

# PART I

The need for theory:  
Understanding the different  
contexts of child development

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction: Starting your journey

In this book, you will meet the children, families and teachers from four educational communities. Through entering into these communities through the pages of this textbook, you will:

- learn how theory guides what you see
- be introduced to a range of ways in which teachers understand children's development
- draw on theories to frame educational practice
- reflect on the power of theories to support inclusion and enable diversity, but also to detect marginalisation.

In Part I, you will be introduced to the four case studies and be shown how to gather and analyse your own observational data and undertake analyses of children's development. As you continue to read, you will learn more about each case study and find out how theory helps with understanding children's development. Additional content about the lives of the children, families and teachers will be presented in each chapter, alongside different theories of child development. You will meet interesting problems that you will need to solve using the different theories of child development.

Part II presents explanations of the main theories of child development that guide early childhood and primary teachers today. This book is focused on the core theories that guide contemporary practice in playgroups, childcare centres, pre-schools and schools – maturational and developmental theories, constructivist and socio-constructivist theories, bioecological theory, socio-behaviourist theories and sociocultural – or, as it is increasingly becoming known, cultural-historical – theory. Because of this focus, some long-standing theories of development and learning have not been included – for example, Freud's psycho-sexual theory and others

have not been detailed – for example, behaviourism. The focus is on theories that guide practice, so the case examples and the core theories introduced have been chosen with this goal in mind. Australian contexts and examples of development are theorised in Chapters 7 and 8, with Chapter 8 examining the perspectives of Karen Martin and Peter Anderson, two of Australia’s leading scholars in educational and child development theory.

Part III turns to the critiquing of child development theories in the context of what guides our practices and the curriculum – the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Curriculum. We look closely at the different theories that are reported in the EYLF and discuss which could be considered theories of child development. We do this alongside a critique of existing theories because the theories were researched and theorised outside Australia.



.....  
 The *Child Development in Educational Settings* companion website provides links to additional resources, videos and activities to expand upon the content of the book. Throughout the book, the ideal point at which to view these resources is identified with this margin icon.  
 .....

## Your professional journey

Struggles with understanding child development and learning theories continue throughout our professional career, as Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show. Figure 1.2 is a poster that was prepared by the experienced teachers shown in Figure 1.1, who were analysing their pedagogy in relation to their assessment and asking questions about their alignment through examining the different theories of child development.



**Figure 1.1** What theory of child development informs our pedagogy?  
 What theory is guiding our school and early childhood setting?



**Figure 1.2** Critiquing the child development theories that guide our pedagogy and principles of learning in our school

They wanted to know which theory of child development they should support in their school. As seen in the poster, they initially examined social constructivism by asking questions about this theory. Was it a theory of learning? Was it a theory of child development? What approaches to teaching are related to this particular theory? They asked similar questions about sociocultural theory, later deciding that the term ‘cultural-historical theory’ was much more closely aligned with their beliefs about how children develop and learn. Finally, they asked questions about the theories of development that underpinned their state (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2017) and national curricula (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Assessment Authority, 2017). They wondered whether the developmental perspective that appeared to sit under these documents reflected contemporary thinking about child development.

Understanding what theory of child development underpins a curriculum is also a core issue raised in the EYLF, the national curriculum that guides educators working with children in the birth to 5 years period (DEEWR, 2009). It is also foundational to using the National Curriculum – even though the theory of child development on which it is based is not made explicit. It is much clearer in the EYLF because the document has made a special feature of child development. Educators are encouraged to think about and discuss different theoretical positions of child development and learning. For instance, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009: 11) states:

Different theories about early childhood inform approaches to children’s learning and development. Early childhood educators draw upon a range of perspectives in their work.

The theoretical perspectives named and explained in the EYLF are listed below. As you read through the different chapters of this book, you will be introduced to each of these theories:

- developmental theories that focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children’s learning and development over time
- sociocultural theories that emphasise the central role played by families and cultural groups in children’s learning and the importance of respectful relationships, which provide insight into the social and cultural contexts of learning and development
- socio-behaviourist theories that focus on the role of experiences in shaping children’s behaviour
- critical theories that invite early childhood educators to challenge assumptions about curriculum, and consider how their decisions may affect children differently
- post-structuralist theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings (DEEWR, 2009: 11).

This is not unique to Australia. Different theoretical perspectives are also reflected in the recently released curriculum for early childhood teachers in New Zealand, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). Te Whāriki draws upon Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model and Kaupapa Māori theory.

It is interesting to note that the Australian curriculum provides no sense of what theory of child development should be supported. This is a question to ponder as you read through the book. You should consider what theories of child development might underpin the Australian curriculum and, further, what theories could inform your thinking in relation to the development of school-aged children. This book seeks to foreground child development for both school and preschool (e.g. early childhood and kindergarten) contexts.

## Your personal journey

The theories discussed in the EYLF and those shown in the poster in Figure 1.2, which was made by primary teachers in a school, demonstrate that learning about child development continues throughout your professional career. Using theory to guide your practice in an informed way underpins your personal journey. Thinking critically about these theories (Part III) is key to taking scholarship forward and being open to new ideas about children’s development.

Your journey into comprehensive learning about the different theories of child development begins at university and sometimes before, when studying courses at TAFEs and secondary colleges/schools. However, you will continue to return to your beliefs and practices as you encounter new challenges in different educational settings. The case studies in this book show real-life contexts in which real-world problems arose that needed to be solved by the professionals working with the children and their families, in conjunction with the children and family members.

In using the theories of child development and learning presented in the chapters of this book, you will come to better understand the families, teachers

and curricula discussed throughout each case study. As the children's lives unfold through the pages of the book, and as you use theory to analyse the children's development, you will begin to make informed decisions about the learning possibilities for the particular children about whom you are reading. You will bring to these problem situations your own personal or professional experiences of being in communities, preschools and schools, where you will meet similar children, families and teachers to those introduced in this book.

Please think about the case examples and the problem scenarios introduced in this book as part of your personal journey. You will revisit content, reanalyse case studies, compare and contrast theories, and eventually come to an informed judgement about your own philosophy of teaching and learning, in the context of your emerging understanding of how child development informs practice.

The intention of this book is to support you to build foundational knowledge of child development in ways that encourage you to reach out to the communities in which you will be teaching so that you can learn about what matters for a particular community. It is through this knowledge that you will be more informed, and thus better able to better read the children's development in that community and then use this to inform your practice. It is through researching communities in the context of a deep knowledge of child development that you will be more likely to be able to make informed decisions about the best approaches and optimal conditions for children's development. As noted in the EYLF:

Drawing on a range of perspectives and theories can challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:

- investigate why they act in the ways that they do
- discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
- recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable, but also limit, their actions and thoughts
- consider the consequences of their actions for children's experiences
- find new ways of working fairly and justly (DEEWR, 2009: 11).



.....  
 Challenging traditional ways of seeing children  
 .....

You will return to this analytical frame at different points throughout this book.

## ONGOING REFLECTION: KEEPING A JOURNAL TO DOCUMENT YOUR JOURNEY

You are encouraged to keep a journal and to enter into it your thinking, analysis and research. The Child Development Reflections in each chapter are designed to support your learning journey to discover the different theories of child  
*(continued)*

development. You will be invited to reflect on the case studies and to consider how you would respond if you were the educator. As you gain more insights into child development theories, you will then be challenged to reconsider your initial views. In some chapters, you will be invited to explicitly reflect on a case study scenario, drawing upon a particular theory of child development. This will help you to engage with the particular concepts and principles underpinning each theory, enabling you to better understand what each theory allows you to see and how each theory informs your judgements about children and families.

---

## References

- Australian Curriculum and Reporting Assessment Authority 2017, *Australian Curriculum*. Available at: <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum> [Accessed 20 April 2017].
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Canberra: Commonwealth Government.
- Ministry of Education New Zealand 2017, *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mōngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*, Wellington: New Zealand Government.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) 2017, *Victorian Curriculum: Foundation–10*. Available at: <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/foundation10/f10index.aspx> [Accessed 20 June 2017].

## CHAPTER 2

# Understanding and using theory in educational settings

### Introduction



.....  
Developmental milestones  
.....

In this chapter and those that follow, you will meet the children, families and teachers who are part of four different communities that form the case studies for this book. The case studies are:

- *The Resourceful Community case study.* The first case study is of two families with a similar profile who live in a resourceful, but poor community. They are the Peninsula family and the Westernport family. The community has been labelled the Resourceful Community because the families are able to reuse, recycle and invent in resourceful ways.
- *The Collective Inquiry School case study.* The second case study is of a primary school in a community that has creative families, professional families, poor families and newly arrived immigrant families.
- *The Building Bridges case study.* The third case study is of a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from different parts of Australia who came together to talk about what mattered for their children's learning and development and what non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers needed to know about growing up in Australia as an Aboriginal child (Flear & Williams-Kennedy, 2002). Some core ideas, rather than definitive views, are presented in Chapter 3.



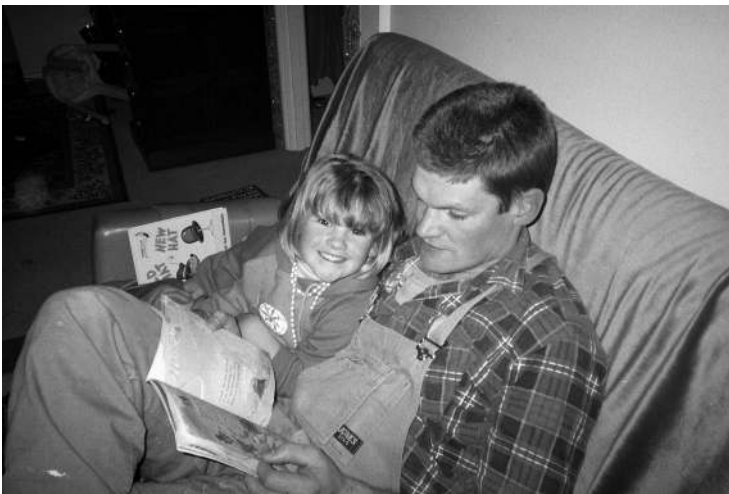
- *The Culturally Diverse Preschool case study.* The final case study is of a group of preschool children who come from culturally diverse families. You will be introduced to this case study in Chapter 3.

To protect the anonymity of the families, pseudonyms and non-identifying material have been used. Only images and work samples of children from families who have given permission have been included in this book.

You are now introduced to the first two of the four case studies. Each case study finishes with a problem situation that you will work towards solving as you read the child development and learning theories presented throughout this book. Enter your reflections on each case scenario and problem situation into your journal. Your responses over time will contribute to building a collective and holistic picture of the development of the children discussed throughout this book.

Through engaging with the content of this chapter, it is anticipated that you will:

- think about child development in the context of families and communities and the conditions that you, as an educator, create in child-care centres, preschools and primary schools
- be oriented to some of the major theories of child development that inform education
- begin to appreciate that theories of child development determine what you see and shape how you might act
- consider the importance of using child development theory to inform your thinking and practice.



**Figure 2.1** A father reads to his daughter

## RESOURCEFUL COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

### PART 1: MEETING THE FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND TEACHERS

The members of the Peninsula family live in a resourceful community. Many of the families in this community are poor, but they appear to be able to cleverly turn their hand to recycling materials in ways that solve everyday problems in cost-neutral or minimal ways. For instance, the community has an abundance of metal, wood and clothing recycling centres, along with staff who appear to give advice on doing things in a cost-effective manner. This is not only an assumed everyday practice, but is something that families expect and grow up with in their community. William, the principal of one of the local schools, drew upon this strength and, with the support of the local Rotary Club, set up an after-school tinkering club.

The children in this community live in homes where families are poor. The families are very resourceful in making things, figuring out cost-effective ways to fix things, and have really highly developed problem-solving skills. So I thought, let's capitalise on this strength, and set up a tinkering club after school. So I asked the local Rotary Club to help. We had people from the community come in and work with the children. We also had a lot of broken things donated, such as lawn mowers – which we know are always breaking down. Well, would you believe it, the children not only 'tinkered' but they actually fixed up the lawnmowers. (Field notes, interview with Principal William)

It is important to know that William grew up in this community and went to school with many of the parents whose children now attend his school. He was therefore very keen to support the strengths of the community through the after-school activity of a Tinkering Club.

Further, many families in the community either run home businesses or do their own repairs, such as servicing cars in the back yard. Children in this community have the opportunity to observe or be part of resourceful home practices from an early age. For example, the photograph shown in Figure 2.2 was taken by Katrina, who photographed her everyday family practices at home, and who was interviewed about her



Figure 2.2 Helping to service the family car