CHAPTER 1

What is a Child? Concepts and Images of Childhood

Estelle Irving

Chapter objectives

In this chapter, we will:

- consider what we mean when we refer to child/children
- introduce the variety of ways in which children and childhood have been seen and imagined
- reflect on your image of the child and concept of childhood and how this 'theory within' is *where our teaching begins*
- consider the nature/nurture debate and introduce theorists with differing perspectives on how we become the people we are
- introduce the concept of 'reflective practice', which begins with examining our own image of the child.

Key terms

agency
Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)
kindergarten
nature
negative reinforcement
nurture
positive reinforcement
tabula rasa
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

What is a child? What do you 'see' when you look at a child?

Perhaps you have never consciously thought about your own image of the child and the question, 'What is a child?' may seem to have an obvious answer: don't we all see the same thing? Surely, a child is just that—a child! Our understanding of *childhood* may also be taken for granted. Many of the Initial Teacher Education students I teach talk about childhood as a precious—even a magical—period of innocence and play with a sense of wonder that needs to be protected. This idealised image is represented so often in popular media that it is easy to assume that this view is 'true' and accepted by everyone, at least as an ideal. However, as this chapter will reveal, there is enormous variation in the ways children and childhood are and have been seen, imagined and understood.

Here is the view of a pre-service teacher from my class in an Initial Teacher Education course, beautifully expressed in a reflective essay:

> I believe each and every child is born naturally innocent, but also enters the world with a set of predetermined genes inherited from each parent, that contributes to a genetic make-up, 'their inherent nature or disposition', which if nurtured and tended with love, care and respect, becomes the creation of an amazing being, with talents and capabilities beyond imagination.

> I also believe caring and nurturing relationships, and bonds made by children in the early years and throughout their lives, if positive and esteem building, can make the difference between a child growing up with confidence and faith in their own abilities, to one who struggles constantly, and moves through life with a sad and jaded perspective.
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> My concept of childhood is one where children should be allowed to be 'children', where natural independence, talents, and interests are nurtured and channelled in ways that help them reach their full potential. In an ever-changing, fast-paced and competitive world, where social justice is often absent, it seems many children miss out on the beauty and freedom that childhood should offer. (Kim McDonald, Bachelor of Early Childhood Teaching, Year 1 reflection piece).

Introduction

In Australia today, there is no one agreed-upon concept of childhood. Instead, there is a wide and diverse range of views, though most people assume that their view is shared by others. One area where there is consensus is that most early childhood teachers accept and practise within a learning framework that is built upon and actively promotes a particular view of children. This view, articulated in the **Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)** will be discussed later in the chapter and references to the EYLF are found throughout the book.

Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) a national framework that provides broad direction for practice in early childhood services for educators, teachers and other professionals, volunteers, students and for family and community who work within or attend these services. 'Belonging, Being & Becoming' are the themes of the EYLF.

Some of the views introduced in this chapter (and the practices they justify) may seem astonishing, absurd or even cruel; others may resonate with your own views and therefore seem 'normal'. Be careful about any assumptions about what is normal. The variety of concepts and images you will be introduced to are evidence that images of the child and concepts of childhood change over time, and new images emerge to challenge or repudiate older images. These changes reflect wider societal changes and concerns.

The ideas, theories and concepts you will be exposed to will challenge you to reflect on the way in which you understand and see children and childhood; your views and understanding of children are likely to change in the course of your studies.

Before we meet the theorists with their diverse concepts and practices, let us take a step back to look at the rationale for beginning with the question, 'What is a child?' In a textbook about early childhood teaching and learning, why do our concepts of childhood and the images we hold of children *matter*?

Here is one view that answers that question:

> There are hundreds of different images of the child. Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image.
>
> (Malaguzzi, 1993, unpaged)

We shall discuss Malaguzzi in more detail later: here we are interested in his assertion that we all have an image of what a child is and that image (or the more developed *concept*) shapes our interactions with—and expectations of—children. Malaguzzi elaborates on this by saying, 'Your image of the child [is] where [your] teaching begins' (1993, p.10). At its most

simple, this means that how we understand any situation involving a child, and what we *do* with or for the child will reflect this image. As a specific example, Malaguzzi says '… if your image is that boys and girls are very different from one another, you will behave differently in your interactions with them' (1993, p.10). This understanding—that our ideas, whether consciously articulated or not, shape our practice—underpins this chapter.

Specifically, our internal image of the child affects:

- our expectations of the child, including what we think they can or cannot do
- the experiences and learning environments we create for children
- how we discipline children (behaviour management)
- the things we give or do not give children
- the things/experiences we believe are either appropriate or inappropriate to children's learning and development.

To illustrate this, consider this vignette.

Twelve-month-old Jo is transfixed by a mobile that is moving with the breeze coming from an open window. Outside it's cold, but Jo is dressed warmly, tucked into a fluffy sleeping bag and the cot Jo is lying in has padded protectors wrapped around its bars, so the cold air does not directly blow onto Jo. Jo's mother comes into the room to shut the window and put the heating on. This stops the movement of the mobile, and Jo screams in protest. Jo's mother …

STOP AND THINK

- Let us stop there and consider: What does Jo's mother do next?
- What might she be thinking that prompts her to respond in this way?
- What effect might her next actions have on Jo?

Here is an alternative to the scenario:

Twelve-month-old Jo is transfixed by a mobile that is moving with the breeze coming from an open window. Outside it's cold, but Jo is used to cool air, and enjoys seeing the play of light and shadow, and the movement of the curtains, even if the draught sometimes blows directly onto the cot. Jo's mother comes into the room and stands between the cot and the open window. This stops the movement of the mobile, and Jo screams in protest. Jo's mother …

What is the difference here? First of all, the scenarios have been created to highlight some changing beliefs about what children *need*, what they *should have* and what we can *expect* of young children. Jo is an infant: do babies need to be kept in climate-controlled environments, or does the experience of varying temperatures build strength and resilience? What about safety concerns with padded cot bars? When you answered the question of what happened next, did you anticipate that Jo's mother comforted Jo, or alternatively told Jo off (i.e. disciplined her) for screaming, or did you imagine that she opened/moved away from the

window and (following Jo's evident interest) shared in Jo's delight in the movement of the mobile?

The start and finish of both scenarios are the same, but the in-between details vary significantly: these details provide clues to the *image of the child* that informs Jo's mother's actions and response.

The next example is much more confronting for two reasons: first, it is real, not created; second, the details are deeply challenging to ideas about what children are capable of and what characteristics define a child.

The case concerns a two-year-old boy, James Bulger, who was kidnapped from outside a shop in the UK in 1993. CCTV images showed the unfolding events as the little boy, in the short time while his mother's attention was distracted, was approached by his kidnappers, held by the hand and led away. The image of the innocent little boy, who trusted strangers enough to be led away without a fuss, was hard to bear, but the real shock was to see the kidnappers. They were themselves children: two boys, both aged ten.

Little James was subsequently tortured by the boys, and finally, horribly, they killed him.

Rather than focusing on the horrific details of this crime, I invite you to consider the two boys in this case. There is no doubt that their actions were cruel in their impact and devoid of compassion or empathy, but how can we make sense of this crime?

Here are some questions that emerged in public responses to the crime:

- What could have motivated the boys?
- Could this crime have been avoided?
- Who or what is to blame? Is society to blame? Is the violence-saturated media to blame? Is it poor parenting or something in the boys' natures?
- If the boys' natures were the root cause, were they born evil or were they born innocent and then corrupted by society?
- If the latter is the case, does that make the boys themselves a type of victim? Were they let down (or corrupted) by a system that allowed them access to violent video games, and a society where they were not challenged as they led a crying, injured child on a day when they should have been in school?
- Or, perhaps the boys were simply playing a game, the consequences of which they could not have predicted or understood. If that is the case, were the boys unable to differentiate between what is real and what is imagination? Is that one of the ways in which we understand the difference between a child and an adult?

You may have noticed that I keep referring to the boys as *children*, and legally there is no doubting they were indeed children. According to British and Australian law, childhood ends when we turn eighteen and until then, children do not have the same status as adults and they are neither tried nor sentenced as adults. Referring to the boys as children implies that they were not capable of fully understanding or being responsible for their actions, but at ten, is that a reasonable assumption to make? Even referring to them as 'murderers' is contentious and reflects an assumption that the killing was premeditated: murder is not accidental, so if it was accidental or without premeditation, then it cannot have been murder. Are ten-year-old children capable of the required premeditation?

The media speculated on all of these questions, and the public response was, understandably, shock—but it was also divided. Tony Blair, the then British Shadow Home Secretary (and later, Prime Minister), cast blame on society and pronounced that 'We hear

of crimes so horrific they provoke anger and disbelief in equal proportions … These are the ugly manifestations of a society that is becoming unworthy of that name'. Reflecting public sentiment of blame and frustration, the Prime Minister of the time, John Major, proclaimed that 'society needs to condemn a little more, and understand a little less'.

This is a distressing case and it raises very difficult questions that may challenge your ideas about how we understand and define children and childhood. Because the boys were legally children and therefore (like all children) entitled to privacy and protections, we will never fully know the answer to the question of motivation for these particular boys. Nor will we be able to 'test' our beliefs about the boys' characters, but our responses to the case and, in particular, the answers we give to the questions about cause and blame are very important. They go to the heart of the issues raised by Malaguzzi's 'image of the child' and highlight our core beliefs about children.

Two recurring questions, raised by the James Bulger case, are 'What makes us who we are?' and 'Can we be born evil, or is evil the result of our environment?' These questions tap into a long debate, which is summarised as 'nature or/versus nurture'.

Nature or nurture?

In this debate, **nature** means what is *in* us—what we are born with—it is *not* about the outdoors or gardens. In the context of scientific understanding of the twenty-first century, we can think of 'nature' as our DNA or genetic code, but thinking of genes and DNA is a relatively new concept. Most of the theorists and philosophers you are about to meet could never have known about DNA and genes: their understanding of 'nature' would have been linked to what were believed to be essential, innate qualities—good and bad, for example—and their ideas reflected religious doctrines.

nature what is in us—what we are born with.

In everyday language, **nurture** usually refers to the loving, supportive care we give children, but in this long debate, nurture means much more: it encompasses the whole physical, social and cultural environment, including child-rearing practices, relationships, resources and the community in which children are reared. Nurture reflects the time and place context of a child's life; nature, by contrast, is timeless. If the boys who killed James Bulger really were born evil, then the environment they were born into would not have made a difference to their innate character and actions.

nurture the whole physical, social and cultural environment in which a child is reared.

If you believe the boys who tortured and killed James Bulger were 'born evil' (as some media headlines claimed), you are likely to be on the side that argues that 'nature' defines or determines who we are. If, by contrast, you side with Tony Blair's assertion that society is to blame, you probably favour 'nurture' arguments and look to the environment as an explanation of character and actions.

The theorists: differing concepts of childhood

The following accounts of selected theorists and philosophers demonstrate the variety of ways in which children and childhood have been 'seen'—that is, how these little beings have been imagined or conceptualised. Some theorists clearly favour a 'nature' view of human beings, while others argue strongly that nurture (the environment) creates who we are. A third group reflects current thinking that both nature and nurture are important and it is

the interaction between our genes and our environment that properly answers the 'nature/nurture' debate. This more complex understanding, which recognises the importance and dynamic quality of the interaction between genes/DNA and the environment, reflects current scientific thinking.

The theorists have been chosen for two reasons:

1 to illustrate the variety of images of children/childhood
2 because each is still relevant to our current ideas about, and images of, children.

I like to imagine these philosophers and theorists standing behind us, challenging and encouraging us to see children through their own eyes, despairing when we ignore their messages. Each passionately believed they were right, and each, in their own way, wanted the best outcome for children—but even those outcomes are imagined differently.

The shadows cast by these theorists are long, but not necessarily visible until we seriously and consciously reflect on our own ideas and how these developed. We can choose to step out of those 'shadows'—but only if we are aware that there are alternatives available.

John Locke (1632–1714)

Locke, an English philosopher, is the first of our thinkers. What Locke saw in children was, initially, nothing. According to Locke, the child's mind *at birth* was blank, without ideas or understanding and with no substance. Locke described this as **tabula rasa**, or a blank slate.

tabula rasa the theory that at birth the (human) mind is a blank slate.

> Let us suppose the mind to be … white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?
>
> (Locke, 1959, p.5)

As a philosopher, Locke employed reason and logic to argue for 'nurture' and against a 'nature' position—though he did not use those actual terms. He argued that, if babies are born with innate reason, ideas and knowledge, then this should be apparent from the start of life. Since this is not evident, Locke's question became: Where do the contents of the mind come from? This is what he is referring to in the quote above as the furnishing of the mind 'with an almost endless variety'. Not surprisingly, given that Locke was a philosopher, he was particularly interested in the question of how reason and knowledge develops, and how it does so 'with an almost endless variety'.

For Locke, the clear answer is '… from *Experience*. In that, all our knowledge is founded …'; 'all the materials of reason and knowledge' (Locke, 1959, p.5) are derived from experience and perception. Knowledge is determined by experience, derived initially from the baby's senses, or in Locke's terminology, 'sense perception', which he contrasted with thinking and reasoning.

Locke identified two sources of experience:

1 *sensation*—experience obtained through the senses, e.g. hot and cold, sweetness, hardness
2 *reflection* (referred to as 'internal sensation')—through which we perceive how our own mind works. So reflection leads us to ideas that include thinking about thinking, as well as doubting, reasoning and willing.

While Locke asserted that the *mind* of the baby is like a blank slate, he also observed that there are different talents and interests evident early in life. Locke advised parents to watch their children carefully in order to discover their 'aptitudes' and to nurture their children's

own interests rather than force them to participate in activities they dislike or have no interest in. Nurture here means to support and encourage these individual aptitudes.

Of special interest to those involved in early childhood education is Locke's observation that the mind of the child is most susceptible to experience in the period of early childhood. He suggested that 'the little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies have very important and lasting consequences'. In this, Locke's understanding is strikingly similar to current thinking about the importance of early experiences and their lasting impact.

According to Locke, the 'associations of ideas' or impressions made when we are young are more significant than those made when we are mature because they are the foundation of the self.

If, as Locke asserts, knowledge is determined by experience (derived from sense perception), early experiences in particular become crucial to who we are and what we become—not just what we learn.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Locke, 1959, p.1) begins with a statement that makes the importance of education clear: 'I think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. 'Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind'.

In other words, 'Education maketh [makes] the man'.

STOP AND REFLECT

- Is this belief still held?
- How important do you think education is in shaping the person you are?
- When you imagine yourself as a teacher, do you think you will make a difference to making children the people they become?

Educating the mind

Locke's concept of tabula rasa raised questions about how the mind could best be 'furnished' through education. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke explains how to educate the mind (i.e. how to fill in the blank slate) using three distinct methods:

1. the development of a healthy body
2. the formation of a virtuous character
3. the choice of an appropriate academic curriculum.

Early experiences should, according to Locke, help the child's body to become accustomed to weather extremes, and develop what we would now refer to as 'resilience'. Over-protecting the child would render them less able to endure cold, for example.

Locke was particularly concerned with the development of virtue, which he defined as a combination of self-denial and rationality. He believed that education should instil these qualities and the role of education was therefore less about instilling knowledge and more about the development of moral character, including rationality. Much of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) is concerned with how to instil virtue in children.

First teach how to learn

Locke argued that parents or teachers must first teach children *how* to learn and enjoy learning. The instructor 'should remember that his business is not so much to teach all that

is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge; and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself' (Locke, 1959, p.89).

Parents should create in their children a 'habit' of thinking rationally and children should, Locke argued, be treated as rational beings. Discipline should be founded on esteem and disgrace, rather than on rewards and punishments. This approach reflected Locke's belief that children understand reasoning 'as early as they do language, and … they love to be treated as rational creatures, sooner than is imagined. 'Tis a pride should be cherished in them …' (Locke, 1959, p.81). The habit of rational thinking and the love of learning should be internalised by the child—not externally imposed. Children learn to think and behave rationally through practising rational thought and behaviour, not by being compelled to obey.

Locke's legacy in current thinking

Locke may have developed his ideas 300 years ago, but in some ways, they are remarkably similar to current ideas expressed, for example, in the EYLF. We can discern Locke's presence, or the 'shadow' his ideas still cast, in:

- our understanding of the importance of early experiences and the lasting impact they have on our development and later learning
- the practice of observing children closely, following their interests and supporting their particular aptitudes
- the belief that parents and teachers should inspire in children a love of learning
- a belief in the importance of a holistic education for young children, rather than education that is only focused on the mind
- the belief that children learn best when they are engaged and interested, rather than when they are threatened or lectured to.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that children are innately good. In that aspect, we could assume that Rousseau is an advocate for 'nature' rather than 'nurture'.

The child in nature—free and uncorrupted

Rousseau's view and concept of childhood is complex. This complexity is captured in the quote, 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains'. What are the 'chains' Rousseau refers to? The answer for Rousseau is, society.

For Rousseau, the natural moral state of human beings is to be compassionate and kind, but civilisation (or society) has corrupted humanity, making us cruel, selfish and bloodthirsty, and taking us away from our natural state.

In Rousseau's view, society corrupts, but 'Whatever is natural is good' (Rousseau, cited in Cleverley & Phillips, 1987, p.36).

Education should follow nature

Children should learn through and in nature, not through what Rousseau regarded as the arbitrary rules of society:

> Let him early find upon his proud neck the heavy yoke which nature has imposed upon us, the heavy yoke of necessity, under which every finite being must bow.

> Let him find this necessity in things, not in the caprices of man: let the curb be force, not authority.
>
> (Rousseau, cited in Cleverley & Phillips, 1987, p.35)

Rousseau's philosophy of education is concerned with developing children's character and moral sense so they may learn to practise self-mastery and remain virtuous even in the unnatural and imperfect society in which they live.

> Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.
>
> (Rousseau, 1979, p.37)

STOP AND THINK

- Who or what is the 'Author of things'?
- What does Rousseau mean by 'everything degenerates in the hands of man'?
- If we are thinking about educating/rearing children, what follows from this belief?

Émile or, On Education (1762)

To promote his educational philosophy, Rousseau used a novelistic style of fictional writing to describe a system of education that would enable the 'natural man' to survive 'corrupt society' (Rousseau, 1979). The book was titled *Émile or, On Education*. In this book a boy, Émile, and his tutor are used as characters to illustrate how a nature-based education that protected the child from society could be implemented—at least in theory—and Rousseau's goal of the creation of an ideal citizen might be created through this education.

Émile is raised in the countryside, which Rousseau believed to be more natural and therefore a healthier environment than the city. In this environment, the tutor guides Émile through various learning experiences, but nature is the true tutor and the lessons for Émile come from nature.

Early education for Émile and, by extension, for all children '… consists, not in reaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and the spirit from error' (Rousseau, 1979, p.60).

How is the heart preserved from vice and the spirit from corruption, or in Rousseau's word, from 'error'? The answer from Rousseau is to provide early education in nature, away from the corrupting influence of civilisation and society. The lessons from nature will then sustain children when they return to 'society'.

Developmentally appropriate education

Rousseau did not see childhood as a continuous and unified period of life. Instead he identified different stages of childhood and, based on that observation, he advocated for different educational methods in different locations, based on the stage of childhood. We now refer to this as 'developmentally appropriate' (or developmentally differentiated) education.

The first stage identified by Rousseau is to the age of about twelve, when children are guided by their emotions and impulses. It is in this stage that Rousseau believed children should be removed from the corrupting influences of 'society' and reared in nature. During the second stage, from twelve to about sixteen, reason starts to develop. The third stage, from the age of sixteen onwards, is when the child develops into an adult.

Rousseau's legacy

Many of Rousseau's ideas and the educational practices he advocated are still evident in current educational philosophy and practice, albeit in a modified form. His legacy includes:

- natural education—learning in nature, with nature as the teacher
- belief in the corrupting influence of society—learning about yourself when removed from society and living in nature
- freedom, not constraint, in education
- child-centred education
- the belief that education should be concerned with development of character and moral sense, not rules and regulations
- learning through *doing* (natural consequences), rather than through *instruction*.

Note: Though I refer to 'the child' as boys and girls, Rousseau's beliefs and educational philosophy only applied to boys.

John Wesley (1703–1791)

John Wesley's image of the child reflected the religious views of a strict and austere eighteenth-century Christian sect that was powerful at that time.

The sinful child

This church believed literally in heaven and the fire and brimstone of hell. Through this lens, what Wesley saw in children was, first and foremost, 'original sin' (inherited from Eve, as described in the Bible). In Wesley's eyes, sin was evident in pride and vanity, as well as stubbornness, greed and cruelty, but most clearly, sin was demonstrated in children's wilfulness.

In order to save children (if possible) from damnation and hell, the solution was, according to Wesley, two-fold: children must be reared in the fear of God and their will must be broken.

> As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children insures their after-wretchedness and irreligion; whatever checks and mortifies it promotes their future happiness and piety … Heaven or hell depends on this alone, so that the parent who studies to subdue it in his child works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul. The parent who indulges it, does the devil's work.
>
> Break their wills betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly … Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity.
>
> (Wesley, 1829, p.389)

It is worth taking the time to carefully read the quote above to gain an accurate sense of what Wesley was proposing, particularly the age at which he suggested a parent should break the will of their child.

According to Wesley, self-will is the heart of all sin and misery, so breaking the will of the child is the first task of child-rearing. Children must submit to the will of their parents, who must make the child realise that they are 'more foolish, and more wicked than they can possibly conceive' (Wesley, 1829, p.389). For parents who shared Wesley's religious views, the prospect of 'doing the devil's work' (Wesley, 1829) and condemning their child to hell would

have been terrifyingly real. Wesley realised, however, that parents (and particularly mothers) might find it difficult to adhere to the strict principles and practices that he deemed necessary to break the child's will.

In *Thoughts on the Manner of Educating Children* (in Wesley & Emory, 1835), Wesley attacked the Rousseau-like, child-centred approach to education as 'the most empty, silly, injudicious thing' and insisted that religion be instilled from the very first—before nature can take root.

> The bias of nature is set the wrong way; education is designed to set it right by 'mildness' where this is possible, but by 'kind severity' where it is not.
>
> (Wesley & Emory, 1835, p.457)

Indulgence of any sort must be avoided and children must not be allowed to gratify their senses:

> The desire of the eyes must not be fed by pretty playthings, glittering toys, red shoes, necklaces and ruffles. (advice to mothers)
>
> (Wesley & Emory, 1835, p.457)

Strict routines were necessary, with no indulgences whatsoever. Corporal punishment was used liberally, with the belief that:

> If you spare the rod, you spoil the child; if you do not conquer, you ruin him. Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity. (Susannah Wesley, John Wesley's mother)
>
> (Wesley & Emory, 1835, p.173)

As you can probably imagine, in this harsh regime of child-rearing where fear and discipline were the primary methods of control, there was no room for play. Instead, play was regarded as a dangerous indulgence:

> He that plays when he is a child, will play when he is a man.
>
> (proverb, cited by Wesley)

For girls, as for boys, there was no play:

> She that plays as a girl, will play when she is a Woman.
>
> (Wesley & Emory 1835, p.457)

STOP AND THINK

- Does Wesley have a lasting legacy, discernible in current attitudes towards children?
- Do his ideas still resonate in twenty-first century Australia?
- How would his advice to parents to use corporal punishment to compel a child to be obedient be received now?
- Are children over-indulged today?

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852)

The historical figure who has probably had the most lasting impact on the educational environments we create for young children is Froebel, the creator of the **kindergarten**. The first kindergarten was built in 1832 in Germany, but Froebel's image of the child, drawn from a romantic notion of the garden/nature, had wide appeal that transcended national boundaries. Consequently, kindergartens were established in many countries, including Russia, Japan and the USA.

kindergarten
'children's garden'

It is very likely that you attended a kindergarten, though you may have called it kinder or 'kindie'. The word 'kindergarten' means 'children's garden' and this term is the key to understanding Froebel's image of the child. Froebel's kindergarten was both a garden for children to play and learn in, and a garden in which children grew according to their inner potential and nature's plan, which Froebel understood as God's/the creator's plan.

In the era in which Froebel lived, the physical and social environment was being transformed by industrialisation, with the development of factories and the growth of industrial cities. The kindergarten was a place away from the adult world and, in that period of rapid industrialisation and the growth of industrial cities, kindergartens were intended to be places of beauty and cultivated education that would nourish the souls and spirits of young children and infuse them with a love of nature.

'Kindergarteners' (translated as 'child gardeners') tended to the children with loving care, just as gardeners tend to their plants. Both the kindergarteners and actual gardeners base their practice on knowledge (of children, of the seasons, of the conditions in which they will thrive) and both types of gardeners nurture growth and development with an image of what the final, fully developed person/plant should be like. Religion animated Froebel's image.

In applying the garden metaphor quite literally, Froebel perceived children as tender and precious, requiring appropriate environmental conditions, special care and nurture.

> The child grows in nature and, like the tender shoot of a plant, children need the right conditions to ensure they grow according to the laws of Nature/God.
>
> (Lawrence, 2012, p.194)

Growth as an unfolding

Froebel imagined the child's growth as an 'unfolding' through which the essential being (physical and spiritual) emerged. In that sense, just as a seed contains all the potential to grow into a plant, the same applied to children. All the elements of the child were there at birth, ready to unfold, but, just as a plant seed needs water and sun, the child's growth needs the right conditions in order to thrive. According to Froebel, a baby is born with a spiritual essence or life-force that seeks to be 'externalised' (or expressed in growth), through self-activity.

> As a kernel of seed-corn dropped from the plant has life within it which develops of itself, so the child lives and grows in close relationship to the whole of life. The child's life in its awakening is first shown in activity. He is active in expressing his inner life in outward form …
>
> (Lilley, 2010, p.99)

Understanding young children

> The ability of a human being to grow in felicity to his full power and to achieve his destiny depends solely on a proper understanding of him in his childhood. He must be understood not only in his nature but also in his relationships, and treated in ways which are appropriate.
>
> (Lilley, 2010, p.93)

If you did attend kindergarten, the pictures below probably have many similarities to the kindergarten you attended: they illustrate the enduring appeal (educational and aesthetic) of this specially designed and equipped learning environment.

Figure 1.1 Kindergarten, Tasmania, 1911

Source: Google images.

Look closely at the photographs. In Figure 1.1, we can see a home corner, pictures displayed at the children's level, child-sized chairs, tables and miniature brooms for purposeful 'play'. Figure 1.2 shows kindergarten children playing with natural materials—sand, water, etc.—in a sand pit, just as children do in kindergartens and early learning centres today.

The importance of play

> Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage [childhood] … It gives … joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the source of all that is good … Is not the most beautiful expression of life at this time a playing child? A child wholly absorbed in his play?
>
> (Froebel, 2005, p.55)

Play, in Froebel's educational philosophy, was not 'free', but *purposeful*. Froebel is recognised for his play-based 'curriculum' and 'pedagogy', but it was a particular type of play that was orchestrated in the kindergarten and through which the child developed spiritually and physically (Bruce, 2012). Valuing and promoting play, even if it was purposeful play, contrasted strongly with the traditional view of the times, which associated play with idleness and regarded it as unworthy or worthless, or even dangerous. Wesley is an example of this view. Of course, the notion that adults could play was, for Wesley, anathema. For Froebel, play is the purest expression of children; for Wesley, play is the pathway to hell.

Figure 1.2 Children's kindergarten play

Education for young children

Kindergartens were primarily educational institutions, designed for children's whole being (spiritual and educational). They were specifically planned for the needs and nurturing care of young children. The conditions, materials and activities needed, according to Froebel, were songs, stories and specially designed activities with specific objects that were progressively introduced by the kindergarteners to the children as they developed (Bruce, 2012).

Specialised training for kindergarteners

Froebel attributed such importance to the educational role of the kindergarteners that he believed that specialised training was required. Women were, he believed, especially suited to the kindergartener role because they were uniquely positioned to understand the importance of education for young children:

> Women will understand how important it is that the children whom they have borne with so much pain and suffering should from the beginning receive an education such as they intuitively desire for them, an education which will relate to the divine, human and natural aspects of the child's own being. First, then, our enterprise will give a training in the care of children.
>
> Froebel (2005)

Just as early childhood teachers now select specific items or resources and plan experiences and activities that they believe will optimise children's learning and development, Froebel's kindergarteners provided specially designed objects—called 'gifts'—to the children in their care. The first gift was a woollen ball, given to babies to hold and manipulate. The kindergarteners designed activities that they believed facilitated learning and development in children. In the early kindergartens, these activities were called 'occupations'. Children played, but play was purposeful, shaped by both the gifts and the occupations.

Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994)

Malaguzzi, whose discussion of the importance of making explicit our internal 'image' of the child provides a frame for this chapter, resonates in many ways with our current understanding of young children and the recognition of the environmental context of early childhood learning and development. Malaguzzi is classified as a 'nurture' advocate in that he gives great importance to the environment, but his image of children highlights their inner/innate qualities and potential as well as children's fundamental need for social connection and communication.

The following statement from Malaguzzi can be read as a repudiation of, or direct challenge to, many of the 'images' and assumptions made about children outlined in this chapter. The final sentence of his statement captures the essence of Malaguzzi's image of the child and it is this image that we can see reflected in current policies and teaching practices, discussed later in the chapter:

> Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not only see them as engaged in action with objects, does not emphasise only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings of what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the reflective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and children.
>
> (Malaguzzi, in Penn, 1997, p.117)

For Malaguzzi, the child is not an empty vessel or 'blank slate'; nor is Malaguzzi promoting an image of the child as passive, incomplete and 'lacking' or deficient in maturity, development and knowledge. Instead this is a 'rich', strong and positive image. Malaguzzi's image of the child is as a citizen and contributor, the subject of rights, not needs; and born with 'a hundred languages' (UNESCO, 2010).

Reggio Emilia

Like Rousseau, Wesley and Froebel, Malaguzzi's image of the child was the foundation of an educational philosophy that was translated into an educational program. Reggio Emilia is the name of the Italian village where, in the aftermath of the devastations of the Second World War, the citizens collectively invested in and created a unique educational project inspired by Malaguzzi's educational philosophy with its roots in his image of the child.

Malaguzzi's legacy

Reggio Emilia is now used to describe an educational approach based on Malaguzzi's philosophy. This philosophy and the approach it inspired continues to inspire many educationalists today. Reggio Emilia societies, dedicated to continuing Malaguzzi's work, thrive in many countries, including Australia. Below is an excerpt from the 'Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange':

> We know that children are born with amazing potential and capacities: curiosity, a drive to understand, the ability to wait, to wonder and to be amazed, the capacity to express themselves in many ways and the desire to form relationships with others and with the physical world.
>
> (www.reggioaustralia.org.au)

The stress on the importance of relationships and communication, together with recognition of the environment itself as an active contributor to children's learning and engagement, are distinctive elements of Malaguzzi's enduring influence. You will see these elements highlighted throughout this book; for example Chapter 13 is specifically focused on relationships.

Observing children in the twentieth century

Advances in science in the twentieth century, and the growing belief that science offered a new, more rational pathway to progress, provided new ways of seeing and understanding children. This in turn led to new regimes or ways of managing, teaching and caring for children. We can identify two perspectives that emerged with the rise of science and its image of the child as a subject of scientific study.

1. Psychology, as a branch of science, offered a new perspective inside the *mind* of the child.
2. Science and its application in child-rearing practices and the management of children offered the prospect of the 'perfect' child.

In this era, we can detect a shift in how children were seen and understood. Informing this new perspective was the rise of science. The shift moved attention away from spiritual or religious views that were concerned with souls or spirits, to a new, science-based interest in the physical health of bodies and *minds* (and later to *brains* as super computers). The new scientific lens moved attention away from gardens and nature to the scientific laboratory, where children were clinically tested and their progress was measured and graded according to standardised norms. In the kindergarten, nature is seen as the natural and best environment for children to thrive and be understood. By contrast, the new scientific perspective assumed that children could best be understood if they were examined and experimented on in laboratories, away from the context of their home and family.

Science promised a new, rational (unlike the 'irrational', emotional approach of the past), objective approach to child-rearing. Scientific principles and processes quantifying data derived from scientific observation, testing and measurement were used.

The child in the laboratory

In the early twentieth century, competing discourses of childhood (representing different concepts and ways of seeing children) emerged. The child in the garden is the first metaphor and it remained an important concept—represented in the kindergarten movement—though this was also challenged by, and eventually modified in response to, the new scientific lens and acceptance of scientific principles.

The child in the laboratory is the second metaphor, with the rise of scientifically trained experts measuring, weighing, testing (including IQ) and timing children and proposing scientific principles for child-rearing.

Science: a new, objective approach

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concerns were raised about the health of children. In Melbourne's and Sydney's inner-city suburbs, high infant mortality and morbidity (including child malnutrition) rates were particularly worrying.

Federation in Australia in 1901 was regarded as the birth of a new, vibrant nation, peopled with a new 'race'. Children assumed a new status as the carriers of this race. The state had a clear, vested interest in their future, but interest in children was not confined to the state: many organisations focused on children's health, education and wellbeing.

Science promised a new, objective approach to child-rearing with a better, more ordered and healthier future. But to reap the benefits of science involved changes of attitudes and changes to the way children were seen, cared for and educated.

An example of this imperative to change and adopt the new discourse of science was articulated by a leading child psychologist, Susan Isaacs. Speaking from her position as an expert in psychology and child development, Isaacs posed the question, 'What should we do?' (Isaacs, 1929, p.2) Changing beliefs, attitudes and practices, she suggested, are not

> … simply a change of custom, nor the passing of one tradition in favour of another. It is that mothers and nurses have begun to turn away from mere custom and blind tradition, to science. … we have now begun to base baby-rearing on proved scientific knowledge … In the care of the child's mind also, this is beginning to be true.
>
> (Isaacs, 1929, p.2)

Isaacs' popular book, *The Nursery Years: The Mind of the Child from Birth to Six Years* represented a new interest in the science of the mind through psychology and a new perspective from inside the mind of the child. The most influential person in this new perspective was Freud.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Interest in and concerns about the psychological wellbeing of children are currently taken for granted. We are familiar with this perspective of looking at behaviours, expressions, moods, affect (emotional expression) and interactions with others as indicators of a child's mind and health. We are also familiar with examining our own behaviour (and the behaviour of others) for unconscious motivations, and with analysing dreams as a type of portal into our otherwise hidden desires, fears and forgotten (repressed) experiences. It is likely that at some stage we might visit a psychologist, counsellor or psychotherapist who encourages us to revisit traumatic events and to use talking as a therapy.

This new perspective originated from Freud, the 'father' of psychoanalysis. When we talk about repression, or ego, or the unconscious, we are using the language of Freud, for whom psychology and psychoanalysis reveal the previously hidden inner life of the mind.

Freud changed the way children were (and are) seen, though in a more confronting and challenging way. He claimed that children are neither 'innocent' nor 'blank sheets', but are, on the contrary, sexual beings from birth. Freud argued (using 'scientific evidence' gained from his observations of children and accounts from his patients) that sexuality did not suddenly emerge at puberty, but developed in a series of stages, from infancy. We need to be clear here: Freud was not claiming that young children were engaging in overtly sexual activity, nor did he condone any sexual interaction between adults and children. We also need to understand that his use of the term 'sexuality' was not straightforward, as this quote clarifies:

> You will perhaps protest that all this is not sexuality. I have been using the word in a far wider sense than that in which you have been accustomed to understand

> it [i.e. linked only to reproduction, which makes it impossible] for you to recognise in its true significance, the easily observable beginnings of the … mental erotic life of children.
>
> (Freud, cited in Cleverley & Phillips, 1987, p.61)

However, Freud was clear that psychology and psychoanalysis reveal the otherwise hidden, inner life: children are neither 'innocent' nor 'blank sheets'—they are sexual beings, from birth. Freud (2001) identified four stages of sexual development in childhood:

1. *the 'oral stage'*—visible in the pleasure of sucking
2. *the 'anal stage'*—children learn to control their bowels and gain some power or control over when and how they will give or withhold their faeces. Freud refers to the 'gift' of faeces (or withholding this 'gift') as a sort of control over parents
3. *the 'phallic stage'*— in which boys discover their penis and girls discover that they lack a penis. Freud attributed 'penis envy' to girls when they discovered this lack
4. *the final stage, from six to puberty*—a period of sexual latency. In this stage, Freud argued, sexual urges are repressed.

The details and extension of Freud's theory (for example, the Oedipus complex) are not important here. What is important is the new understanding of children and the changed perception that arose from the 'discovery' of infantile and child sexuality.

Freud was not an educationalist and his image of the child did not translate into educational practice. However, his image has been and continues to be influential and it has contributed to changes in the way children are 'seen' and cared for and, in particular, to understanding the importance of early experiences on psychological health and wellbeing.

Scientific child-rearing: 'behaviourism'

A different application of scientific methods can be seen in behaviourism. Two theorists associated with this new branch of psychology, with direct implications for children and child-rearing, are John Watson and B.F. Skinner.

John Watson (1878–1958)

Watson epitomises the new scientific approach and lens through which children were seen and understood as subjects of scientific study and amenable to improvement through the application of scientific methods.

Watson believed that applying the principles of scientific methods developed in the natural sciences (such as biology) to the study of children would allow behavioural scientists and psychologists to develop the 'perfect' child. In what now seems an astonishingly optimistic tone, Watson proclaimed:

> Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggarman and thief—regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.
>
> (Watson, 1930, p.104).

How was this amazing feat going to be achieved? For Watson, the key was through controlling or manipulating the environment. Using this method, Watson proposed to control behaviour and, ultimately, to create the type of child the scientist wanted.

Science uses observation and collection of objective data, which is then analysed to form principles and 'rules' that allow scientists to predict what will occur in the future. Watson's conviction that objective rules and principles of behaviour could also be derived from a scientific approach to studying children is evident in his claim that 'psychology as the behaviourist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behaviour' (Watson, 1930, p.5).

According to the behaviourists (including Watson), it is not heredity (nature) but 'nurture'—the environment and the responses it elicits—that create the child. Since families are characteristically subjective (preferring and favouring their own children over others, for example) and parent–child relationships are emotional rather than objective and scientifically precise, it follows for Watson that the best conditions for child-rearing would be in scientific institutions, with scientific practices, rather than in families.

Fortunately, even Watson conceded that this was not a realistic goal, but the advice he offered parents for guiding child-rearing reflects his commitment to science.

Watson's child-rearing advice

> There is a sensible way of treating children. Treat them as though they were young adults. Dress them, bathe them with care and circumspection. Let your behavior always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight. Shake hands with them in the morning.
>
> (Watson, 1928, p.18)

It is interesting to note that Watson does not refer to boys specifically in his advice, but the emotionally distanced, objective practices he advocated were strongly linked to gender stereotypes in which 'boys don't cry' and being a 'Mummy's boy' was intended as a humiliating taunt.

STOP AND REFLECT

- What is your response to Watson's suggested 'sensible way of treating children'?
- What would this experience be like for a young child?

Watson's child-rearing advice was adopted in many households and it affected real children. It is possible that you might have an older family member—a grandfather or great grandfather, for example—who was reared using this type of objective, unemotional practice in which physical affection and expressions of love were discouraged or even repudiated.

You might like to consider how this has affected this person's sense of self, ability to express emotions and, even possibly, ability to feel that they were loved.

Note: In Chapter 3 the concept of 'attachment' is discussed. It will give you greater insight into the potentially damaging impact of objective 'scientific' child-rearing.

Conditioned responses

In 1920 Watson attempted to condition an emotional response (fear) in a nine-month-old child, Albert (referred to in the literature as 'Little Albert'). Watson devised a laboratory experiment whereby every time Albert was shown a furry white object, a loud banging noise was made. On their own, and before the experiment, furry white objects such as a rat, a rabbit and cotton wool did not produce any negative reaction in the baby. Quite quickly though, Little Albert responded with distress at being shown any furry white object. This was a learnt response: Watson's scientific experiment was a success! This 'success' in eliciting a new and predictable response, conditioned by the association of a fluffy white object and a loud banging noise meant that every time Little Albert saw a similar object (i.e. *stimulus*), his response was the *conditioned* response of fear.

For the behaviourists, this study provided 'evidence' that even complex behaviours, including emotions, could be learnt through manipulation of the environment, using stimulus to condition the desired response. In an era where science was widely regarded as holding the promise of a better world, Watson's claims had enormous popular appeal, though some critics raised serious concerns about the possibilities of creating a controlled population. Novelist Aldous Huxley was one vehement critic. Huxley darkly satirised the future where the population was psychologically manipulated through conditioning in his futuristic novel *Brave New World*, published in 1932.

agency the ability to act independently, to make own free choices and decisions, and to impose these choices on the world.

As a scientist, Watson was committed to studying what could be *observed*, so his focus was on observable behaviour: the concept of **agency**, or free will and conscience, would have been foreign or simply irrelevant to his instrumental image of the child as a scientific specimen.

A significant limitation to Watson's 'conditioned child' arose from the laboriousness of conditioning each child's behaviour by manipulating the environment, as demonstrated in the Little Albert 'experiment'. Note that I have put 'experiment' in inverted commas here because I want to draw attention to the ethical issues raised by such an intervention, which traumatised a young child. Such 'experiments' would now be considered unethical and abusive; they would simply not be permitted today.

B.F. Skinner (1904–1990)

Watson's crude (i.e. unrefined) 'classical conditioning' was further refined and developed by B.F. Skinner. If you have studied psychology, you are likely to have heard of 'Skinner's box', in which a contained animal (rat) learnt to press a lever to deliver a pellet of food. Skinner's box demonstrated a more sophisticated refinement of behaviourist principles of 'change the environment, change the response/behaviour'. Skinner (1953) focused on learnt behavioural changes, rather than simple 'conditioned' responses. The rat in the box learnt to adopt behaviour that brought reward (the pellet of food) and to avoid behaviour that brought punishment (an electric shock). This learnt behavioural change is referred to as 'operant conditioning'. It recognised that behaviour can be reinforced. It is affected by its consequences, but the process is not simply trial-and-error learning—positive or negative reinforcement can be used.

Behaviour reinforcement

Behaviour can be changed by giving reinforcement following the desired response.

Behaviour reinforcement can be positive or negative: **positive reinforcement** strengthens behaviour; **negative reinforcement** can also strengthen behaviour through the removal of an unpleasant reinforcer.

Obviously, in current practice we cannot and do not use anything like the electric shock 'punishment' or behavioural deterrent, but the principles of reinforcement (positive and negative) are widely used for behaviour modification. More subtle variations of the carrot (reward—positive reinforcement) and the stick (punishment—negative reinforcement) are used to build desired behaviour in children and to discourage undesired behaviour.

negative reinforcement strengthening behaviour by removing an unpleasant reinforcer

positive reinforcement reinforcement through reward; used to strengthen behaviour

Applying science to infant care/environment

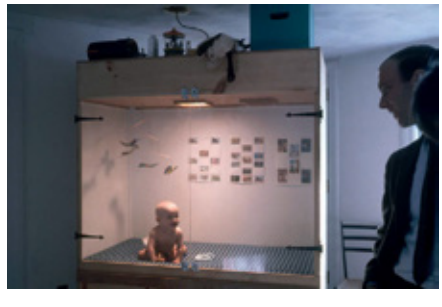
Skinner was a huge enthusiast for the possibilities of science and his vision extended to technological innovation that incorporated scientific principles for child health.

The 'air crib', developed by Skinner for his second child Deborah, was a 'climate controlled environment' for babies (Joyce & Faye, 2010). It is not to be confused with 'Skinner's box', though both creations used the behaviourist principle of controlling 'behaviour' by controlling the environment.

The air crib was intended to be the application of scientific principles for controlling a child's environment to improve the physical health and comfort of the child and to make infant care more routinised and less onerous for parents.

> In that brave new world which science is preparing for the house-wife of the future, the young mother has apparently been forgotten. Almost nothing has been done to ease her lot by simplifying and improving the care of babies … We asked only one question: Is this practice important for the physical and psychological health of the baby?
>
> (Skinner, cited in Cleverley & Phillips, 1987, p.125)

Most of my Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students react with horror at the idea of the 'air crib': it seems to them to be science gone mad, and looks like a science experiment that would be better suited to rats than children. This seems to be a common response, and not surprisingly, the air crib was not adopted into widespread child-rearing practices. While we might reject Skinner's air crib, his insistence that this was scientifically sound in keeping young, vulnerable children in a climate-controlled, safe environment, away from the dangers of open fires, animals, stairs and germs—and even with the benefit of allowing freedom of movement, unencumbered by clothing—is accurate. It is interesting to note also, that there is no 'horror' associated with the use of humidicribs for premature babies: these are life-saving.



Again, our image of the child is relevant here.

STOP AND THINK

- What is your response to Skinner's air crib?
- What aspects of development and learning does the air crib prioritise?
- What aspects of development and learning are overlooked?
- What might the effects be on children and their sense of 'belonging', 'becoming' and 'being'?

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

The EYLF is the national framework applicable to the practice of *all* early childhood professionals in Australia. The EYLF is referenced in many chapters in this book, but in this chapter our interest is specifically on the image of the child it conveys.

'Belonging, Being & Becoming' are the themes of the EYLF and they link to the image of the child. Echoing Malaguzzi, in the EYLF children are seen as capable and active learners, with the capacity and right to contribute to their own learning, to 'actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others' learning' and to be involved in decisions about their own learning (DEEWR, 2009, p.9).

> Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities.
>
> (DEEWR, 2009, p.9)

Importantly, children's learning is seen as 'dynamic, complex and holistic'.

'Being' specifically 'recognises the significance of the here and now in children's lives' and 'Childhood is a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world' (DEEWR, 2009, p.7). This emphasis is explicitly on how children understand, interact and make sense of the world and their experiences, including their relationships with others. This emphasis on the child's meaning-making and the message that the everyday, lived experiences of children are valuable in themselves is at variance with theorists such as Wesley, for whom childhood was only considered to be preparation for adulthood. Childhood as such had no value, and concepts such as agency and 'being' were not just irrelevant, but dangerous.

The EYLF articulates 'practice principles' to guide educators in their goal of 'ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning' (DEEWR, 2009, p.5). The EYLF takes for granted that all early childhood educators (including teachers) must themselves be 'trained' in the care and education of children, and that this is important work. This echoes Froebel's claim that 'First, then, our enterprise will give a training in the care of children'.

With further echoes from Froebel, the EYLF has a specific emphasis on play-based learning. If we return to an earlier quote from Froebel, this link with the EYLF is now more visible and multilayered: it is not just the importance of play-based learning and the development of an appropriate 'curriculum' that links Froebel across two centuries to the twenty-first century EYLF, it is also the value each gives to relationships: 'He [the child] must be understood not only in his nature but also *in his relationships*, and treated in ways which are appropriate'.

Compare that statement with this from the EYLF: 'Their [children's] earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families …' (DEEWR, 2009, p.7). These themes of the importance of relationships to early childhood teaching and learning and the specific 'practice principle' of working in partnerships with families are the subjects of Chapters 13 and 14.

Locke's presence is also evident in the EYLF. Specific links back to Locke's view of the child and early childhood education are evident in the shared focus of following the interests of children and encouraging learning that inspires a love of learning. The conviction that early experiences matter, and that they form the foundation of all later learning, is also a legacy we can trace from Locke to the EYLF.

Reflective practice

The question that framed this chapter—'What is a child?'—links to a key practice for current early childhood teachers. This practice is called *reflective practice*. This involves ongoing, active thinking about (or *interrogating*) one's own beliefs, values, assumptions and prejudices, and how these shape what we do, including how we manage, care for and educate children.

To illustrate this, let us return to the first scenario in this chapter, where we left Jo screaming when the movement of the mobile stopped. Behind Jo's mother's actions we can identify four questions that provide a foundation for reflective practice for all teachers, and especially for early childhood teachers:

1. What is she doing?/What did she do? This question becomes the early childhood teacher's reflective practice question: *What am I doing?*
2. Why did she do that? This question becomes: *Why do I do what I do?*
3. What happens next?/What was the outcome? This question becomes: *What are the outcomes of what I do?*
4. How could she have managed this differently? This question becomes: *How could I do it differently (better)? And, if I did this, what might the outcome be?*

Imagine now that you are the *teacher* in a room where Jo is lying in the cot, watching the dancing movements of the mobile. What will you do? Why will you do that? What are the likely outcomes? When you consider these questions, reflect not just on what Jo does next (stops screaming? screams more intensely? shares your delight in the mobile?), but on what Jo might have *learnt* from this interaction and what the *meaning* of this is for her.

The excerpt from the EYLF below extends our understanding of reflective practice, and adds another term commonly used in early childhood literature: 'critical reflection'. You will hear more about both reflective practice and critical reflection in other chapters in this book and, no doubt, in your lectures. While you read this excerpt, think particularly about the second dot point: 'What theories, philosophies and understandings shape and assist my work?' and remember Malaguzzi's point that the 'theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child' (1993, p.9).

> Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children's learning. As professionals, early childhood educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change. Critical reflection involves closely examining all aspects of events and experiences from different perspectives. Educators often frame their reflective practice within a set of overarching questions, developing more specific questions for particular areas of enquiry. Overarching questions to guide reflection include:
>
> - What are my understandings of each child?
> - What theories, philosophies and understandings shape and assist my work?
> - Who is advantaged when I work in this way? Who is disadvantaged?
> - What questions do I have about my work? What am I challenged by? What am I curious about? What am I confronted by?
> - What aspects of my work are not helped by the theories and guidance that I usually draw on to make sense of what I do?

Cont.

- Are there other theories or knowledge that could help me to understand better what I have observed or experienced? What are they? How might those theories and that knowledge affect my practice?

(DEEWR, 2009, p.13)

Critical reflection can also be applied to a set of assumptions about children that are part of the Western tradition of early childhood education and care.

Underlying assumptions

- Children are different from adults, and should be treated differently.
- Young children are seen as *important beings* who achieve their full potential through specialised care/education and in specific environments.
- Play is regarded as important to children's learning and development.
- Children should be segregated into age groups for their care and education. Though this is no longer so clearly the case in prior-to-school settings, it is a fundamental principle for school entry.
- Young children are worth investing in.
- Children are not just 'the future', and childhood is not about simply preparing children for an imagined adulthood: the here and now of their lived experiences of childhood matter.

As an exercise in 'reflective practice', consider the points above. You should now be familiar with the idea that these assumptions or beliefs are not universally shared.

This chapter opened with a quote from Loris Malaguzzi. It is appropriate now to return to Malaguzzi, this time to his conclusion about the image of the child he believed we *should* hold:

> It's necessary that we believe that the child is very
> intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful
> and has very ambitious desires and requests.
> This is the image of the child we need to hold.

(Malaguzzi, 1993, p.12)

STOP AND THINK

- What is your response to Malaguzzi's statement?
- Why does Malaguzzi proclaim that seeing children as intelligent, strong and beautiful is necessary? Does this apply to all children, including for example, James Bulger's killers?
- Did Malaguzzi mean this literally and for all children in all circumstances, or is this statement intended as a general principle and the starting premise for our interactions with children?

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) the key document that actively promotes an image of the child as a holder of specific rights in their own right.

Here is a final, explicit statement of a prevailing image of the child: this time the author is directing us towards a *rights-based* concept of children. I hope you will recognise that Rinaldi (the author) is an advocate of the Reggio Emilia approach. Rinaldi is referring to children's rights as a birth right, linked to agency, and to active and valued contributions made by children. Rinaldi is also indirectly referencing the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC, 1989). The convention is the key document that actively promotes an

image of the child as a holder of specific rights in their own right—they are not derived from their parents or other adults. This important document is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Its implications for your role as a teacher are considered in Chapter 10.

> Our image is of a child who possesses his or her own directions and the desire for knowledge and for life. A competent child!
>
> Competent in relating and interacting with a deep respect for others and accepting of conflict and error. A child who is competent in constructing; in constructing his or herself while constructing the world, and who is in return constructed by the world. Competent in constructing theories to interpret reality and in formulating hypotheses and metaphors as possibilities for understanding reality.
>
> A child who has his/her own values and is adept at building relationships of solidarity. A child who is always open to that which is new and different. A possessor and builder of future, not only because children are the future but because they constantly re-interpret reality and continuously give it new meanings.
>
> Our image is of the child as a possessor and constructor of rights, who demands to be respected and valued for his/her identity, uniqueness and difference.
>
> (Rinaldi, 2013, p.16)

A final note

The theorists and philosophers discussed in this chapter had clear concepts of childhood that were founded in their image of the child. For most of them, these concepts were carried through into educational programs and practices. However, it is important to note that these images and concepts were not necessarily applied to *all* children. Many of the theorists assumed that the children they 'saw' and referred to shared their own characteristics of sex*, race and class. 'Other' children, who did not share these characteristics, were either not seen at all, or were seen differently, with different qualities attributed to them. For example, I have already noted that Rousseau did not apply the same benevolent and inspirational philosophy of education to girls, whom he regarded as inferior and unworthy of education except to fulfil a subservient, domestic role.

STOP AND REFLECT

- When you reflect on your image of the child, what does this child look like?
- Does this child share your own characteristics, so that essentially you are seeing children who are like you?
- Are any children not included in this image and in your concept of childhood?
- As a teacher, you will work with a diversity of children: how will you ensure that your concept includes and respects this diversity?

*Gender is a twentieth-century concept, so though we now routinely use this lens, it was the lens of *sex* (male or female) that applied previously, with deeply held convictions about what were believed to be the natural differences between the sexes.

SUMMARY

- Our image of the child shapes our interactions with children, including our practice as teachers.
- Paraphrasing Malaguzzi, our image of the child and concept of childhood is what drives and shapes our teaching philosophy and practice.
- An important aspect of the teacher's role is reflective practice. We can begin this by reflecting on our own image of the child.

FURTHER REFLECTION

How do you define children/childhood? In what ways do you think children differ from adults?

These questions might help you answer this reflection question:

- What activities do you think characterise children?
- Is it useful to describe specific ages and stages in childhood? Explain your answer.
- When does childhood end? Is this satisfactorily defined by age or can we include other criteria?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How might the theorists you have been introduced to in this chapter account for the actions of James Bulger's killers?
2. What responsibility does society carry in this? If society is responsible, could this crime have been avoided? How?
3. Compare Wesley's perspective with how you think Froebel might understand this crime.
4. What 'solution' do you think Locke might suggest? How would this differ from Watson's answer to the vexed question of how such acts can be avoided?
5. Which do you think is more important: what we are born with (nature) or the environment (nurture)?

In small groups, discuss:

1. How do we become the people we are?
2. Is it nature (genes) or nurture (environment, child-rearing and education) that makes us who we are?
3. What is the role of education?
4. Can education change who we are? If so, is this limited to gaining more knowledge and understanding, or can this change be more profound? Reflect on your own experience of education, including what you think you will gain from your current studies.
5. Think back to the teachers you experienced when you were a child. What image of children (or concept of childhood) do you think they had?

CLASS EXERCISE

Collect a variety of prospectuses for schools and, paying close attention to the words and images that are used to promote the schools' approaches to education, categorise each in terms of which theorist they are most closely aligned to.

FURTHER READING

Cleverley, J. & Phillips, D.C. (1987) Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

I highly recommend this fascinating book; it provides examples of images and concepts of childhood and groups them under chapters that include 'On seeing children throughout history', 'The loss of innocence: the Freudian child' and 'The thinking machine'. It provided overall inspiration for this chapter. Many editions are available.

Malaguzzi, L. (1993) 'Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins'. Seminar presented in Reggio Emilia, Italy, June 1993. www.reggioalliance.org/downloads/malaguzzi:ccie:1994

This is the article that invites us to consider our image of the child as 'where [our] teaching begins'. The article is thought-provoking and considers widely the role of the teacher. I recommend reading it to deepen your thinking about your role as a teacher.

Rinaldi, C. (2013) 'Re-Imagining Childhood', Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of South Australia.

This is a really important article that informed early childhood education and care policies in South Australia; it provides an interesting and inspiring overview of the Reggio Emilia approach.

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