her influence is everywhere. In fact, Miller and Pound (2011) have drawn attention to the fact that advocates of the Montessori principles have recently worked in tandem with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in the UK and with local authorities to encourage understanding and the use of approaches based upon Montessori principles as a means of improving educational experiences of young children today. Indeed, it is recognized that these principles have led to effective practice:

> In 2008, 88% of Montessori nurseries were considered by Ofsted to be 'outstanding' or 'good'. Concerns remain that local authorities have the power to oversee EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) provision and to monitor its quality when assessing nurseries' eligibility for state funding for 3- and 4-year-olds' places. Interpretations of the EYFS can vary from one local authority to another and … can easily ignore the particular nature of Montessori education. (Miller and Pound, 2011, p. 81)

Maria Montessori is recognized particularly as being a major and influential figure in the field of early education. Maria saw learning not so much as a task but a

journey and she viewed development in young children as being guided by directives that are already within the child's nature (Gray and MacBlain, 2012). Montessori teachers, therefore, place great emphasis upon the environment in which children are learning and view themselves as guardians of these environments. By changing the environment Montessori teachers enable the children in their care to develop at their own individual and natural pace. Because of this, creativity is given time and space to flourish and thus supports the learning of the children. She also saw music as an important aspect of children's development.

Montessori introduced us to the idea of the *Casa dei Bambini*, or *Children's House* in which teachers created environments that stimulated the children and where they were free to learn and to develop their learning naturally and in an individualized manner. Indeed, Montessori went as far as designing special furniture for these *Children's Houses*. She also strongly advocated the importance of children learning through their senses and believed that central to the process of education was the need for children to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

At the core of the Montessori Method is the idea of 'Planes', or Stages, that children pass through as they learn. It is whilst moving through the first 'plane' that children experience significant change in their physical, and social and emotional development. During this first stage the infant takes their first steps, uses their first words, and begins to engage socially with those around them. By the time they are ready to progress to the next Plane or Stage they are running, jumping, climbing and having conversations with others. In effect, they are employing quite complex and sophisticated language. They are also starting to comprehend the feelings of others and can adapt their own behaviours and actions to respond to the feelings of others. They are also learning to make friendships and adapt to meet the complexities of those social interactions they encounter outside of their family. It is also during the first Plane that children develop their abilities with memory and with expressive and receptive language. Montessori identified 11 'sensitive' periods within the first stage or Plane: Movement; Language; Small Objects; Order; Music; Grace and Courtesy; Refinement of the Senses; Writing Fascination; Reading; Spatial Relationships; and Mathematics (see Gray and MacBlain, 2012, pp. 152–5 for further discussion of these).

Despite the gains practitioners have made from the ideas put forward and practised by Maria Montessori, there are also those who have raised some criticisms. For example, the author John Holt (see later in this chapter) commented in his celebrated text, *How Children Learn* (1967, p. 243) as follows:

> Maria Montessori and her followers did not approve of children fantasizing … Of course some Montessori people disagree with this … To whatever extent the Montessori schools may still think and act this way, I think they are much mistaken.

Many of the ideas of Montessori and her predecessors stand in marked contrast to those of the next celebrated educationalist whose views on learning, though representative of some areas of the popular psychology of his time were, and still are, deeply controversial. Though controversial, however, they have influenced the thinking and practice of many teachers and parents who have wished for a 'freer' education and 'less repressive' schooling for children.

Alexander Sutherland Neill (1883–1973)

A.S. Neill is perhaps best known for his radical views on the teaching and learning of children and for setting up his quite unique school, Summerhill. Neill's work came about at a time of tremendous social change during the post-war years and especially the 'sixties' when many aspects of the establishment were being challenged by young people. It was one of those periods in history when new ideas and new thinking were to be found everywhere.

Neill's ideas on education and learning can be located within the field of *Psychodynamics* and the sometimes controversial legacies of Freud and *Psychoanalysis*, which enjoyed a high degree of popularity at the time. Indeed, much of the thinking at this time in relation to child development was directly influenced by the legacy of Freud's philosophy. Miller and Pound (2011, p. 22) have commented on how the legacy of ideas offered by Psychoanalysts, '… are embedded in the culture of the industrially developed world, including in relation to the development and care of children'.

The influence of psychoanalysis upon Neill's thinking and philosophy of education can be seen in the following excerpt from his now celebrated book *Summerhill*:

> Freud showed that every neurosis is founded on sex repression. I said, 'I'll have a school in which there will be no sex repression'. Freud said that the unconscious was infinitely more important and more powerful than the conscious. I said, 'In my school we won't censure, punish, moralize. We will allow every child to live according to his deep impulses'. (1968, p. 20)

Neill offered the following view of children's development, '… a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing …' (1968, p. 20) and in regard to the experience of children at his own school Summerhill, which he ran according to his own philosophy of education and learning he wrote:

> Summerhill is a place in which people who have the innate ability and wish to be scholars will be scholars; while those who are only fit to sweep the streets will sweep the streets. But we have not produced a street cleaner so far … lessons are optional … Children can go to them or stay away from them – for years if they want to. (1968, p. 20)

Whilst Neill's views on education are of great interest, many of these, nevertheless, remain controversial. It is an interesting fact that his school remains open today.

Having explored the ideas of Neill whose philosophy of education lies very much within the psychodynamic field of psychology, we now turn to a major figure whose ideas lie firmly within the *Behaviourist* tradition in psychology. Indeed, he is considered to be one of the founding fathers of *Behaviourism*.

Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904–1990)

B.F. Skinner was an American psychologist whose name is associated with that tradition in psychology known as *Behaviourism,* and he is especially recognized for developing the concept of *Operant Conditioning*, which will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. Behaviourism as a branch of psychology was gaining recognition amongst academics and thinkers at the time and offering important challenges to the then popular field of psychodynamics and the work of Sigmund Freud, amongst others.

Skinner's work, which owed much to his two predecessors Edward Thorndike and John Watson, sought to investigate, through empirical thinking and experimentation, the nature of behaviour, and more particularly learning. Though not a philosopher in the true sense, it is without argument that our understanding of learning owes a great debt to the work of B.F. Skinner. Like the work of Pavlov, it is certainly the case that many practitioners today, wittingly or otherwise, employ many of the ideas and principles first put forward by Skinner. This is especially the case where practitioners engage in behaviour modification and seek to alter and shape the behaviours of the children under their care. Though firmly rooted within the Behaviourist tradition, it should be recognized that Skinner, like many of his followers and most notably perhaps Jerome Bruner, believed that individuals are not passive learners but are in fact active learners. Skinner's ideas are discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Whilst Skinner's work formed the basis for much thinking in the area of learning, others focused more upon the formal structures of institutions in which learning took place and where education could be challenged against sociological and political constructs. We now turn to the work of two major contributors, John Holt and Ivan Illich who, like their predecessors, challenged much of the established thinking of their time.

John Holt (1923–1985)

John Holt exercised considerable influence upon many practitioners during the 'sixties' when he published his two widely-read and controversial books, *How*

Children Fail (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1967). It must be remembered that this was a time of enormous change, with an almost unprecedented growth in confidence amongst the emerging youth of the time and a sustained increase in spending power amongst children coupled with an accelerating sense of the perceived need to challenge the establishment. In many respects this was a time of experimentation, characterized by a willingness to challenge the established ideas that had underpinned the education of so many generations beforehand. It must also be remembered that when Holt wrote his popular book *How Children Fail* the world was still reverberating from World War II, which had ended only 20 years earlier. Indeed, many teachers within the profession had seen active military service between 1939 and 1945.

To many at the time, Holt articulated views that had been widely held, but rarely expressed, with regard to why so many children failed to realize any true benefits from their schooling. In *How Children Learn* (1967, p. viii), for example, Holt suggested that:

> Only a few children in school ever become good at learning in the way we try to make them learn. Most of them get humiliated, frightened, and discouraged. They use their minds, not to learn, but to get out of doing the things we tell them to do – to make them learn.

Holt also suggested that a key reason for children failing to learn at school was fear. This, he suggested, was in large part due to children giving incorrect responses when asked questions by their teachers and being teased by their classmates. This will come as no surprise to older readers of this book. It must be remembered that at this time corporal punishment was widespread in schools and seen as perfectly acceptable by many. The renowned philosopher and theologian C.S. Lewis, who is perhaps more popularly known for writing the *Chronicles of Narnia*, for example, spoke about his own schooling in very negative terms. Lewis' biographer A.N. Wilson (1991, p. 23) in commenting on this aspect of Lewis' education wrote as follows:

> C.S. Lewis remained obsessed by Wynyard [Lewis' preparatory school] for the rest of his life. Although he spent only eighteen months as a pupil there, he devoted nearly a tenth of his autobiography to describing it, in the most lurid terms, as a 'concentration camp'.

Holt also suggested that many children fail at school because they feel they are lacking in different ways. Such a proposition raises important issues about children's self-esteem, and whilst Holt's views may have been relevant in the sixties it is worth considering if this remains the case today and if so, why. Holt was also critical of the learning that many children were exposed to in schools, suggesting that they were made to learn material that held little interest for them. At the time,

schools placed considerable importance upon formal learning. Children typically sat in rows in their classrooms and dialogue between students was considered by few teachers to be a necessary or even important element in children's learning. Holt appeared regularly on television and gained celebrity status through his writings and popularized notions of how children learn and the factors that cause them to fail. He was also instrumental in acting as a catalyst for parents choosing to educate their children at home. In 1981 he published a further book entitled, *Teach Your Own*, which, again, was controversial and which became a key resource for parents educating their children at home.

Ivan Illich (1926–2002)

Illich was born in Vienna, the son of a civil engineer. In 1941, when just a teenager, he was forced by the Nazis to leave his school because of Jewish ancestry on his mother's side. Ten years later Illich entered the priesthood, but left subsequently, in 1969. Two influential books, *The Celebration of Awareness* (1971) and *Deschooling Society* (1973) led to his ideas and thinking being in much demand. It must be remembered that Illich, like John Holt, was writing at a time of enormous social and political change. The 'swinging sixties' had given a strong voice to young people, especially after the events of 1968 when, in May of that year, a million individuals marched in a demonstration in Paris following an uprising by student activists. At this time the USA was also engaged in a drawn-out conflict in Vietnam, which was the first war ever to be televised.

Illich is recognized for his critical appraisals of many aspects of the social, political and economic world within which he lived. He was, for example, very critical of the part played by institutions in Western societies and their apparent negative impact. Here, it is useful to consider Illich's critical stance with respect to institutions in the light of the current unfolding crises across the modern world that are being driven, in part, by banking institutions, the effects of which run very deep and affect not only business and enterprise but also families, individuals and schools, as well as the vast array of support systems that support these.

Illich was also critical of professionals and expressed particular concern with regard to how large corporations might come to exercise considerable influence over what type of learning should take place in schools. He even went as far as proposing that institutions and professionals could be instrumental in the process of dehumanizing individuals. He argued, for example, that substantial parts of our lives are driven by institutions which lower individuals' self-confidence and self-esteem and adversely affect their abilities and their potential to take initiative and engage in solution-focused thinking and problem solving. It is worth reflecting, at this point, upon the arguments that are being levelled against recent

developments in the UK in regard to government directives on the need to change the curricula in schools.

Illich argued that a particular aspect of developing societies is how they increase the number of institutions. In his book *Disabling Professions* (1977) Illich voiced his criticisms of professionals and 'experts'. For example, he proposed that health care systems such as Primary Care Trusts in the UK and Care Services for families with children with a learning disability can, in fact, mask the real problems that adversely affect individuals, communities and the wider society because they are perceived to be dealing with the problem. Illich also felt that in modern societies individuals are increasingly drawn into living their lives in institutionalized ways, a process that starts early when children begin their learning in large educational institutions. Illich was especially critical of the growth of experts in modern societies whom he felt, inadvertently or otherwise, exercise control over what individuals know and should know.

We now turn to the work of a contemporary American philosopher whose ideas are gaining momentum amongst a growing number of practitioners and who is challenging not only our perceptions of such key areas as the role of the family and the parenting of young children but also how we think of teaching as a caring profession.

Nel Noddings (1929–)

It can be suggested that Nel Noddings has brought a refreshing and, in many respects, alternative focus to our understanding of learning and child development in the 21st century. Noddings has addressed the issue of ethics and its relation to 'care' and has given greater consideration in her writing to the importance of relationships than many of her contemporaries or predecessors. In particular, she has explored the notion of care in relation to education, and how children learn within their families and communities, as well as in more formal settings such as schools. Noddings sees the home as being at the very core of children's education and has called for much greater recognition of the importance of the home in children's education and development. Such a view raises some important questions with regard to the nature of parenting and the challenges faced by many families at present.

Noddings (2005, p. 1) has drawn a distinction between two types of caring found amongst teachers and commented as follows:

> It is sometimes said that 'all teachers care.' It is because they care that people go into teaching. However, this is not universally true; we all have known teachers who are cruel and uncaring, and these people should not be in teaching at all. But even for the majority who do 'care' in the virtue sense – that is, they profess to care and work hard at their teaching – there are many

> who do not adopt the relational sense of caring. They 'care' in the sense that they conscientiously pursue certain goals for their students, and they often work hard at coercing students to achieve those goals. These teachers must be credited with caring in the virtue sense of the word. However, these same teachers may be unable to establish relations of care and trust … The relational sense of caring forces us to look at the relation.

Noddings has also highlighted the challenges faced by many teachers and schools in actually caring for their pupils and has suggested that in some instances the conditions encountered by teachers and their pupils are so bad that they militate against the formation of caring relations. She suggests that this may be due to a variety of causes such as pressures from standardized testing, large class sizes and the nature and content of the curriculum.

Noddings also suggests that there are those within the field of education who find it difficult to accept her proposed view of relational caring because of the legacy in education that teachers feel they know best. She suggests, however, that because the world within which children now grow up is so complicated that it is not acceptable anymore to view teachers as knowing best. She puts the case, thus:

> … we cannot be sure (beyond a small but vitally important set of basic skills and concepts) what everyone needs to know. Every student will need much knowledge beyond the basic but what John needs may differ greatly from what Ann needs. Caring teachers listen to John and Ann and help them to acquire the knowledge and attitudes needed to achieve their goals, not those of a pre-established curriculum. (2005, p. 3)

Understanding what each child needs to know beyond 'the basic' is, of course, a fundamental part of any teacher's role. This said, it is also important to consider the extensive range of abilities, background and individual academic, social and emotional needs that children bring with them when they enter school and move through primary into post-primary education. Society is changing at a rate, which is perhaps faster than has been the case in the past and this is having a marked effect upon how teachers work with children (MacBlain and Purdy, 2011). More specifically, teachers now have to take much greater account of the learning needs of individual children than ever before, in large part, because of their increased accountability.

Exercise

Identify key issues that have been raised by more modern philosophers and theorists and consider how relevant these are to education in the 21st century.

Summary

It is certain that future generations will think differently about learning and how children are taught, and new philosophies and theories will emerge through the experiences and thinking of individuals who are yet to be born. For these reasons it is essential that all practitioners working in the fields of teaching and learning keep an open mind and understand that philosophers and theorists can and do offer us a means by which we can more carefully examine our own thinking and practice as well as that of others. More particularly, practitioners working with children need to critically engage with all elements of their practice as well as the thinking and philosophies that inform policy and decision makers.

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