How children learn 4
Thinking on special educational needs and inclusion

by Shirley Allen and Peter Gordon

Contents

Introduction

This book is the fourth in the *How Children Learn* series. It considers the contribution made by a range of theorists, educational thinkers and practitioners to current ideas and practices about how young children learn and develop, with a particular focus on how we can support children with additional needs. Educational theorists and thinkers, both classical and contemporary, have an important influence on current inclusive practice within the early years.
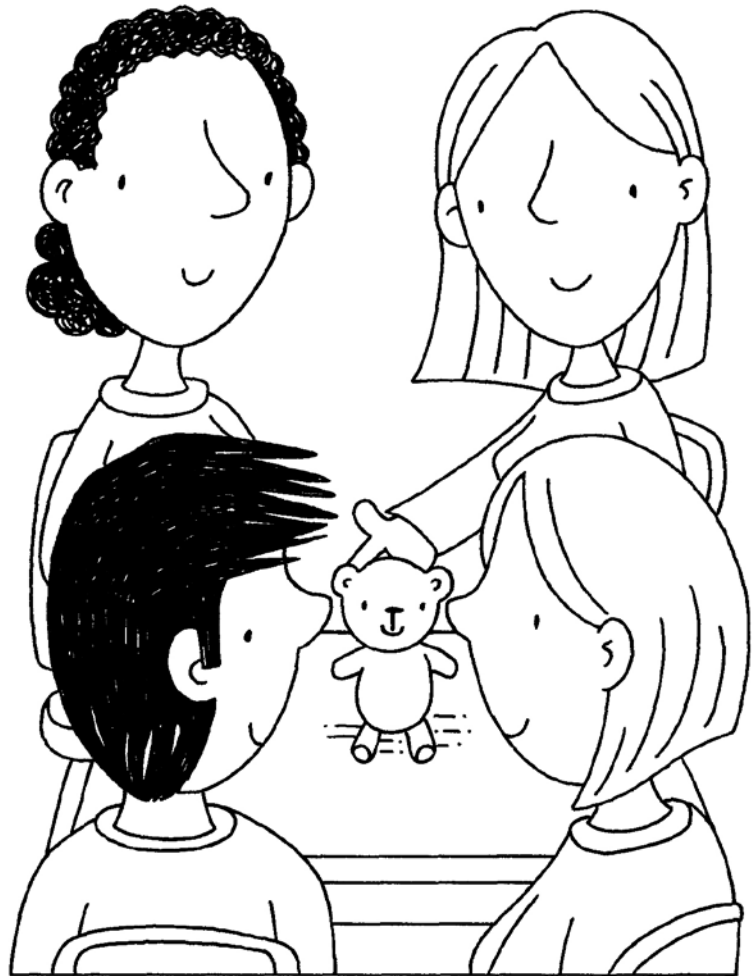
As we have seen in the previous books in the series, theories and thinking on education can be developed from research, experimentation, philosophical ideas or experiential considerations. However they are arrived at, one common strand is the importance of observation of real people in real contexts. All the theories, ideas and philosophies explored in this book have been developed and honed by academics and practitioners who have observed how people, including children, learn.

The focus of the first book in the series was generally on individual theorists such as Susan Isaacs and John Comenius, and, in addition, there were some general sections which looked at influential education approaches such as High Scope and Forest Schools. There were also sections on important aspects of early education such as Learning Through Play.

The second book was more concerned with trends and developments rather than individual theorists. It considered how both classical ideas and modern 'progressive' ideas have made an impact on current thinking and practices. The book mostly considered the way that theories about talking, literacy, creativity and intelligence have grown out of other people's theories and then further developed new thinking in these areas.

In the third book, contemporary thinkers and theorists were highlighted such as Tina Bruce and Guy Claxton, who are currently influencing ideas about the learning and development of young children. There were also topics of interest to contemporary practitioners such as Gender Issues, Moral Development and Learning Outdoors.

About this book

■ This book, the fourth in the series, focuses on theorists and thinkers who are currently influencing ideas about the learning and development of young children, particularly those with additional needs, and about inclusive practice in early years settings. In the second part of the book, a range of topics will be explored which are highly influential in promoting inclusive practice and are of particular interest to today's practitioners. Examples of practice in the book demonstrate how educators have looked 'beyond labels, diagnoses and particular settings' and considered individual factors to ensure that children with additional needs are 'both prepared for and accepted within society'. [1]

■ Most sections are laid out in a consistent pattern. There are some key facts to place the theory or thinking within a context. The theory is explained and titles of the main publications are listed. Theory is then linked to practice with examples where relevant. Each section has a 'Comments' area which is there to encourage some critical and reflective analysis of the content.

■ There are a great many links between the theorists, their theories and the other ideas presented in this book and in the series as a whole. These links are highlighted to encourage the reader to explore beyond the current page. It is our hope that readers will use these pages as springboards into further reading and research and will want to find out more about how children can be included and their learning developed.

■ This book deals with a huge amount of theory and understanding about the education and development of young children and those with additional needs. It can be just a brief introduction to these ideas which will hopefully stimulate the interest of readers to find out more. We are conscious that we will have omitted many potential thinkers and theorists who have also been influential in developing inclusive practices, but this is inevitable given the choices we have had to make.

Reference

Hickman, C. and Jones, K. (2005) 'Inclusive practice for children with Special Educational Needs' in Waller, T. (ed) *An Introduction to Early Childhood*. London: Paul Chapman

Notes to students

Every effort has been made to make sure that you have all the information you will need to cite sources in your own work. You may need to rearrange these references in your work in order to satisfy the specific demands of tutors and accreditation bodies. You would be wise, before you hand in your assignments, to double check that you have indeed met the requirements relevant to your particular course or place of study.

Each section contains guidance to help you track down more information for yourself. The information in this book is just the beginning as there is much more available material to be read, discussed and learnt from the work of the eminent thinkers and theorists that we have introduced to you. It is worth checking to see whether your library (public, college or university) can help you find some of the texts we refer to.

Words of warning

Take extra care about referencing accurately. Any written work should include clear references to all sources used, whether you have just used their ideas or quoted directly from their work. You want to avoid being accused of plagiarism, which can be a very serious academic offence, through carelessness or inaccuracy.

Be very cautious about the use of web sites. They can be a really useful and helpful source of accurate information. They can also be misleading, inaccurate or purposefully mischievous. They may just be simply out of date. It is always sensible to reflect on who is publishing the information and why. It is just possible that they are trying to get you to buy something or are presenting a particular viewpoint to sway your opinion.

Any website addresses given in this book were valid and accessible at the time of going to press.

Observation and Assessment

Some key thinking and theories about observation

Observation of children can be described as 'watching the children in our care, listening to them and taking note of what we see and hear.' [1]

Pioneers of observation

Early pioneers of observation in early childhood education included the educators Friedrich Froebel, Margaret McMillan, Maria Montessori and Susan Isaacs, who used observation to inform their provision for children's learning and development. Froebel recognised the importance of play and thought educators could use observations of young children to support their play interests. McMillan, who was influenced by Froebel, observed children at her Open Air Nursery in Deptford, London. She was concerned with children's holistic needs and used observations to develop records of their development.

Montessori thought observations of children could help identify how the learning environment should be organised to support their individual progression. Isaacs believed that 'deep observation was the key to understanding the complex and unique realities of individual children'. [2] She made detailed observations of children's activities at the Malting House School in Cambridge during the 1930s and analysed these to consider children's cognitive and emotional development. Isaacs also proposed that parents should record observations of their children to provide further information on their progression.

These educators emphasised the importance of the process of observation, which is now an integral part of current early years practice.

Observation and Assessment

Different kinds of observations and their use

Observation method	Purpose of observation
Time sampling	track a child's actions at intervals over a fixed period of time
Event sampling	provide details of a significant event which has been noticed
Checklist	record particular information about a child
Daily timed	observe a child at a specific time of day
Target child	record details of a child's actions over a period of time
Narrative observation	provide a detailed account of a child's actions
Sociogram	identify a child's social interactions and friendship groups
Tracking map	record the location of a child's activity
Film, photography and audio recording	record a conversation with a child, an activity or an area of provision

Observations enable early years educators to: [3]

- Review safety of provision and identify possible dangers.
- Give attention to all children.
- Value, support and extend play activities.
- Be aware of new developments in children's play activities.
- Know more about children's intentions and meanings.
- Identify any difficulties that children may be experiencing, such as bullying.
- Know more about individual children's interests, preferences, dispositions and patterns of action and interaction.
- Gain evidence of children's cognitive and social development and share this with parents, colleagues and other professionals.
- Inform planning for individuals and groups of children.
- Reflect on their observations of children and evaluate provision in terms of the curriculum, environment and resources.
- Consider observations against theoretical views of children's development.
- Use observation as a tool for their own or others' professional development.

Observation of children with additional needs

Educators and other professionals can use observations to evaluate the progression of children with additional needs and monitor the effectiveness of any interventions that have been introduced to support their needs. If children have a statement of special educational need, then observations will provide important sources of information on their progression at their annual review meetings. Observations can also assist with the identification of a child's specific areas of strength or difficulty when initial concerns have been raised by a parent, educator or another professional who is working with the child. [4]

Methods of observation

Observations that are undertaken when educators are engaged in children's activities are known as 'participant observations'. Other forms of observation are 'spontaneous observation', when a record of a noticeable or significant event is made or 'planned observations', when the observer stands back to observe children. [1] Observations vary in type and length, according to their purpose.

Some key thinking and theories about assessment

Assessment is 'the process of analysing and reviewing what we know about children's development and learning.' [1] Margaret Carr has identified four characteristics of assessment: [5]

- It is concerned with everyday practice.
- It is observation-based.
- It requires an interpretation.
- It leads to improved learning and teaching.

Early years educators generally form judgements about children's ideas, knowledge, motivation, abilities and thinking from their experience of observing children rather than from using formal assessment procedures. [6] This formative assessment is called 'assessment for learning', as it informs planning and provides information which is used to plan for the 'next steps' of children's learning. Children's assessments can be called 'Learning Journeys', as they document their progression over a period of time, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Observation and Assessment

Learning dispositions

The EYFS Profile is a summative assessment, as it summarises children's progress towards the Early Learning Goals at the end of the EYFS. It also serves as formative assessment to guide provision for children in their following year at school (Year One). [1]

Carr advocated the use of a framework of 'learning dispositions', which describes children's attitudes and motivation. She suggested that educators use 'learning stories' to describe children's dispositions, which make their learning 'visible'. Carr proposed five domains of leaning disposition: [5]

- Taking an interest.
- Being involved.
- Persisting with difficulty or uncertainty.
- Communicating with others .
- Taking responsibility.

The emphasis on children's achievement in Learning Stories and the notion of 'learning dispositions', resonates with Loris Malaguzzi's view of the child as a 'competent learner', which he promoted in the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia. Learning Stories acknowledge that assessment of learning in early childhood should have a broad application. They should not be limited to describe children's academic achievement, as this could lead to a focus on academic instruction at the expense of child-centred, play-based learning opportunities, although they are not 'mutually exclusive.' [7]

Assessment of children with additional needs

The assessment of children who have additional needs can be documented through use of the 'Common Assessment Framework' (CAF), which enables information on a child to be shared between all members of multi-agency teams involved in supporting the child. The CAF contributes to a 'joined-up' approach to provision of support and interventions for children. Careful procedures should be established to ensure that information on a child is kept confidentially and only shared with relevant people.

Observation and assessment in practice

Observers should have appropriate permission to undertake observations of children or access information on their assessment. Observation and assessment, which are essential aspects of educators' work with young children, can also be complex processes. Skills involved include: [1]

- Looking – having a focus and clear purpose of the observation. Prior knowledge about children's learning from other sources, such as the child's parents, could be used to support the focus of the observation and its interpretation.

- Listening – attending to the child's interactions with different adults and children.
- Recording – accurately documenting aspects of children's behaviour, responses, learning and development.
- Thinking – reflecting on the observation and interpreting what has been seen. This process informs assessment and planning. Discussion with the child's parents and others who work with the child can support the thinking process.
- Questioning – questions addressed to the child or their parents may help to confirm, clarify or discard thoughts arising from observations.

Importance of objective observation

Educators should consider how they enable children's involvement in their observations and assessment. They should also recognise that their observations and assessments of children may be influenced by their attitudes towards children. For example, educators' views on a child's gender or appearance could potentially influence their views about a child's behaviour or abilities. Therefore, they should be alert to the likelihood of their judgments being affected by their feelings and attitudes. [8]

Tina Bruce suggests four steps of a narrative observation which aim to minimise the observer's bias during the process of observing and describing children's play: [9]

- The context of the observation is recorded briefly by the observer.
- The observer records a description of the child's actions and conversations as accurately as possible, referring to other children involved. The observer only describes and does not try to interpret what they observe the child do or say, as the observation will be impaired if the observer is distracted or biased in their approach to the observation.
- The observation is analysed and interpreted.
- The observation is related to observations of the child by others and compared to theories of children's learning and development.

Observation through schemas

Schemas, which describe a child's consistent patterns of action, provide a focus for an observation. Children's actions can be interpreted through different schemas, and this information can then be used to inform ways in which educators can extend children's learning. Educators can apply their knowledge of schemas when analysing observations to identify the learning needs of all children, including those children with additional needs. This enables a more inclusive approach to provision.

Influence

The importance of observation and assessment is recognised globally in early years policies and frameworks. These processes

help educators to see the child as an individual and plan accordingly for their individual needs. This is particularly relevant for children with additional needs, as it supports the early identification of any difficulties and can provide reliable evidence to inform judgements and future requests for additional support. However, it is not sufficient to record only what is observed. Observers should carefully and sensitively interpret observations so they can be used to inform assessment and guide provision for children's learning.

Observation and assessment processes have also been used as quality indicators when evaluating practice. For example, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the additional Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Extension (ECERS-E) were used to measure the effectiveness of the learning provision for children during the longitudinal research study, Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project. [10]

Comment

The observed child may be perceived as a passive object without a voice, so it is important that children are treated respectfully and consistently. [8] Observation and assessment have been criticised as their outcomes could be used to categorise children in relation to prescribed 'norms' of development or learning outcomes. Nevertheless children's difficulties should be identified and monitored so that these can be appropriately addressed; educators should be sensitive to potential negative outcomes from their assessment of children with additional needs against measures that are based on national expectations. A range of assessment opportunities that consider children's holistic development enables children's competencies to be highlighted and helps to balance potential or actual deficit views of children.

References

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Where to find out more

Glazzard, J., Chadwick, D., Webster, A. and Percival, J. (2010) *Assessment and Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: Sage.

Chapter 5: 'Observation and assessment' in Wall, K. (2011) *Special Needs and Early Years: A Practitioner's Guide* (3rd edn.) London: Sage.

K. (2003) *The Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs (EYTSEN) Project,* DfES Research Brief RB431. Available from https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/publicationDetail/Page1/RB431