

Child Development in Educational Settings

Child Development in Educational Settings provides a comprehensive introduction to traditional and contemporary theories of development and learning in the contexts of early childhood and primary education.

Drawing upon the experiences and perspectives of children, families, educators and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, Marilyn Fleer provides insights into significant theories and approaches, including cultural-historical, constructivist, social constructivist, maturational and ecological systems. The book features four major case studies, which are revisited throughout, to examine how learning and development can be reimagined within socially, culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This approach enables readers to use theories to analyse and measure learning and development in planning and curriculum, and to feel empowered to enact change in their educational settings.

Written in an engaging and accessible style, *Child Development in Educational Settings* is an essential resource for pre-service teachers and professionals alike.

Marilyn Fleer is Professor of Early Childhood Education and Development at Monash University, Australia, and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, UK.

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Marilyn Flear



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Preface: My journey

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This textbook is an important book to me because it represents a reclaiming of the field of child development by and for early childhood educationalists. For far too long we have been told from outside our profession what we should think and do. Many of those who have advised the field of early childhood education have not even stepped into a early childhood centre, let alone worked together with such young children and their families. But of course many have, and their research has been informative. However, I feel we need to support our profession with research conducted from within our own field. We should be building capacity within our own profession, but also valuing what it is we know about our practice that can meaningfully inform new ways of thinking about children’s development.

Observing children through the eyes of a researcher is very different from being an educator working with a group of 25 to 30 children, so this book is written through the eyes of someone who has been a preschool teacher, in both child-care settings and in government- and community-funded kindergartens in Australia. As a teacher, I ask different questions about the conditions we create to support children’s development. I don’t just focus on the child, but also look closely at the contexts we create for children’s development. My own experience has shaped the way this book has emerged.

I began my career as an early childhood educator, having worked in child care and preschool education, as well as acting as an educational adviser in Aboriginal education, as an adviser on information and communication technology (ICT) and as a researcher undertaking many studies in child development with my colleague Professor Mariane Hedegaard, from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Together, these experiences laid the foundations for me in terms of thinking through the key theories of child development that contemporary early childhood education students would find most helpful to support the important work they do with young children and their families.

Consequently, this book does not follow the traditional norms of psychology; rather, it takes the essence of what matters for education and discusses only those child development theories used in education. Many of the child development theories that can be found in traditional educational psychology textbooks cover traditional theories. Some of these theories are still relevant, but many do not say

much about contemporary children, who live in different contexts, have different digital and virtual experiences, travel the world in real time and through new media, and simply do not fit the patterns of ‘growing up’ described by traditional theorists such as Piaget or as speculated on by Freud. The studies that sit under many of the child development theories were done on children who have grown up and are now in their old age, or have passed away. I wondered why we still draw on these theories. My response has been to go back to the original writing of each theorist and to study closely at what they said, rather than just drawing on secondary sources. Some interesting differences have emerged through this research method.

In drawing upon primary sources to support the content of this book, many anomalies have emerged between what is traditionally presented in child development textbooks and what I present here. This means that some sections will feel familiar to the experienced reader, but other sections will challenge and disrupt what some have come to know as the ‘truth’ about child development. Further, many traditional theories that are viewed as old-fashioned in the field have not been covered. Other theories that are being used in education, but are not always covered in traditional child development textbooks, are included. Further, the concepts that are discussed in this textbook focus on the essence of the particular child development theories. Rather than covering many different concepts, this book seeks to cover fewer, but to do so more comprehensively. Student teachers have busy lives, often supporting their study through part-time work. I wanted to make sure that the content was concise and immediately relevant to today’s context. I wanted this book to be about theories that are talked about by students’ peers, theories with which they grapple through the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Curriculum, and theories that are relevant to children living in today’s world.

When I was a student, I had the good fortune to be taught by a child development lecturer who had grown up in a family of theorists. She set a foundation of questioning many of the taken-for-granted theories of children’s development. Now, when I look at the available textbooks, and seek to set a textbook to support my own university students’ learning, I continue to be amazed that the same content I learned so long ago is still presented – albeit with much more relevant examples and photographs of children today. So why has theory not developed further? I was a student of the late 1970s!

I continued to wonder. When my first child was born, I watched him closely, drawing upon the theories I had learned as a student to see and understand his development. But the theories I had learned about were all formed in different countries. Key ideas were framed in relation to milestones, but these milestones didn’t really fit what with what I was seeing. This was also the case when I was teaching in the field. I recall a conversation with a colleague who was teaching babies and toddlers. I asked her whether she thought the stages of play so carefully illustrated by Parten actually explained the development of the infants and toddlers in her room. I explicitly asked whether she ever saw babies playing imaginatively. She said, ‘Yes, of course – many times!’ Parten’s theory suggests that infants

shouldn't be doing that. Later, when my daughter was born, I watched her in relation to this curiosity. I have a lovely set of photographs of her role-playing at 8 months – just sitting and using a spoon to feed her brother, who was being the baby. I also remember a moment when my partner changed her nappy. She pointed to him and said 'woof'. She was engaging her father in role-play – child-initiated play. She wanted him to be a dog – we are a dog-loving family, and this was an important part of her life. She was less than 12 months old and just starting to say the odd word. So these experiences have informed how I wanted this book on child development to be.

The intent of this textbook is to inform, challenge and provoke, so that the student will emerge from the pages of this book with a solid understanding of a few key child development theories, and have a toolkit of concepts for critiquing theory. It is hoped that students will adopt an open mind towards new thinking in the future, when a comprehensive Australian theory of child development is finally researched and written. The beginning of an Australian theory of child development is presented in Chapter 8. Our early childhood profession should continue to do this important work from within, so that we have theories of child development based on Australian children.

Acknowledgements

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In the many chapters of this book are the stories of exemplary leaders, such as Dr Esme Capp, teachers from her school and preschool teachers of distinction. The book also features analyses of data from a range of research projects, funded through different sources, such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant Scheme, Early Childhood Australia and the deLissa Institute in South Australia. Common to many of the ARC discovery projects has been my amazing research assistant and PhD student, Sue March.

New insights from Associate Professor Karen Martin (Griffith University) and Associate Professor Peter Anderson (Queensland University of Technology), examined through their scholarly writing, dialogue and interviews, are presented in the latter part of this book. Their scholarly contribution is important for paving the way for the new work that is still to be done. Collectively, these experiences and my own journey with co-collaborator Professor Mariane Hedegaard (University of Copenhagen), along with the scholarly women who have, at different times, supported my thinking, such as Professors Anne Edwards (University of Oxford), Elena Kravtsova (formerly Vygotsky Institute, Russian State University for the Humanities), Barbara Rogoff (University of California – Santa Cruz), Iram Siraj (University of London) and Joy Cullen (formerly Massey University), and Dr Valda Kirkwood, Dr Anne Hone and Dr Margaret Bearlin (formerly University of Canberra), have contributed to the way this book has ultimately been shaped – even though they have not seen a single page of the manuscript.

There have also been teams of research assistants over the years who have helped me with my data collection at different times, colleagues at Monash who have positively challenged my thinking and a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Professor Don Aitkin, who believed enough in my scholarship to give me a personal chair at the age of 40. Last but not least, Cambridge University Press, with their amazing team, including Vilija Stephens, who joined the journey through her continual encouragement and patience, and her colleagues, Tanya Bastrakova and Georgina Lowe, for their editorial support. I thank them all!