

# CHAPTER 1

## TAKING A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Overview

The chapters in this book explore both contemporary and historical perspectives relating to some of the theories and approaches which have influenced Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) today. This chapter gives an overview of the structure of the book and its rationale. In the chapter, we signpost some key themes raised in the ensuing chapters and invite you to take a critical stance in relation to the identified themes and to reflect on these in the light of present day issues. The book is divided into three parts: Theoretical and Analytical Positions; Foundational Theories; and Contemporary Theories. In Parts 2 and 3 of the book, the chapters are written by 'advocates' of distinctive approaches to ECEC. One dictionary definition of an advocate is, 'a person who supports or speaks in favour of' (our italics) (Allen, 1991). Each of the chapter authors are 'champions' of, and passionate about, a particular and distinctive approach to learning and pedagogy, and each approach is underpinned by particular theoretical frameworks. However, theories are not a truth but an explanation and will

influence practice depending on the views and beliefs (based on these theories) held by the practitioner, or perhaps the ethos and philosophy of the setting in which she works. The chapters also consider change, transformation and continuity within each approach and its relevance to current policy and practice.

The purpose of this book is to encourage you to examine the different theories and approaches presented and to consider the implications for your own practice. In this first chapter, we invite you to critically reflect upon and consider your own individual position and perspective and to take a critical stance in relation to each chapter. Questions and discussion points at the end of this chapter (and also within each chapter) encourage you to examine each approach through your own particular lens. We hope that in using the framework we offer, you will have the opportunity to ‘step back’ and develop a critical perspective in relation to each chapter – so that you see what may be familiar with a new and critical eye. We have no doubt that some ideas you will ‘throw away’; other ideas you will take with you. We hope that as a result of reading this book, new meanings will emerge and it will help you to look at practice in a different way.

In this book, we take the view that the terms early years and early years education and care should be seen as encompassing ‘education’ but with a care component and that it should be impossible to educate without caring, nor care without developing and promoting children’s learning. We also use the term *she* when referring to individuals of both genders.

## Organization of the book

We have inevitably been selective in choosing the theories and approaches included in this book. The history of ECEC is both fascinating and convoluted and to do that rich history full justice is beyond the scope of any one single book. We have, for example, *not* included a chapter on constructivism – either Piagetian or Vygotskian – since their theories are widely discussed elsewhere (Donaldson, 1976; Rogoff, 1990) and underpin so much current thinking about young children (Johnson, 2010). Constructivist theories are key to, and explicit within, for example, High/Scope, Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki (see this chapter and Chapters 7 and 10). In other perhaps less developed initiatives, such as the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (Chapter 8) and the development of Forest Schools (Chapter 9), constructivism is less explicit but equally influential.

Nor have we included anything on highly influential thinkers such as John Dewey or Susan Isaacs. Both deserve a special place in the history and philosophy of early childhood education – but neither approach is explicit in current practice in the United Kingdom, so have been omitted from this book. In much the same way as Julia Manning-Morton (see Chapter 2) suggests that psychoanalytical theories are implicit

within high-quality care and education for young children, so the work of Dewey and Isaacs are implicit in much current practice. With their different but related emphases on empowerment and supporting children in making the connections that enable learning, their influence continues to be felt.

The interrelatedness of the theories and approaches is an interesting aspect of the chapters. For example, Froebel's theory, as Tina Bruce points out in Chapter 4, continues to have great influence but owed much to the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Owen. We hope that these common threads and shared histories will become apparent as you read this book. As we note above, each chapter represents the views of individuals committed to a particular approach and set of theories, although each chapter offers a critique. Therefore, the views represented are not impartial but they *are* informed and knowledgeable. It is for you as the reader to consider the views presented and to reflect upon what they say to you and to form your own views.

The first part of the book is dedicated to *Theoretical and Analytical Positions*. The two chapters focus, not on a single approach or theory, but on sets of ideas which support a reflective and analytical view of work with young children. In Chapter 2, Julia Manning-Morton considers the way in which the broad raft of psychoanalytical theories underpins all practice in ECEC (or perhaps all practice in life). The chapter has particular importance for two key reasons. The first is that, aside from attachment, the full impact of psychoanalytical theories on adult interactions with young children is not always fully understood. The second reason for its importance is in inviting critical reflection on the way in which our own feelings and emotions shape the psychological well-being of the children with whom we work. The other chapter in this section, by Deb Albon, focuses on postmodern theories and offers an invitation to 'deconstruct' other approaches and theories. Albon raises interesting and challenging questions which may help you to bring a critical edge to your reading and thinking.

Part 2 focuses on what we have termed 'Foundational Theories' and begins with an overview of the work of Froebel by Tina Bruce. The remaining two chapters consider the specific approaches and clear theoretical underpinning of Steiner Waldorf schools and Montessori schools. Both have a long history but are being reviewed in the light of current thinking. Conroy et al. (2008: 16) suggest that their contribution might lie in the now 'stronger emphasis on individual capabilities and a more significant focus on the affective'. These three chapters together serve to remind us of the pioneering practice which continues to contribute much to ECEC throughout the world. The approaches have much in common and yet, at the same time, many differences (Bruce, 2005). However, in all three, the child is placed firmly at the centre of thinking and practice.

In Part 3, 'Contemporary Theories', the chapters are concerned with more recent approaches to ECEC. Chapter 7 focuses on High/Scope which, although highly influential, has, when compared to the foundational theories explored in Part 2, a relatively short history. High/Scope was established around 50 years ago in the United States and the longitudinal research findings which have emerged from it were the rationale for setting up Sure Start in England. In Chapter 8, Trisha Lee offers a personal account of the impact the work of Vivian Gussin Paley has had on her thinking and practice through a story-telling and story-acting approach. Sarah Blackwell and

Linda Pound in Chapter 9 provide an historical overview of the development of outdoor provision and the place of Forest Schools within that development. They describe the work of Forest Schools and discuss the benefits of outdoor experiences and risk taking in what they see as a current risk adverse culture. The roles of culture and community are explored in Chapter 10 where Anne Smith describes Te Whāriki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, which reflects a holistic and bicultural vision for childhood. She describes a curriculum developed by Māori and Pākehā partners and which included wide consultation with a bi-cultural community and key stakeholders, and which emphasizes children's participation in shared meaningful activities.

The final chapter in the book draws together what we see as the critical issues raised by the chapters in this book.

### Historical context

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Early childhood care and education has a long and interesting history. Writers and thinkers from even before the 17th century onwards have influenced the way in which education, including early education, has been shaped and developed in more recent times. Although it is with the work of Froebel that the exploration of specific theories and approaches to early childhood care and education begins in this book (see Chapter 4), we should be aware of the precedents which shaped his thinking. Pestalozzi's belief that love, work and social interaction were the foundations of development shaped both his work and that of Froebel. Despite this formative and fascinating early work, it is within the 20th century that the history of early childhood care and education really begins to burgeon – but again this has older historical roots. Robert Owen's work in New Lanark is not explored in this book but it was he who established what has been described as the first workplace nursery in the early part of the 19th century. He and Froebel held different perspectives and their work had different roots but the ideals of both were to influence developments in the early part of the 20th century. The work of the McMillan sisters in England, looking at the needs of severely socio-economically disadvantaged children and communities, held the same compassion as Owen's pioneering work. Their emphasis on nature drew on Froebel's theories and approaches, as Tina Bruce points out in Chapter 4.

The interrelatedness of theories is something to be borne in mind as you read this book. Theories have roots and precedents and they go on to spark new theories and ideas. Theories are also shaped by the contemporary social context and these influence popular views of childhood, curriculum and pedagogy.

### Themes and threads

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In this section, we highlight some of the key themes and interrelated threads which permeate and link the chapters. We have added questions at the end of the chapter as a framework for your thinking and reflection. The themes explored are:

- children and childhood
- curricula, learning and play
- the role of adults
- the nature of research and evidence.

## Children and childhood

The theories and approaches outlined in this book have at their heart careful observation, intense listening and a desire to tune into children – to understand what they seek to understand and to know. We should not forget that childhood is a construction that arises from historical, cultural and economic conditions (Kellet, 2010) and that educators can hold multiple views or constructions of children. Practitioners can recognize both the child in need of nurture and the child as agent of their own learning. It is reflection which helps us to understand and reconcile what are sometimes apparently irreconcilable views.

The way in which children are represented informs the way in which teaching and learning develop. The metaphor of a garden (or kindergarten) is key in Froebel's work – as the context for learning, needed if the plant (or child) is to thrive. If you think of children as blossoming plants in need of nurturing, then your approach will be different than if you primarily think of education as 'a process of living, not a preparation for future living' (Nutbrown et al., 2008: 43, citing Dewey, 1897). This assumes, as, is the case in Reggio Emilia nurseries (see below), that the child is a powerful and active agent in her own learning. This view of children as active agents in their own learning encompasses ideas of listening to or learning from the child (Clark et al., 2005) but is not in itself new. Each of the theories and approaches outlined in this book views children in this light and although practitioners understand and share this view, their interpretation of that may be different. This is because each of us also holds our own views of children and childhood and these, like theories, contain something of earlier views.

James et al. (1998) suggest that historical views of childhood (or pre-sociological views) include ideas of innocence and evil; natural development or the empty vessel; or the child without will or consciousness. They go on to suggest that more recent views have situated childhood within a cultural context, recognizing the impact that social influences have on shaping childhood, as well as the role that both nature and nurture play in the process. Perhaps the key point for the reader here is that awareness of these factors does not grant immunity from holding conflicting views. We talk about active learners but in practice (as pointed out in the chapter on Forest Schools), we minimize risk to the point where action and agency is severely limited. We theorize about children as unique individuals yet, as Paley reflects and seeks to understand in her writing, we jump to stereotypical conclusions about children.

## Curricula, learning and play

Curricula are undoubtedly culturally shaped and cannot always be readily transferred from one environment to another. Te Whāriki presents a powerful metaphor of the

curriculum as a woven mat on which everyone can stand, consisting of the principles of education, interwoven with strands or aims of learning which embrace both Māori and Pākeha culture. It also provides an example of a curriculum which was shaped through negotiation between practitioners holding different views – finally arriving at a consensus.

Curricula may also be shaped by the view of the child held by practitioners which can produce markedly different curricula; the place of modern technology offers an interesting illustration. Technology is not included in the Steiner Waldorf curriculum since, as Jill Taplin points out, it is believed to be inappropriate to that stage of development. ‘Instead ... children use a wide range of “warm technology” such as ... corn grinders, drills and whisks’ (Steiner Waldorf Education, 2009: 28).

On the other hand, other curricula – such as those of High/Scope, Reggio Emilia (discussed later in this chapter) and Te Whāriki – embrace modern technologies. How are these decisions arrived at? While the latter approaches may cite the need to recognize that children need to be part of the 21st century, the former (and other approaches) may cite the work of those who urge caution. A raft of dissenters from a very broad range of backgrounds suggest that information technologies may be changing the brain and learning in undesirable ways (Greenfield, 2004; Pagani et al., 2010); threatening established forms of communication and thought which require face-to-face responsive and interactive exchanges (Alexander, 2010) or failing to develop physicality and thought (Healy, 1999) while subjecting children to commercial forces (Mayo and Nairn, 2009).

A vital question here it seems is who is choosing what is to be learnt? On what basis are decisions made about what should be included or excluded from the curriculum? And, once those decisions are taken, by what means are they maintained or not? In Chapter 4, for example, Tina Bruce highlights the role of the revisionists – people who were prepared to make changes to the prescribed curriculum in order to maintain its dynamic qualities. Who are the revisionists in today’s society?

Play is a recurrent theme in most chapters. From the earliest days of ECEC, play has been widely regarded as an essential part of the learning of young children. However, as is illustrated in Chapter 5, different theories and approaches are based on different views of what play is. This is of course closely linked to the view that is held of children and childhood. Froebel’s view of play has some different qualities and characteristics to that held by Montessori or Paley. Montessori practitioners take the view that play and work share many characteristics – their emphasis is on practical tasks – while Paley also identifies play as work but places imaginative play at the forefront of her work with children. She writes, for example:

The mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas. Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind, whether in the service of further storytelling or in formal lessons. (Paley, 2004: 26)

## The role of adults

The common ground which may be seen in relation to views of childhood and curricula is also to be found in the role of adults. Warmth and care are at the heart of all of these approaches, recognizing the vulnerability of young children which stands alongside their unique, active and curious approach to learning. However, there are also significant differences in the role considered most appropriate for adults.

Chapters 2 and 3 indicate that adults need both to be self-aware and to be willing and able to reflect and analyse from a range of perspectives. The emphasis within foundational theories is on an enabling role. This may take the form of providing structured materials or open-ended play materials. It will undoubtedly involve careful observation and analysis of what children are doing.

The adults' role in observing and analysing is also evident in the theories and approaches outlined in Part 3. This may take the form of analysing children's own stories and observing their play as Paley does; collecting and analysing learning stories as New Zealand practitioners do; or emphasizing the importance of observations in shaping experiences as Forest School practitioners do.

However, the adults' role in interacting with children may vary. Steiner practitioners, for example, frequently engage in practical activities. While children play, adults busy themselves with real tasks for real purposes, such as sewing. They are 'present' (Drummond and Jenkinson, 2009) and available but do not engage explicitly in children's play. Paley, on the other hand, describes some very active engagement in shaping play. When a teacher calms children's play focused on a hurricane, she tells the children that they are now the National Guard and must put on their hip boots. Now they are ready to clear up the storm damage, thus returning the classroom to order (Paley, 2010).

The role of the adult in High/Scope hinges around structuring time – the environment is arranged so that children can act independently, while in Forest Schools a range of routines led by adults provide procedures to ensure that risks are safely managed. Many of these differences in the role of adults are subtle but they are informed by the adults' views of children and curricula. Official theories are often mediated or modified by the practitioners' personal theories.

It would be wrong to leave this section without mentioning the role of parents and carers. For Froebel, the emphasis was on mothers. As Tina Bruce indicates, this focus on the role of women was pioneering for its time. Montessori offered support for hard pressed parents – again probably with an emphasis on mothers. A key feature of High/Scope, often overlooked by politicians, was the high level of work with parents which was involved when the programme was introduced. One of the basic elements of Te Whāriki is the role of family and community in supporting children's learning.

## The nature of research and evidence

A vital factor to consider, as you read this book, is the nature of research and evidence. Qualitative research methods may be subjective but may hold truth in the stories they

tell. An example of this might be the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (see Chapter 8) whose theories are not based on quantitative research but on her own ‘stories’ – which have emerged from watching and listening to children. While this means that they reflect only her individual experience, it also means that her writing depicts ‘real families’ and real actions, is ‘grounded in reality and risk’; and the reflection and analysis of experience explores not just successes, but failures – from which the writer demonstrates her own learning (Cooper, 2009: 2).

Quantitative research may be held up as being objective but may actually contain bias in the way in which it is set up (Mukherjee and Albon, 2009). The quantitative data provided by longitudinal follow-up studies of children who have been part of the High/Scope approach (Schweinhart et al., 2005) have been highly influential on government policy in the UK, as have the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Melhuish et al., 1999; Sylva et al., 2004). However, research can only be useful if it answers questions relevant to culture, time and place. The values, principles and theoretical constructs underpinning the researchers’ approach will determine its usefulness to practitioners.

In the sections that follow, we examine the way in which the themes and ideas discussed above may be illustrated by reference to the renowned approach in Reggio Emilia pre-schools. The chapter concludes by inviting you, the reader, to take a critical stance in relation to your own theories, beliefs and approaches and in relation to the chapters that follow.

## **Influences on early childhood curricula**

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According to Laevers (2004), curriculum is the way in which society expresses what they want from education. The OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (Bennett, 2004) found that in most countries:

- there are national curricula for young children
- most agree on the utility of these frameworks
- most agree about curricular principles and aspirations
- most agree about subject areas
- most cover children aged 3–6
- there is a growing interest in curricula for children from birth to 3.

Developing curricula for young children involves making important decisions and choices about what and how they learn – as we note earlier in this chapter. Differences in curricular approaches stem from different conceptions of childhood. Most recently, there has been a trend towards a national and centralized form of curricula, for example in England. However, as we see from the chapters in this book, some approaches to curricula – both historical and contemporary – have stemmed from the vision and beliefs of one person, as in the case of the Reggio Emilia system of early childhood education. In this first chapter, we have included an overview of the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning, as an example of an approach which embraces the

key themes covered by the chapters in this book and as an example of a contemporary approach with historical roots. Moss (1999: 8) has discussed how looking at other approaches ‘provides us with a sort of lens for looking at our own situations’ –, a stance we are encouraging you to take throughout this book.

## Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia is an example of contemporary early childhood curricula with historical roots. It is a community-supported system of early childhood education and care situated in a region of northern Italy which has become internationally known for its provision for young children through ‘The Hundred Languages of Children’ touring exhibition (Malaguzzi, 1996) and through visits to the region from practitioners and authorities concerned with early childhood education (Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001).

The Reggio Emilia pre-schools stem from the inspiration of Loris Malaguzzi. His approach is grounded in his personal philosophy, influenced by his experiences in the Second World War and by progressive educational theorists such as Vygotsky. Malaguzzi believed strongly that a new society should nurture a vision of children who could act and think for themselves (Malaguzzi, 1995; Soler and Miller, 2003). This led to an early childhood education system founded on the perspective of the child. Carlina Rinaldi, who worked alongside Malaguzzi for many years, says the cornerstone of the Reggio Emilia experience is based on the image of children as rich, strong and powerful. Children are seen as unique subjects with rights rather than simply needs (Rinaldi, 1995).

### The emergent curriculum

A key, and perhaps unique feature of Reggio Emilia pre-schools, is that there is no written curriculum; the child is seen as a starting point for an ‘emergent curriculum’ (Rinaldi, 1995: 102). The pre-schools have evolved from a ‘ground up’ and individualized approach to teaching and learning, rather than from external and national policy pressures. Malaguzzi refers to the ‘hundred ways’ in which he believes children learn and practitioners and other adults are urged to ‘listen’ to the many languages through which children communicate. Projects, which stem from the children’s ideas, experiences and interests, serve as the main framework for teaching and learning.

### Views of the child and the role of adults

Malaguzzi drew on Vygotsky’s theory (amongst others – see Soler and Miller, 2003) which sees the relationship of the child and adult as central to the work in Reggio Emilia pre-schools. This perspective embraces the view that knowledge is co-constructed by the child and adult as they find meanings together. Listening to the child’s views and ideas is key to this learning partnership. Central to the role of adults in Reggio Emilia

is an ongoing dialogue which questions and challenges existing educational viewpoints and accepted teaching practices and approaches. This professional dialogue is shared with the children, parents, teachers, administrators, politicians and educators from other countries and enables practitioners to challenge dominant discourses around accepted ideas and practices; thus 'deconstructing' (i.e. taking a critical stance in relation to) existing ideas and theories (Dahlberg, 2000). Time for discussion, planning and preparation are built into the working week and other times of the day are also viewed as important. Rouse (1991: 13) describes her visit to Reggio Emilia, where during lunch time guests and teachers had 'a relaxed and delicious meal'. Time is also given to children to discuss their ideas, to develop cooperative projects with other children and adults and to research, problem solve and to revisit work and ideas already undertaken (Nutbrown and Abbott, 2001).

### A researchful approach

In Reggio Emilia pre-schools, adults (referred to as 'teachers') take on the role of children's learning partners. As projects develop, the teacher acts as the group's 'memory' by documenting visits and children's work through photographs, tape recordings and written notes. Such documentation has been described as 'visible listening' (Clarke, 2005: 42, citing Rinaldi, 2005). The children and teachers can then reconstruct, revisit and reflect on what they have learnt. A *pedagogista* supports children's reflection on their learning and meets regularly with other staff and parents to share knowledge and ideas; she also has a co-coordinating role with many facets, including administration and training (Fillipini, 1995). The *atelierista* (artist in residence) is closely involved in project work and in the visual documentation of the children's work (Vecchi, 1995). The adult is seen as a facilitator and co-constructor of children's learning, helping the children to explore ideas and arouse their interest.

Parents are seen as central to the learning process in Reggio Emilia settings and are closely involved with their children's learning and on-going projects. Information about their child is valued and 'feeds' the children's activities and experiences, thus keeping the child as a learner at the centre. Adults view group work as an important form of social learning and the practice of children staying with the same teachers over a three-year period creates a stable and secure learning environment and provides for continuity of learning experiences for the children. This is indeed a model of 'community of practice' (Wenger, 2010)

### The environment

In Reggio Emilia pre-schools, the environment is seen as the 'third teacher' with both indoor and outdoor experiences an important part of the learning process. The environment is intentionally visually appealing and stimulating with close attention

paid to 'spaces, materials, colours, light, microclimate and furnishings' (Clark, 2007: 4). Displays of the children's work reflect on-going projects and research, providing documentation of the learning process. Focal points are the piazza, a central meeting place where children play and talk together and the tetrahedron with a mirrored interior, where children can sit and see themselves from many angles (Nutbrown and Abbott, 2001). The importance placed on listening to children's views is demonstrated in a project where, in one Reggio pre-school, the children's views informed the architects' thinking about the kind of space needed for 'living well' in a school environment (Clark, 2007: 9).

The preschools of Reggio Emilia have, as Clark (2007) says, reached a global audience through 'The Hundred Languages of Children' exhibition and through publications. In Clark's own research, focusing on enabling young children to participate in decision making, the influence of Reggio Emilia is acknowledged. She posed the question, 'What does it mean to be in this place?' and asked the children, 'Can you show me what is important here?'

## Critique

One criticism of the Reggio Emilia approach is that the lack of a written curriculum reduces 'accountability' to the wider community and to society and that practitioners may feel insecure about such an open-ended approach. However, advocates argue that the rich and detailed documentation through photographs, slides, film, publications and the travelling exhibition, opens practice to criticism and scrutiny. This process builds on Malaguzzi's philosophy of making the practice of Reggio Emilia visible to others in order to share and promote his vision (Soler and Miller, 2003). Another criticism is that whilst the system has aroused immense interest internationally, the 'localized' approach to teaching and learning means that it is not readily transferable and applied to other cultures or context.

## Taking a critical stance

Theoretical positions are about how we understand the world. The way in which adults take on a theory or an approach depends on their own views of children, curriculum and practice, as the example from Reggio Emilia clearly illustrates. All of us have existing theories of our own and none of us give these up readily. Professional development processes which fail to take account of this may result in what has been termed 'formica' (Pound, 2000, citing Claxton, 1984) since it overlays but does not change the views and beliefs it masks; these remain untouched and unvoiced but yet continue to influence behaviour. The theories and beliefs we hold – whether formal or informal, explicit or implicit – influence practice. This is what makes reflection such a vital aspect of effective practice and enables the development of a 'researchful approach' to teaching and learning. In looking at the theories and approaches

presented in the chapters in this book, you do not have to agree with them, but what you *do* have to be able to do, is to argue a case or a position.

Professionals taking a critical stance will need to consider the nature of research and evidence to be able to become reflective. Gardner (2006) argues that no one, in any profession, can be regarded as a professional unless they have developed reflective practice. All practitioners need to ask themselves whose theories they are adopting and where have they come from.

## Reflecting on practice

Reflective practice involves questioning what you do and why you do it in the way that you do. Early years practitioners in their day-to-day work may have very little time to stop, think and reflect upon their practice. However, reflection based on observation is a recurrent theme in the chapters that follow. One of the remarkable features of the pioneers of early childhood care and education, such as the McMillan sisters, Susan Isaacs and Friedrich Froebel, is that they knew and understood children well. Their observations gave them great insight – insights into the nature of play as well as the role of physical action and social interaction in learning. Today, these theories are being supported through neuroscientific study and developmental psychology (Pound, 2005).

Schon (1983) talks about ‘knowledge in action’ – that is the knowledge that practitioners may use on a daily basis but which they may not readily articulate. This encompasses the view that knowledge is not ‘out there’ but within the practitioner; however, sometimes strategies and processes are needed in order to ‘get it out’. This may take place when we talk through problems, ideas or situations with colleagues in what Wenger ([www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm)) describes as a ‘community of practice’ – when we try to articulate to others what we think and mean or when we read a book such as this. For example, you will bring your own views, beliefs and present understanding to the ideas and theories presented in the chapters in this book. They may be ideas on which you routinely base your practice – but have not yet have clearly articulated. The danger of this is that ‘accepted practice’ can become routine rather than questioning – for example, the role of play in the curriculum as a ‘leading’ activity. Exposing yourself to a range of different ideas, beliefs, perspectives and frameworks, as presented in the chapters in this book, can enable you to reframe your thinking or use your unarticulated knowledge to look differently at children, families, settings and practices – thus leading to greater understanding and perhaps to change. A book can be viewed as a ‘cultural tool’ offering you the opportunity to position yourself in relation to new or familiar ideas, to challenge your own views and beliefs and to help you to ‘know what you don’t know’.

## The Reflective Practice Cycle

The Reflective Practice Cycle is designed to support practitioners in thinking about and exploring their practice and in beginning to articulate, the ‘hidden’ values and

beliefs that underpin their practice (Cable et al., 2007). The three layer model of professional practice includes:

- *Thinking about practice* – the ‘visible’ top layer that represents what practitioners do in their day-to-day practice
- *Exploring practice* – the ‘explicit’ and ‘articulated’ knowledge, values and beliefs that are used in talking about practice (often learnt from courses, reading and sharing experiences or talking with colleagues)
- *Reflecting on practice* – the usually hidden knowledge that is not readily articulated, comprising values and beliefs and hidden assumptions and ideas about children, culture and society.

The model is designed to help practitioners understand the interactions between their day-to-day practice and how their knowledge, values and beliefs influence the ways in which they work with children. We hope that this book enables you to explore these layers of beliefs and values and encourage you to think more about some of the implicit ideas that shape your thinking and practice, and that new meanings will emerge as a result.

## Final thoughts

No single book can do justice to the rich tapestry that is ECEC. No single chapter can do justice to the intricacies of the theories and approaches that seek to explain how children learn and how we can best support that learning. The human mind is complex and adults are capable of holding a number of dissonant views at the same time. Reflection is the process by which we attempt to sort out those anomalies between theory and practice, between what we say and what we do. As the practitioner and theorist at work in each of us strives to come to a heightened understanding of children, learning and effective practice, the chapters that follow may cause us to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct our ideas. While each of us must do this in our own unique way, in the light of our unique experiences, we have also to reach consensus with our colleagues. A genuinely consistent approach to effective education for young children can only be arrived at through communities of practice and shared thinking.



### Summary

- Both historical and contemporary approaches to teaching and learning in the early years can inform thinking and practice.
- Theoretical positions are about how we understand the world.
- Critical reflection is crucial to effective practice.



### Questions for discussion

We hope the following questions will support you in developing a critical and reflective stance as you read through the chapters in this book.

1. What different understandings about how children learn and develop are contained in the approaches outlined in this book?
2. What are *your* views of children and childhood and how do these affect your practice?
3. How are play, learning and 'work' interpreted in the different approaches?
4. Which approach speaks to you most and why?

### Further reading



#### Levels 5 and 6

Craft, A. and Paige-Smith, A. (2008) 'Reflective practice', in L. Miller and C. Cable (eds) *Professionalism in the Early Years*. London: Hodder Education.

This chapter traces the role of reflection, both in and on practice, and draws on Wenger's notion of communities of practice.

Maynard, T. and Chicken, S. (2010) 'Through a different lense: exploring Reggio Emilia in a Welsh context', *Early Years*, 30(1): 29–39.

Following the staging of the Reggio Emilia travelling exhibition, this article gives an account of a project in which teachers explored Reggio philosophy and practices in order to gain insights into their thinking and pedagogy.

Waller, T. (2010) 'Modern childhoods: contemporary theories and children's lives', in C. Cable, L. Miller and G. Goodliff *Working with Children in the Early Years* (2nd edn). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge/Open University Press.

In this chapter, Tim Waller offers an accessible and critical discussion of contemporary perspectives on children and childhoods. He examines contemporary views of the child and challenges traditional theories of child development.

#### Levels 6 and 7

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (2nd edn). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

This book brings together the reflections of Italian educators of who were involved in founding the Reggio Emilia system and 'observers' of the system. It offers useful background material to those who wish to understand more about the origins, history and philosophy of Reggio Emilia.

MacNaughton, G. (2004) 'The politics of logic in early childhood research: a case of the brain, hard facts, trees and rhizomes', *Australian Educational Research*, 31(3): 87–104.

MacNaughton claims that early childhood education is essentially about children's rights. She regards tackling inequality as its prime task and warns against embracing simplistic theories that ignore the complexities.

Wood, E. (2007) 'Reconceptualising child-centred education: contemporary directions in policy, theory and practice in early childhood', *FORUM*, 49(1 & 2): 119–34. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2007.49.1.119>

This article argues that contemporary theories challenge aspects of developmental theories, focusing on social and cultural influences. Wood places children together with adults at the heart of contemporary educational processes.

## Websites



[www.ewenger.com/theory](http://www.ewenger.com/theory)

This website offers an explanation of 'communities of practice' and provides links to further reading and information.

[www.sightlines-initiative.com](http://www.sightlines-initiative.com)

This website outlines Reggio-style approaches in England, offers a range of information and links to Reggio Children's website.

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