

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

**WAYS OF SEEING AND KNOWING CHILDREN:
A CASE STUDY OF EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS'
UNDERSTANDINGS AND USES OF CHILD OBSERVATION
DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR OF EMPLOYMENT**

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“Observation is a vital research tool but also – especially when embedded in reflective dialogue with others – an endless source of information and constant stimulus to discovering how people of all ages think and relate to each other.”

(Fawcett, 2009:21)

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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WAYS OF SEEING AND KNOWING CHILDREN

Observation of children, based upon careful watching and listening, is a key aspect of effective early childhood pedagogy, and yet research shows that early years practitioners struggle to observe children satisfactorily and find difficulty in planning provision based upon their observations. This finding is unexpected as there is a focus upon child observation in practitioners' initial training. This study set out to consider this anomaly through exploring new practitioners' understandings and uses of child observation during their first year of employment.

The study took the form of a collective case study involving ten newly qualified early years practitioners. Taking an ethnographic approach, the project used participant observation in three early years settings, combined with semi-structured interviews with new practitioners and their mentors, to collect evidence of child observation in practice. Thematic content analysis of data, supported by the use of NVivo2 software, focused upon three aspects of the research question: firstly, new practitioners' understandings of the nature and purpose of child observation; secondly, why and how they use it; and, thirdly, observation as an aspect of their work within early years settings.

Findings indicate that new early years practitioners demonstrate both informal practice, underpinned by an ethic of caring which guides observant, responsive work with young children; and formal practice, rooted in a developmental view of childhood leading to conscientious recording of predetermined, sequential, learning outcomes. The former is an intrinsic, connected response whilst the latter results from implementation of external policy requirements. Drawing inspiration from Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of education and from notions of wise practice, a new dynamic and relational approach to child observation is proposed, which may unite these dichotomous modes of thought and action and so enhance early years care and education.

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Part One - Introduction

Chapter One – Background to the research study

“Watching children as they learn and understanding their learning moments is complex and difficult work and places the highest of demands upon their educators”

(Nutbrown and Carter, 2010: 120)

The research study reported here focuses on the experiences of ten newly qualified employees in three different early childhood settings. It centres on one aspect of their professional work, observation of children, and explores how they understand and use this skill during their first year of employment. In this chapter I shall introduce this topic with an outline of the research issue and a rationale for the research, followed by an explanation of the context for the study, and a summary of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

1.1. An introduction to the research question

Government advice for practitioners working in child care and education settings, in England, emphasizes the importance of observation skills. Both the ‘Birth to Three Matters’ framework (DfES, 2002) and the ‘Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage’ (henceforth CGFS) (QCA, 2000) highlighted the need to observe children and then plan activities and experiences, informed by an understanding of their developmental needs. Similarly, the Early Years Foundation Stage (henceforth EYFS), which has now superseded these documents, places emphasis upon child observation as one of the commitments relating to the ‘Enabling Environments’ principle (National Strategies, 2009a) and requires that plans for children’s learning should be “informed by the use of ongoing observational assessment” (DCSF, 2008: 7). UK research into effective pedagogy in the early years identifies high quality child observation as an indicator of excellent practice. ‘The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning’ (SPEEL) report, for example, recognised the collection and recording of evidence of learning outcomes and progress, through

observing children's responses to activities, as a characteristic of an effective early years practitioner (Moyle et al, 2002).

The importance of child observation is acknowledged in the initial training of child care and education workers. Students taking the CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education (DCE), for example, are expected to produce a significant portfolio of observations of young children (CACHE, 2003, 2009). There is potential for a highly successful match between child care courses committed to preparing students with the observation skills which are "vitally important" to their "future work with children" (CACHE, 2003: 23) and a valuing of child observation as a feature of good practice in early childhood settings.

The observation of children, however, is not a simple task. Nutbrown and Carter (2010) for example, cited above, acknowledge that watching and understanding children's learning is complex and demanding. The aforementioned SPEEL study (Moyle et al, 2002) sees observation and formative assessment, linked to a cycle of recording and planning, as an area in which more training for practitioners is needed. This is borne out by the 'Children at the Centre' report (Ofsted, 2004) which confirms a link between accurate observations and effective planning; but cites evidence of too little observation leading to limited planning and inconsistent practice, even in designated Early Excellence centres. These findings resonate with my own professional concern (which arose whilst working as a nursery advisor and CACHE course tutor) that approaches to child observation taught during initial training may not fully equip practitioners for using observation as an effective pedagogical tool in the workplace. The apparent discrepancy between training in child observation and the implementation of such knowledge and skills in practice raises important questions for research. Are understandings and skills in child observation developed in initial training well matched to the knowledge and applications required when employed in early years settings? What challenges do new practitioners face when observing children during their first year in work?

With this in mind, this exploration of the practices of newly qualified child care and education workers, via a collective case study (Stake, 1995), seeks to understand and appreciate their experiences of carrying out observations of children in the early years workplace. The choice of three different types of early years care and education settings is intended to reflect the diversity of provision within the UK. The research is designed to extend knowledge of this aspect of work with children in several ways: firstly, to explore the understandings which newly qualified early years practitioners bring to the task of child observation; secondly, to gain insights into the nature and purpose of observation of children within English early childhood settings; and, thirdly, to examine whether an emphasis on observation skills during their initial training gives new practitioners confidence in this aspect of their professional role during the first year in the workplace. Thus the question guiding the research is: ‘How do newly qualified child care and education practitioners understand and use child observation during their first year of employment in early years settings?’

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

The arguments and investigations reported here are based upon the view that early years practitioners, children and educational researchers are located within complex contexts; and all care and education encounters, including observations of children, occur within particular social and cultural circumstances (Woodhead et al, 1998; Anning et al, 2004). The environment in which research is planned, conducted and reported is central to its meaning (Clough and Nutbrown, 2001; MacNaughton et al, 2003) and the nature of the knowledge that is sought is situated within a particular place and time (Toulmin, 1972). Recognising this, the conceptual framework upon which this thesis is based can be described as ecological and contextualist. These terms are used, following Tudge and Hogan (2005), to denote understandings of the transactional relationships between people and their environments and the impossibility of studying individuals separately from the contexts in which they are embedded. Like Tudge and Hogan (2005:104), I draw upon the ideas of Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner to provide a “contextualist ecological” theoretical basis for

researching typically occurring everyday activities. Whilst these two theories are sufficient for conducting and interpreting naturalistic observations of children's lives (e.g. Tudge et al, 1999; Tudge et al, 2003, Tudge and Hogan, 2005, Tudge, 2008) a third theoretical perspective is added here, the educational philosophy of Dewey (1897/1974; 1933/1998; 1938/1997), as a tool for researching pedagogical understandings and uses of child observation. Dewey's views cohere with those of Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky in that key components of his theory are ideas of experiential learning (Dewey, 1933) and of communication (Dewey, 1925/1981) which emphasise dynamic interactions and transactions between people and their environments, mediated by language and other cultural tools, as essential to human growth and knowledge construction (Glassman and Whaley, 2000; Biesta, 2009).

This part of the introductory chapter, explains the relevance and use of these three theories within the thesis. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is discussed, as a means of understanding child observation as a process occurring within dynamically interacting layered social systems. Reference is then made to Vygotskian sociocultural-historical perspectives, which also identify and value human experience and activity as interpersonal, interactive processes within cultural and historical context. Finally, the educational philosophy of Dewey is introduced as a means for considering educational "purpose" (Dewey, 1938/1997: 67; Amobi, 2003). Dewey's ideas are crucial to the proposed thesis as he writes explicitly about the significance of observation, in combination with knowledge and experience, as a basis for thoughtful judgements and the creation of pedagogical possibilities.

An ecological systems perspective

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992, 1995a, 1995b) bioecological model of human development, inspired by the work of Lewin (1936), provides an understanding of human activity taking place within a hierarchy of systems, which operate independently and in relation to one another. The theory emphasises the significance of context and environment in influencing the growth of individuals. Here it is selected as a way of understanding and portraying children who are observed, the

practitioners who observe, the practice of child observation, and the research study itself, as embedded within a layered, interconnected social system which supports human development (Palaiologou, 2008). Ecological systems theory is drawn upon explicitly (in the fourth section of this first chapter) to provide a structure for discussing the context within which practitioners were working, and in which the research was conducted, and for identifying ways in which external and institutional factors may impact upon the practice of observing children. It is then used, implicitly, throughout the thesis as a basis for appreciating the ways in which ideologies and policies within the wider society (macro and exo systems) interact with the day-to-day experiences and activities of practitioners, children and families in early years settings (meso and micro systems).

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's focus was developmental psychology, his work offers a useful perspective on research in education (e.g. Beardsley and Harnett, 1998; Hannon, 1998) and is used to inform early childhood research (e.g. Tudge and Hogan, 2005; Anning and Edwards, 2006). A bioecological approach is helpful for explaining and exploring the circumstances in which this research was conducted. The child observation work of newly qualified childcare and education practitioners occurs, and is studied, within a macrosystem of cultural, historical and political influences on the provision of services for children and families. This has concrete expression in an exosystem of policies and institutions, which impact on the mesosystem of social networks with which the children and staff are involved, and the microsystem of interactions occurring in any particular playgroup or nursery (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Anning and Edwards, 2006; Palaiologou, 2008). It is used as an organising framework for presenting the background to the study (*below*).

Daniels (2001: 19), with reference to Bronfenbrenner's 1979 work, challenges the portrayal of the social environment as layered concentric circles and requires a more active explanation of context: "Bronfenbrenner's onion rings may be reshaped, transformed, deleted and mutually interpenetrated." Bronfenbrenner (1992) answers this type of criticism, to some extent, in the redefinition of his original theory which

emphasises that research participants and others are active within his bioecological model, as the interaction between people and their environment is reciprocal. This has parallels in other epigenetic explanations of human growth, for example, Sameroff's (1987) transactional model, in which developmental outcomes are viewed as resulting from a continuous interactive process between the characteristics of individuals and their social context. This has been slightly differently expressed as biological factors and universal features of the environment interacting, less directly, through the medium of culture (Vygotsky, 1934/1986; Geertz, 1973; Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1998).

According to bioecological systems theory, the historical, economic, social and physical contexts in which individuals live and interact provide environmental resources which will affect their growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, the contexts in which educational research and the observation of children occur influence our understandings and the assessment of outcomes. This view of human activity, as interaction within a particular social and cultural environment, is not unique to Bronfenbrenner and other theoretical explanations of the relationship between human development and the context in which it occurs are now considered.

Sociocultural-historical perspectives

For Vygotsky (1934, 1978, 1981), as for Bronfenbrenner, understanding human experience involves viewing the person in relation to others within the wider cultural and historical context. Tudge and Hogan (2005: 104) discuss Vygotsky's theory alongside that of Bronfenbrenner and refer to both as "contextualist ecological theories". The emphases, however, are different with Vygotsky (1978; 1981) stressing the progress of higher mental functions from the social to the individual, the importance of fostering developmental potential and the role of cultural tools in mediating learning. Within early childhood education, the significance of the social and cultural environment has been increasingly well recognised in the light of "sociocultural-historical theory" (Anning et al, 2009: 1) drawing primarily upon the

ideas of Vygotsky and his followers. Whereas Bronfenbrenner's theory offers a tool for examining the impact of wider society upon the lives of individuals, sociocultural-historical theory foregrounds cultural context and sees knowledge as socially and collectively constructed, rather than the product of individual development. In this thesis, the main significance of sociocultural-historical theory is in acknowledging the importance of culture and history in developing knowledge about the understandings and uses of the social activity of child observation; and recognising the ways in which this theoretical perspective informs contemporary approaches to early childhood pedagogy and research.

Vygotsky's ideas, and those of his followers, have offered inspiration to educators and educational researchers, indeed Moll (2002: 266) describes a Vygotskian approach as "a theory of possibilities" and the field of early childhood education has begun to embrace these possibilities. In the Netherlands, for example, the Basic Development Curriculum (Janssen-Voss, 2003) is explicitly based upon neo-Vygotskian ideas. Anning et al (2004: 1) describe a "theoretical seachange" towards "theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning", influenced by the work of Vygotsky and also Rogoff (2003) and Engestrom (1999). The emphasis upon community, positive relationships between adults and children, and the co-construction of curriculum has led to both Reggio Emilia (e.g. Anning, 2004; Soler and Miller, 2003) and Te Whākiri (e.g. Fler, 2003; Cullen, 2004) being described and discussed in relation to this theoretical approach.

Research in early childhood has also been informed from a sociocultural-historical perspective (e.g. Woodhead, 1999; Hedegaard et al, 2008) resulting in approaches which take into account perspectives of children, adults and researchers as active participants within a specific social context. In the current project, observation of children is explored as an activity undertaken in a social setting, influencing and influenced by the immediate and wider environment. Likewise, the practitioners participating in the research are seen to belong to a community of learners (Cullen,

2004), actively responding to the challenges of their daily work and constructing professional knowledge alongside colleagues and others.

Whilst it is important to consider child observation as a particular pedagogical practice occurring within a specific historical, political and social context; using these two ecological, contextualist theories as the conceptual basis for this study is insufficient in two ways. Firstly, bioecological systems theory is not specifically designed to address the type of question under study; and, secondly, sociocultural-historical theories are not entirely consistent with current understandings and uses of observation within an English context.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (as outlined above and below) was devised in order to analyse individual human development throughout the life span, with an emphasis upon measurement of outcomes, taking into account variables of process, person, context and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a) . Within his theory child observation might be viewed as a research strategy for gathering information about the growth of a person within a particular ecological niche or, potentially, as informing the proximal processes through which adults might influence and stimulate aspects of children's development. The concept of mutually influential systems interacting can also prove useful when analysing educational activities; for example, some studies of children's early literacy learning and whole language approaches to the teaching of reading emphasise a social and ecological theoretical perspective (Pellegrini and Galda, 1998). It is also important for observers to recognise the contexts in which children live, understand the pressures upon their families and, perhaps, evaluate the impact of social policies designed to alleviate inequality. What is under study here, however, is not specifically the relations between people and their surrounding environments but, rather, an aspect of care and education practice, albeit located within a particular cultural context.

The second difficulty in basing this research study entirely upon theories which are centred upon the interaction between people and environments, and the social and

cultural mediation of learning and shared production of knowledge, is that this view is not central to the way that care and education is conceived in England. The focus within both the CGFS (QCA, 2000) and EYFS (DCSF, 2008) is upon the developing knowledge and skills of individual children and the same statutory guidance framework is universally applied in settings throughout the country. Soler and Miller (2003) identify a tension between the progressive ideals of many childhood educators and a centralised, instrumental, competency based Foundation Stage curriculum. Therefore, to achieve a positive insight into the understandings and uses of observations by practitioners who are implementing this curriculum, an additional theoretical perspective is needed. For this, I turn to Dewey (1938/1997) who, in his lifetime, sought to mediate between traditional and progressive approaches to education through proposing a unifying philosophy of experience.

Dewey's educational philosophy

Biesta (2009) argues that socio-cultural theorists, who endeavour to overcome individualism and to explain learning as rooted within human action and interaction, share many ideas with Deweyan pragmatists. He explains that contemporary, participatory, theories of learning, were developed within developmental and educational psychology, influenced by Vygotsky, but are paralleled by philosophical discussions of the purposes of education. For this study, Dewey's work is potentially fruitful for theorising and researching early years practitioners' uses of child observation as Dewey captures relationships within learning, teaching and development, occurring within a cultural context, in ways which concur with the contextualist ecological theories (as expressed above). Although Dewey's view of the relationship between activities and environment can be described as broadly similar to those of Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky and other sociocultural-historical theorists, Glassman (2001) has drawn attention to the fact that Dewey's ideas concerning educational processes and goals, and the nature of culture and experience, differ from those of Vygotsky. For example, whilst Vygotsky stresses the impact of social processes upon the individual and the pro-active role of the educator, Dewey emphasises the role of the individual in influencing social change

and the educator as facilitator of dynamic interactions between the learner and his / her experience (Glassman, 2001).

What is particularly significant for this study, is that Dewey (1897/1974: 436) specifically states the importance of child observation as an aspect of pedagogy: “the constant and careful observation of interests is of the utmost importance for the educator.” This is echoed in the current EYFS advice: “Observe children to find out about their needs, what they are interested in and what they can do” (National Strategies, 2009a: no page). For Dewey (1938/1997) observation is not just a task but instigates a reflective learning process. Observation of a situation followed by recall of past knowledge and experience, in order to explain what is observed, forms the basis for judgement and the development of a purposeful plan of action (see Diagram 1.1 below). This process of active construction of meaning, occurring in the context of the wider community, may be the key to young children’s learning (Dewey, 1933/1998; Cuffaro, 1995), to the professional development of educators (Dewey, 1904/1974; Amobi, 2003) and, potentially, educational research (Biesta and Burbules, 2003). It is for this reason that Dewey’s ideas are central to this exploration of understandings and uses of observation in early years settings.

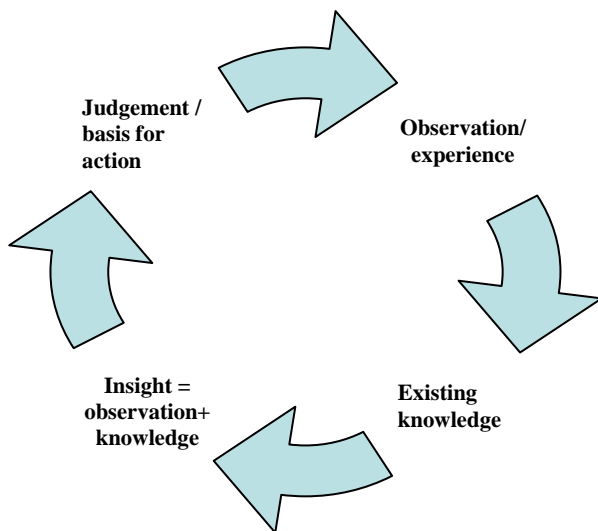


Diagram 1.1 *Illustration of a process of experiential learning*
(based upon Dewey 1933 / 1938)

The conceptual framework for this thesis, therefore, combines three theories: ecological systems theory; sociocultural-historical perspectives; and Dewey's educational philosophy; all of which can be described as ecological and contextualist. Together they offer a basis for considering and analysing observation of young children, within early years settings, as a process of careful watching, recording and documenting of children's progress and achievements, rooted within a social and historical context. Drawn from all three theories, is recognition that the observation of a child is not an isolated act but part of a complex process in which observer and observed interact, in relation to one another and also within a wider community and culture. These same understandings are applied to the activity of educational research and the knowledge to be gained from studying newly qualified practitioners' observation work in early years settings.

1.3. Intended contribution to knowledge

Wells (1999: 76) suggests that knowing is "the intentional activity of individuals who, as members of a community, make use of and produce representations in the collaborative attempt to better understand and transform their shared world." It is in this sense that, as an experienced early years professional alongside others working in the same field, I aim to construct and contribute to knowledge about child observation, a key aspect of early years education and care. This aspiration to understand, and perhaps transform, corresponds with Dewey's (1933, 1938) view that inquiry should address practical problems and that development and improvement can occur as a result of human effort (Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Hildebrand, 2008).

Child care and education practitioners, with level three qualifications, are key carers who take responsibility for babies and young children yet little research has focused on their work and that which does exist suggests that there needs to be clarification and valuing of their role (Robins and Silcock, 2001). Extant studies have focused on initial training (e.g. Alexander, 2001, 2003; Colley, 2004) and attitudes towards practitioners and their roles (e.g. Carlson and Karp, 1997; Robins and Silcock, 2001)

but not upon aspects of their pedagogical work or their experience as they begin employment. Understandings of child observation as an aspect of professional practice have been researched in relation to the work of teachers, in Australia (Grieshaber et al, 2000) but the uses of these skills by other early years practitioners, during their first year of employment, have not previously been explored.

This work, therefore, aims to contribute new knowledge through a novel analysis and theorising of the dynamic, relational processes of observing children within early years settings, thus adding to understandings of the significance of observation as a tool for children's care and learning and for practitioners' professional growth. The study also has practical implications, in terms of potential to inform curriculum development, in relation to child observation, for the initial training, induction and continuing professional development of early years practitioners.

1.4. Context for the study

In order to place the research project and the observation work of early years practitioners in context, the background for the study is now presented in terms of the four interacting systems: macrosystem; exosystem; mesosystem; and microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which may influence observations of children. The levels described in Bronfenbrenner's theoretical model are dynamic and subject to change over time (David, 2004); Bronfenbrenner (1992) introduced this as the 'chronosystem'. For example, ideas about observation and assessment in English early years education have developed significantly within recent years, gaining in importance for those working with children (Fawcett, 1996, 2009; Anning et al, 2004; 2009) and are likely to continue to change. Bearing this in mind, aspects of each of the contextual layers will be outlined next and elaborated in subsequent chapters.

Aspects of the macrosystem

Three important features of the macrosystem, which forms the background to this study, are: historical traditions of early childhood education; contemporary international influences on early years practice; and current political views about the nature and purpose of early childhood care and education.

The historical and ideological basis for early years practice in the UK has been described as the “common law of English nursery education” (Webb, 1974: 4). It is drawn from philosophy, developmental psychology and from the work and writings of pioneer educators. In relation to child observation, this aspect of traditional practice can be seen to be inspired by the ideas of Rousseau (1762/1993) and Pestalozzi (1774 cited in Soëtard, 1994); and the methods of learning through play and observation of children advocated by Froebel (1826 cited in Brehony, 2001) and Montessori (1912). Dewey (1897/1974: 436), too, expressed the belief that: “the constant and careful observation of interests is of utmost importance to the educator.” In the UK these ideas were developed by McMillan (1919) and by Isaacs (1930), who recorded the activities of the children at her Malting House School, and were influenced by Piaget’s approach to researching intellectual development through child study (Piaget, 1929; Davis, 1991).

Early childhood care and education in England developed throughout the twentieth century, initially to improve the health and physical well-being of children living in poverty in industrial areas (partly due to the campaigning work of the McMillan sisters); and then to offer child care during a period of increased maternal employment during the years of the Second World War (1939-1945). These themes, of increasing children’s welfare and allowing parents to work, continue to drive policy today (Pugh, 2010; Penn, 2008). Provision for the care and education for children under five has grown unevenly with local authority day care provided for families in need and, from the 1960s, the expansion of pre-school playgroups run by parents and voluntary agencies. Some extension of state nursery schools and nursery

classes occurred following the publication of the Plowden Report (HMSO, 1967) and, in addition to this part-time educational provision, private sector day-care centres expanded, particularly during the 1990s, to cater for children of working parents who required full time care for their children (a service also provided by registered childminders and by private nannies). Commentators note that access and affordability varied according to local priorities (Anning et al, 2004) and that these services differed in their aims and purposes (Pugh, 2010) with a divide existing between child care and early years education (Penn, 2008). In this context, the significance of observing children would depend upon the aims of the service provided. In education settings a cycle of observation, planning, implementation and evaluation of children's activities is likely to have been the basis for effective nursery teaching (Webb, 1974; Hurst, 1991; Edgington, 2004) whereas in other types of provision formal observation of the children may not have been a priority.

Recently, early childhood and education and care in England has been inspired by exemplary practice from overseas. Gammage (2006: 239) refers to approaches which influence ideas about provision for children on a global scale as “ikonic”. He highlights the Head Start project, notably the High Scope method which developed within that US initiative, and the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, characterised by the implementation of a socially constructed emergent curriculum. Within both these curriculum philosophies observant attentiveness to children's interests is an important element of the pedagogy. The emphasis within High Scope (2005) of tracking individuals' progress within different domains of development can be seen within the CGFS (QCA, 2000) and EYFS (DCSF, 2008) whilst the documentation of collaborative learning activity from Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006) is incorporated within good practice advice (DfES, 2006).

The Te Whākiri (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) early childhood curriculum, has also been influential in the United Kingdom. There are acknowledged mutual interests between academics, from the two countries, in

developing ideas and arguments (e.g. Carr, 2001; Drummond, 2003; Claxton and Carr, 2004); and the adoption of Learning Journeys (National Strategies, 2009b), as an English version of the Learning Stories method of recording children's achievements (Carr, 2001), is one example of the implementation of practice from New Zealand. A challenge in embracing international ideas is the problem of taking interesting initiatives and trying to apply them without a full appreciation of the differing cultural context (Papatheodorou, 2006). This can result in key ideas being implemented in naive ways (Gammage, 2006) rather than the developing of shared understandings which can enrich provision for children and families (Moss, 2005).

These historical and international perspectives influence current political views about the nature and purpose of early childhood care education and, thus, reasons for observing young children. Between 1997 and the present time, the UK Labour government has shown commitment to young children and families investing significant sums of money in the expansion of early childhood services, with the aim of reducing child poverty and increasing children's well-being and educational achievement. Influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and first published alongside the report of the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), the Every Child Matters programme of reform (DfES, 2003; DfES, 2004; HM Government, 2004) is based upon five principles in which positive aspirations for children are summed up as: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being. Reflecting upon a decade of Labour government, prominent figures from the field of child care and education in England showed enthusiasm for the increased recognition of the importance of the sector and acknowledge the progress made in developing a play-based curriculum and extending provision (Nursery World, 2007). Nevertheless, they also expressed disappointment with the lack of a clear long term vision for the early years and the proliferation of existing types of early years care and education rather than the implementation of a comprehensive strategy at national, regional and local level (Nursery World, 2007; Penn, 2008; Fawcett, 2009).

Aspects of the exosystem

These historical, educational and political ideologies find expression in an exosystem in which government policy, and legislation for the early years, is designed and implemented with the aim of influencing outcomes for children. Below brief consideration is given to government strategy, particularly: early years curriculum guidance; the associated regulatory framework; and the implications for training and professional work. These features, which I am labelling as elements of the exosystem, are those that others have also identified as providing the context in which children are observed by early years practitioners (Palaiologou, 2008; Fawcett, 2009).

Following from the National Childcare Strategy (DFEE, 1998), which led to the expansion of care and education provision and the establishment of local Sure Start programmes; the UK government's ten year child care strategy "Choice for Parents: the Best Start for Children" (DfES, 2004a) was published as this research study began. It has led to reorganisations in local authorities, to create integrated children's services, a new Ofsted inspection regime and workforce reform. Pugh (2010) notes that the dual aims of increasing day care provision, as part of a strategy to support parental employment and alleviate child poverty, and of ensuring high quality learning environments, in order to promote positive educational outcomes, are sometimes in conflict.

Widespread government funding for early years education has been accompanied by a national curriculum for this age group. The Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education (SCAA, 1996) set out goals to be achieved within six areas of learning, in preparation for school. These were reviewed and replaced by the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) (QCA, 2000) with the six areas of learning, and associated learning goals, remaining but a new emphasis upon playful learning and an extension of an active, child-centred approach into the first year of school. Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002) was

subsequently introduced, as a framework to promote and support effective practice for those caring for babies and very young children. This included the advice to 'look, listen and note' children's positive responses (DfES, 2002; Elfer, 2005). These two framework documents, together with national standards for the registration and inspection of childcare, are now combined within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008; National Strategies, 2009a). Practitioners' observation skills were considered to be important for the successful implementation of the CGFS and this remains the case with the EYFS. The Foundation Stage Profile, now the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (QCDA, 2009), completed for each child to assess their attainment during this phase of their education, is based upon judgements of observed behaviour during independent and predominantly child-initiated activities. Within the Foundation Stage, early years practitioners are, therefore, required to use child observation in two different and potentially contradictory ways (Luff, 2007, 2010; Fawcett, 2009). On the one hand, they must use observations of children as a basis for planning open-ended learning opportunities in response to children's interests and, on the other hand, are required to record observations to chart each child's achievement according to pre-set learning outcomes.

It is mandatory for all registered early years settings, in England, to implement the statutory elements of the EYFS (DfES, 2008), which are legally binding and enforced by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Quality and standards in early years care and education have been monitored by Ofsted since 2001, when registration and inspection of childcare settings moved from local authority control to a centralised government system. Under the current regime, Ofsted inspectors visit in order to assess and grade provision, according to the extent to which each setting is perceived to be providing for the welfare of children, and promoting their learning and progress in relation to the Every Child Matters outcomes (see above); and judgements are also made about the effectiveness of leadership and management (Ofsted, 2009b). Written observations are likely to be useful sources of evidence to

indicate, to inspectors, the extent to which children are developing skills in relation to early learning goals (Ofsted, 2009a).

In the UK there are many recognised vocational qualifications for work with babies and young children, offered by different awarding bodies (CWDC, 2009). There are also different levels of qualification: Level Two, which reflects a basic initial training and prepares the holder to work in a supervised capacity; and Level Three, a more challenging training which allows the holder to work in an unsupervised or supervisory role within an early years setting. Current child care standards (DCSF, 2008) require at least half the staff in an early years setting to be qualified to Level Two or above and for supervisors and managers to be qualified to Level Three. The participants in this study have all gained a qualification at Level Three.

Prompted by findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project, which identified a positive relationship between levels of staff qualifications and good intellectual and social developmental outcomes for children in the early years (Sylva et al, 2003) the government has expressed a commitment to provide training, and opportunities for professional development, for all those who work with babies and young children. A Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) has been set up to lead a program of workforce reform for all those who work in services for children and young people. There is now a defined 'Common Core' of basic skills and knowledge which all those who work with children and families are expected to demonstrate during their training (DfES, 2005). Observation features as a key element of the 'Child and young person development' aspect of this common core and also has relevance for the development of skills in communication and for safeguarding children. Child observation therefore retains its importance in the training of early years practitioners (CACHE, 2003; CACHE, 2009). Fawcett (2009: 21) cautions that observation could be seen merely as a "foundational skill", learned in initial training but subsequently given less attention among more experienced practitioners, despite its potential importance for informing attentive, reflective work with children.

Aspects of the mesosystem

In Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) account of his theory, the mesosystem refers to connections between microsystems, interrelations between the settings in which a developing individual participates. In addition to direct participation within different settings, Bronfenbrenner (1979: 210) writes of "indirect linkages" and "inter-setting communications", through which dialogues are maintained and knowledge is exchanged. Observations of children can be viewed as an important means of connecting the microsystems of children's homes and early years settings. Several writers highlight the significance of sharing observations for developing close working relationships with parents in order to foster children's well-being, learning and development (e.g. Hurst, 1991; Drake, 2001; Edgington, 2004; Driscoll and Rudge, 2005; Draper and Duffy, 2006; Manning Morton, 2006) and successful implementation of the EYFS requires an exchange of information concerning each child, including parental involvement in record keeping (DCSF, 2008; QCA, 2008 National Strategies, 2009c, 2009d; Wheeler and Conner, 2009).

For the new practitioners in this study, too, the interacting microsystems of training courses and work placements may influence their preparedness for their first year in the workplace. Tissington (2008) makes use of the concept of the mesosystem to describe and analyse the experiences of beginning teachers, undertaking a work-based training programme. The microsystems of college classes, peer meetings, mentoring and school classrooms are seen to inter-relate and contribute to their professional growth during their transition to teaching. Similarly, as a researcher, involvement in the microsystems of college and nursery prompted the investigation and, during the fieldwork, the microsystems of the different settings in which the research was conducted, together with participation in university life, provided an important context for the construction of knowledge about child observation.

Aspects of the microsystem

The microsystem is the “pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 22). According to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1995a; Ceci and Hembrooke, 1995) it is proximal processes, complex reciprocal interactions between the developing human being and the people, objects and symbols within a microsystem, which drive growth. Observation can, perhaps, be viewed as underpinning the proximal processes which occur within the care and education environment; with careful observation promoting appropriate interventions to support children in fulfilling their developmental potential.

The microsystem is the part of the bioecological system which is directly observed, although the impact of influential variables from the wider systems may also be measured (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1995a). Here the microsystem for the participants, entered by the researcher, is the early years setting within which practitioners observe the children in their care. These particular settings are introduced in Chapter Five and described in detail in Chapter Eight of this thesis. Participant observation within this microsystem, with an awareness of the surrounding systems with which the microsystem interacts, thus forms the basis for this study.

1.5. An outline of the thesis

The structure of the remainder of the thesis is outlined below. Following on from this introductory chapter (which forms Part One, Chapter One); Part Two, consisting of Chapters Two, Three and Four, offers a review of literature in relation to understandings and uses of child observation as an aspect of early years practitioners’ work. The aim is to analyse extant knowledge and experience in this area; thus elaborating the context for the research and establishing the relevance of the current study. Chapter Two focuses upon understandings that have dominated approaches to child observation and discusses six theoretical perspectives, which

may inform methods of undertaking observations and the interpretation of what is seen. Chapter Three moves from theoretical conceptions of observation to introduce pedagogical viewpoints, informed by historical and contemporary ideas and practices, and so reviews the various uses of child observation in care and education. In Chapter Four observation is considered as an aspect of early years practitioners' work. Findings from research into the initial training of early years practitioners are contrasted with the outcomes of studies of continuing professional development projects, for staff from early years settings and for social workers, in which different models of child observation are used.

Part Three, Chapter Five of the thesis, offers a rationale and justification for the research design, methodology and chosen methods of enquiry. The use of a collective case study and the adoption of an ethnographic approach to data collection are explained. The particular research methods used are also discussed with a focus upon observation, as being both a research method and the topic under study, emphasising the new insights about the process of observation that this may offer.

Part Four consists of three chapters, each presenting an aspect of the data analysis and thematic findings from the study. Chapter Six highlights practitioners' formal understanding of child observation, framed in terms of identifying the ages and stages of children's development and setting targets for attainment; and also their informal appreciation of observation, which involves a more intuitive and holistic awareness of each child. Chapter Seven, similarly, contrasts formal uses of observation, which emphasise the tracking of progress, with informal, more responsive uses of observation which foster relationships with children and their families. Chapter Eight explores the context in which the work of observing children occurs and reflects the experience of practitioners during their first year of employment. Some key challenges of observing young children in the early years workplace are identified.

In Part Five, Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven offer discussion and analysis of the empirical research in the light of extant knowledge. Perspectives from theory and research are drawn from the literature reviewed in Part Two of the thesis and also from some additional sources, sought in order to illuminate findings arising from the inductive analysis of the data. In each of the three chapters, the influence of ideology and policy within the macrosystem upon the practice of observing children within the microsystem is considered. Chapter Nine examines practitioners' ways of knowing about children. Their formal, developmental understandings are characterised as examples of separate, procedural knowing; whilst the informal are described in terms of connected knowing. Chapter Ten discusses the uses of observation within child care settings and contrasts the limitations of a formal, separate, procedural approach, which focuses on actual development, with a relational approach, inherent within informal and connected practices, which offers the potential to foster growth. Chapter Eleven considers practitioners' experiences of observation at work, with reference to some challenges and opportunities afforded by the environment, and also relates this to professional learning.

Part Six, Chapter Twelve, completes the work: drawing conclusions, in answer to the research question; and providing a relational model of child observation, which encompasses both caring and education. This is proffered as a contribution to knowledge in the field of early childhood pedagogy. Some possibilities for future research are also highlighted.

The thesis can be read in a linear way but the three threads of the research question (understandings of observation, uses of observation and observation as an aspect of newly qualified practitioners' work) have been used to organise the information and, thus, can be followed together or as separate themes. In response to each of these themes, a model of experiential learning is followed with information from existing sources of knowledge and experience (the literature review) and from observation (the empirical research) combining to provide new knowledge in answer to the research question (the discussion). So, chapters two, six and nine focus upon

understandings of observation; chapters three, seven and ten consider pedagogical uses of child observation; and chapters four, eight and eleven examine observation in the workplace. These three themes are cross referenced throughout, brought together in the introduction to each part of the thesis, and considered holistically in chapters one, five and twelve.

1.6. Summary

This chapter has offered a rationale for the research study and introduced the research question: ‘How do newly qualified child care and education understand and use child observation during their first year in employment in early years settings?’ The conceptual framework for the study has been presented, drawing upon and combining ecological systems theory and socio-cultural understandings of early childhood care and education with Dewey’s views of the processes of observation and enquiry. In the light of this, recognising that this research is situated in a particular place and time, influenced by and influencing social context; a bioecological model of interacting systems was employed to portray the environment for the conduct and interpretation of the research. Themes from the above, which feature in key writings and research and inform this study, will be further explored in the chapters which follow.

Part Two – Background and literature review

“We interpret a text, or a situation, in part by connecting it to other texts and situations which our community or our individual history has made us see as relevant to the meaning of the present one.” (Lemke, 1997: 50)

Understandings and uses of child observation in early years settings have not been a specific focus for research and neither have the early career experiences of early years practitioners. Whilst this makes the current research area a promising one for making an original contribution to knowledge within the field of early childhood care and education, it presents challenges when undertaking a systematic literature review. The approach to the review is, therefore, neither sequential nor “an activity of detached intellectual curiosity” (Hartog, 2004: 102) but represents an engagement with key themes within extant writing on the topic of child observation, in order to establish what is known in relation to the three parts of the research question: understandings of child observation; uses of observation; and newly qualified practitioners’ experiences of observation in the workplace.

My aim, in this second part of the thesis, is to discuss some different theoretical perspectives which influence contemporary understandings of child observation (Chapter Two); consider the uses of child observations as an aspect of early childhood pedagogy (Chapter Three); and then explore the role of observation in practitioner training, and learning in the workplace, examining extant research which informs this study of practitioners’ understandings and uses of child observation in early years settings (Chapter Four). The purposes of this process of review and analysis are, therefore: to locate this study within the historical and contemporary context of relevant ideas and research; to identify, draw upon and engage with extant knowledge; and to refine and develop the main research question: ‘How do newly qualified child care and education workers understand and use child observation during their first year of employment in early years settings?’

Chapter Two - Understandings of observation: the influence of six theories

“Theories help us to predict and anticipate how children might behave and react. They help us to structure what we observe. Theories help us to make sense of what we see We may find our observations fit with theories. We may find that they do not. This will help us think deeply”

(Bruce, 2001: 19).

2.1. Introduction

Child observation is a fascinating topic and a significant activity, both in the training of early years care and education practitioners and in their professional work, because it inevitably combines theory with practice. When observing, ideas about children and childhood meet the reality of the living child; and, as the introductory quotations for this section of the thesis and for this chapter suggest, the child is viewed and their actions are interpreted according to the observer’s formal or informal theories and prior experience. For observations to be of use in children’s care and education they must then form the basis for action. Bartholomew and Bruce (1993: 9) sum up the challenge: “If we are not aware of the philosophy that influences us, our observations will be random, uninformed and so incapable of being used to inform our future planning.”

In this chapter I shall, therefore, explore and analyse theoretical perspectives that influence and inform the implementation and interpretation of child observations in early childhood settings in England. The aim is twofold: firstly, to illuminate and discuss aspects of the historical, ideological and cultural context for child observation, which is essential to this thesis; and secondly, to highlight some of the understandings of child observation which newly qualified early years practitioners may bring to their workplace, influenced by ways of carrying out and analysing observation introduced during their training. This will be achieved through considering six “grand theories” (David et al, 2003: 8) which inform approaches to

the observation of young children and provide lenses for the interpretation of observations.

In the transition from training to the work place, English early years practitioners are required to recall, reconcile and use different and seemingly contradictory philosophies all of which may influence their understandings of young children, their approaches to observing children and their interpretation of observations to inform children's care and education. Raban, Ure and Waniganyake (2003) acknowledge the complexity of such a task and offer a descriptive framework for practice that encompasses five different theoretical views, which may inform adults' work with young children. These perspectives do not provide a comprehensive list and are not necessarily those that others would have chosen, Bruce (1991) for example uses chaos theory to illuminate ideas about play whilst Wood and Attfield (1996) suggest that multi-theoretical perspectives, including information processing theory and structural theory, can be drawn upon to understand young children's playful learning. Nevertheless, with the exception of critical theory, and the possible addition of psychodynamic understandings of child development, the theoretical dimensions which Raban and her colleagues (2003) outline represent ideas which dominate the academic content of child care and education courses in the UK (Bruce and Meggitt, 2006; Tassoni et al, 2002). They are also the 'grand theories' which underpin the literature review on which the English Birth to Three Matters framework was based (David et al, 2003).

These major theoretical schools of thought are of interest and significance to the current research project as they influence both how observations are undertaken and how they are understood. They are of particular importance as practitioners' assumptions are likely to have an impact upon the children with whom they work. Bronfenbrenner (1992: 228) explains that belief systems "constitute a developmentally-critical feature of every macrosystem", as culturally defined ideas about children and child-rearing "can create or constrain developmental

opportunity.” With this in mind, what follows are six main sections, each of which considers child observation from a different perspective. The first three schools of thought (maturationist, constructivist and behaviourist) are characterised and summarised as objective approaches to child observation and the latter three (psychodynamic, social constructivist and postmodern perspectives) as subjective. The theoretical reviews are followed by a short discussion in which I offer a possible synthesis of the ideas discussed in the chapter, relate this to contemporary debates about approaches to child observation, and summarise the research questions raised.

2.2. A maturationist perspective

Observing children from a maturationist viewpoint focuses on the systematic, scientific recording and monitoring of typical, naturally occurring, biological stages of human growth and development (Gesell, 1950; Cohen, 1977; Wachs, 1992). Arnold Gesell (1880–1961) has been identified as a major theorist informing such biological understandings of children’s growth and development (Raban et al, 2003; Smuts, 2006). During the first half of the twentieth century, Gesell and his colleagues at the Yale Clinic of Child Development collected observational data and charted timetables documenting universal stages of children’s acquisition of skills: “His project brought children into his Yale laboratory, where they were given mental and behavioural challenges ranging from bells and balls to stairs and strangers.” (Herman, 2007: no page). Gesell (1950) offers plans for an examination suite and nursery with one-way-vision panels to enable close observation. Pioneer early years educator, Susan Isaacs (1929) wrote enthusiastically about Gesell’s project and suggested that parents should keep journals recording their own children’s progress, in order to contribute to this scientific enquiry.

The maturationist perspective has earlier roots, however, in biographical studies of babies and young children. Much historical evidence exists of mothers, and other family members, keeping informal diary records of special milestones in their children’s development (Fawcett, 1996), whilst the beginnings of academic

recognition for child study date from the eighteenth century when Swiss educationalist Pestalozzi (1774 cited in Soëtard, 1994) and, in Germany, Tiedemann (1781 cited in Soldan, 1890) wrote observational accounts of their son's early years. Later, Darwin (1877) published a paper based upon his observations of his son, Doddy's, first three years (recorded more than thirty years earlier) and his fame as a scientist gave baby biography further intellectual respectability. Darwin's account clearly illustrates how the observer's theories influence the interpretation of a child observation, as he highlighted the heritability of gender specific behaviours and drew parallels between infant growth and human evolutionary development. Such systematic, biographical accounts were formalised in the Child Study Movement (Irwin and Bushnell, 1980; Fawcett, 1996), as the new discipline of developmental psychology became established in universities in the United States of America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

Granville Stanley Hall, credited as the leader of this Child Study Movement (Brooks-Gunn and Johnson, 2006; Brehony, 2009) was a significant figure in terms of his own work, notably "The content of children's minds on entry to school" (Hall, 1893), and, perhaps more especially, his wider influence (Smuts, 2006). Hall (1897a) encouraged the observational study of children in everyday environments, such as home and school, and urged parents to maintain records of their sons' and daughters' development. This contrasts with a perception of a maturationist approach to understanding child development as laboratory based with the views of expert scientists subsequently imposed upon parents and carers (Bradley, 1989).

Hall's observations, for example the "Story of a Sand Pile" (1897b), were practical in focus as he aimed to use insights from the study of children, including recognition of their emotional responses, to provide appropriate educational experiences and ensure that each stage of childhood could be lived fully. Berliner (1993) argues that the most important legacy of Hall and the child study movement was in linking the new discipline of psychology with education, through working with teachers.

Certainly, Hall (1896) argued for the importance of observational child study in the training of teachers, and this influence spread to England (Brehony, 2009) with the educator and teacher educator Catherine Dodd (1898:67) stating that:

“the time is not far distant when Pedagogics will have a recognised standing in our courses and the systematic observation of children will be part of the training of all who intend to teach children.”

Maturationist influences and current practice

These historical observations of children, from a maturationist perspective, have been influential in two directions. For some researchers, close naturalistic observation of children in their everyday environments is key to understanding their lives and behaviours (e.g. Stallibrass, 1977; Tudge and Hogan, 2005; Trevarthen, 2002); whilst, for others, Gesell’s project charting developmental milestones remains significant (e.g. Krough and Slentz, 2001; Dalton, 2005). Norms of child development continue to be a reference point for professionals working with children, for example developmental screening tests routinely performed by health visitors (Frankenburg et al, 1990). Many parents own a childcare manual outlining expected milestones (e.g. Cave and Fertleman, 2007; Waterston, 2009) or can access this information on internet sites for parents. A survey of a representative sample of American adults (DYG Inc., 2000) revealed that 40% would look for child development information on the internet at least once a month. There is also evidence that parents place great value on information from child care professionals about their children’s progress (Athey, 1991; Hughes et al, 1994; Allen, 1997).

In the UK, Mary Sheridan’s (1973, 2008) book tracking sequences of typical child development from birth to aged five years has long been a key text for student nursery nurses. In observation work it is used as a basis for comparing the observed child’s skills to the developmental norm for their age. Students on the CACHE Level Three Diploma in Child Care and Education (DCE) course learn “to evaluate the

extent to which a child's physical development and skills accords with accepted milestones and measurements" (CACHE, 2003:24). In order to receive a pass grade for their work, for every observation that they complete students must link their conclusions to "the age and stage of the child / children being observed" and to "developmental norms" (CACHE, 2003:103). Despite recent changes to the DCE course, study of child development remains a mandatory element (CACHE, 2009).

Knowledge of typical child development, learned through completing such observations, allows professional carers and educators to have realistic expectations of children of different ages and to make suitable provision for them. This is exemplified by guidelines for 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs', in the USA (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). Blenkin and Yue (1994) found that heads of early years settings considered an understanding of child development, to be the most positive influence upon the professional development of practitioners. Likewise, the SPEEL study (Moyle et al, 2002) identifies child development knowledge as an area in which training is needed in order to promote pedagogical effectiveness. The National Children's Bureau's summary of outcomes from consultation events, organised to discuss the UK government's workforce strategy, reported the views of 300 child care and education professionals asked about the expertise required of early years practitioners and found that: "consultation participants were unanimous that knowledge of child development from birth was central" (Owen, 2005: 11).

This maturationist approach also has critics. The values, assumptions and biases underlying some normative accounts of children's acquisition of skills have been highlighted (WGARCR, 1991; Lane, 2007), as Woodhead (1998:3) contends: "textbook child development is a particular cultural description". Others, similarly, argue that, in focusing on developmental norms when interpreting their observations, students on child care and education training courses may form a limited understanding of the different childhoods experienced by children in the UK

(Alexander, 2002) and elsewhere (Boushel, 2000; Penn 2008). There is also concern that observations and assessments which emphasise average development will restrict an appreciation of children's potential (David, 1999; Drummond, 2003). Another controversial aspect of observation which focuses on normative, maturational accounts of child development is its use in identifying children who may be at risk or who have a disability and would benefit from support. Whilst early intervention may be highly effective (Fawcett et al, 2001), it can be argued that classifications such as 'in need' (HMSO, 1989) and the use of other, similar terminology contribute to a negative construction of the child as weak, the family as inadequate and society as offering diagnosis and therapy (Dahlberg et al, 1999). There is a tension here within the CACHE (2003, 2009) DCE course and the associated textbooks (Bruce and Meggitt, 2006; Tassoni, 2002) as, alongside the focus on typical development outlined above, there is an emphasis upon holistic views of the child, anti-bias practice and upon adopting social rather than medical models of disability.

2.3. Constructivist developmental psychology

Constructivism focuses upon a particular aspect of human development: the outlining of stages of intellectual development, specifically, characterising the nature of thought at various ages. Observing from a constructivist perspective involves trying to understand how young children are interacting with, and making sense of, the world around them; and identifying and appreciating the qualitatively different ways of thinking, displayed throughout childhood and adolescence (Piaget, 1950/2001, 1978; Miller, 1989; Das Gupta, 1994).

Like Darwin, Piaget was a biologist who became fascinated by human intellectual development and brought close observation techniques from the natural sciences to careful studies of his own children and others. These observations took the form of detailed diary accounts of the development of his three children; the following example describes his son, Laurent, at one month old:

“First he makes vigorous sucking-like movements, then his right hand may be seen approaching his mouth, touching his lower lip and finally being grasped. But as only the index finger was grasped, the hand fell out again. Shortly afterward it returned. This time the thumb was in the mouth while the index finger was placed between the gums and the upper lip. The hand then moves 5 centimeters away from the mouth only to re-enter it; now the thumb is grasped and the other fingers remain outside” (Piaget: 1953/1997: 53).

Piaget combined this evidence with findings from clinical interviews, in which he was a participant observer, noting children’s responses to set tasks and their responses to his questions. From these two types of observation, Piaget developed his theory of children actively constructing their own intellectual development, in their interaction with the physical environment, through processes of assimilation, accommodation and adaptation. He proposed an account of cognitive development as progressing through stages, in each of which thinking is governed by underlying mental structures, or schemas, which become progressively logical and organized, enabling different forms of thought (Piaget, 1950/2001). Whilst Piaget (1967) considered learning to be subordinate to development and “had rather little to say about the educational implications of his work” (Davis, 1991: 22) his ideas have been widely applied to learning in the early years, partly because of a correspondence with existing child centred philosophies of early years education, such as those of Froebel (1826) and Montessori (1912).

Piaget’s theories provided a conceptual basis for the Froebel Research project led and reported by Athey (1991). Five thousand detailed observations of two - five year old children, who attended an especially designed enrichment project, were collected over a two year period. Athey worked with colleagues and with the children’s parents to describe and interpret the children’s cognitive growth, through identification of their persistent interests revealed in systematic patterns of behaviour, or ‘schemas’, during their play. These observations were used as a basis

for mapping the schematic development of each individual child and age-related behaviour patterns within the group. The professionals used the language and concepts of Piagetian constructivist theory when discussing the children's actions and representations with parents, who increasingly began to understand and describe the significance of their children's behaviours in similar ways. The children who participated in the project showed significant gains in performance on standardised intelligence tests, which Athey (1991: 56) attributed to "parents participating with professionals within an articulated pedagogical approach".

Constructivist influences and current practice

Piaget's understandings of young children's learning have been widely applied in other educational contexts. In England, the Plowden Report (HMSO, 1967), influenced by his ideas, advocated a child-centred approach to education; whilst in the United States the High Scope approach (Weikart et al, 1971), similarly, emphasises key active learning experiences. Cunningham (2006: 15), drawing upon oral history testimony of early years teachers who trained prior to 1955, identifies the "towering figure of Piaget" in informing curriculum and contributing to a "distinctive shift in teacher-child relationships." Davis (1991) found that whilst experienced teachers (trained after those in Cunningham's sample) claim to recall little about Piagetian theory, their replies to questions about children's learning reveal the influence of Piaget's principles, notably: ideas of the child as a self-motivated active learner; thinking differently from adults; and influenced by their environment.

Piaget's ideas remain influential in UK classrooms (Northen, 2003). Current students of child care and education learn basic information about Piaget's stages of intellectual development, often with a focus upon the conservation experiments (e.g. Tassoni et al, 2002). A more detailed understanding of constructivist theory is required in some early years settings where identification of schemas, through detailed observations of children's play, forms a basis for curriculum planning. This

is exemplified in the Possible Lines Of Direction (PLOD) charts, developed at the Pen Green centre (Whalley, 1993), from which plans are made to correspond with children's dominant interests. Arnold (1999, 2003) provides extended examples of interpreting observations in this way, in her accounts of her grandchildren's early learning.

Whilst such detailed, naturalistic observations of children are acknowledged to reveal rich information about intellectual growth and patterns of thinking, Piaget's clinical interviewing techniques for exploring children's understandings have been critiqued. In his lifetime Piaget changed his strategy from direct questioning to observing a child's completion of a given task and then asking follow-up questions (Campbell, 2006). Piaget's followers (Donaldson, 1978; Grieve and Hughes, 1990) also adapted his empirical methods, demonstrating that children are capable of logical operational thought at an earlier age than Piaget found, if problems are presented in ways which make sense in relation to their experience. Nevertheless, constructivist notions of development are seen to exemplify an individualistic understanding of the child, in which thinking is privileged over interaction (Burman, 2001) and many of the criticisms of maturationist accounts of children's growth, for example the limitations of normative descriptions of development (as discussed in 2.2. above) might also be applied to a staged model of intellectual progress.

2.4. Behaviourism

Piaget sought to understand and explain hidden cognitive structures whereas behaviourism, by contrast, is the study of overt activities that can be seen, or heard, and measured. Observation is key to this approach as external, empirical evidence, a careful noting of what is seen and heard, is always the object and focus of study (Skinner, 1953, 1980; Bolles, 1979; Toates and Slack, 1990). John B. Watson (1876–1958), and his fellow behaviourists, aimed to model research in psychology on the rigorous and replicable methods adopted by natural scientists, and thus proposed that precise measurement of observable human behaviour should be the

focus of study. Animal and human responses to environmental stimuli were measured and learning was calculated in terms of change in reaction. Thus precise, objective, observation became a means to assess the behaviours, skills and knowledge acquired as conditioned responses to experience.

Skinner (1953) also believed that human behaviour could be predicted, controlled and interpreted. He agreed the central importance of careful observation, as the means to discern the reality of the physical world, but explained learning as elicited and shaped responses to reinforcing stimuli. The theory is a positive one for educators because it offers the promise of successful acquisition of knowledge and skills for every individual, given a structured programme of tasks, with an appropriate schedule of reinforcement (Skinner, 1953, 1980).

Behaviourist influences upon observation in current practice

Behaviourism, with its disregard for the activities of the mind, has been criticised as offering too simplistic and mechanistic a model of learning which fails to account for the complexity of human thinking (Walsh and Peterson, 1985). In early years settings behaviourist approaches do not dominate pedagogy (David et al, 2003) but are reflected in an emphasis upon objectivity when carrying out observation (Harding and Meldon Smith, 1996; Hobart and Frankel, 1999; Sharman et al, 2004). Bartholomew and Bruce (1993:12) consider that theories from behaviourist psychology have had the “damaging impact of over-valuingpre-structured record keeping. Records of children were confined to those who could or could not manage to do what the adult’s task required, and a ‘sheep and goats’ element began to creep in.” Although behaviourist teaching methods are not advocated within the Foundation Stage curriculum, there are fears that checklists of learning outcomes achieved, and not achieved, may come to dominate observation and record keeping (Arnold, 2006; Luff, 2006).

Behaviourist observations and interventions do provide a basis for programmes for children with some types of special needs (David et al, 2003) where clarity of learning objectives, identified as a key feature of a behaviourist approach to education (Hartley, 1998), are important. The Portage method (Maunder, 1989; National Portage Association, 2008) of teaching specific skills, to pre-school children with disabilities is, arguably, an example of a current application of operant conditioning. Here steps towards learning goals are identified, activities to promote this learning are taught and methods of positive reinforcement reward successful practice and progress during daily teaching sessions. The child's achievements are monitored and the carers' observations are recorded using a tick chart, with space for comments.

The three theoretical perspectives, described above, are distinctly different, and even opposed. For example, none of Piaget's work was translated into English during the 1930s and 1940s when behaviourism dominated developmental psychology in the US; and Piaget argued against the nativist, maturationist views of Chomsky and Fodor (Campbell, 2006). Nevertheless, the approach to observation of children from all three perspectives can be characterised as scientific and objective, grounded in the belief that facts about children can be discerned through careful watching. The main features of each of these theoretical perspectives are summarised in Table 2.1. (below). In the second part of the chapter, the discussion then moves to consideration of three theoretical perspectives, which can be characterised as subjective in nature: psycho-dynamic theory; social constructivism and postmodern perspectives.

Table 2.1. Summary of three objective theoretical approaches to child observation			
Theoretical perspective:	Maturationist biological growth	Constructivist genetic epistemology	Behaviourist learned responses
Major theorists:	Stanley Hall; Gesell	Piaget; Athey	Watson; Skinner
View of the child:	Predisposed to grow, develop and learn	Active with innate desire / capacity to make sense of the world	Responsive to modelling and conditioning
Role of the adult:	Watchful care, ensuring safe / positive conditions for growth. Trusting child to progress	Adapting the environment in order to promote and stimulate intellectual development	Modelling and teaching to shape children's behaviour in desired ways
Purpose of observation:	To understand and to monitor child development	To identify mental processes / schemas – to plan learning opportunities	To monitor a child's behavioural responses to the environment
Observer stance:	Passive, objective, unbiased	Objective, inquiring, constructing knowledge	Objective, recording sensory information, noting responses
Methods of observing children:	Biographical accounts of child's development <i>or</i> Developmental checklists	Identify and record children's dominant schemas – via narrative observation and clinical interview	Checklists record step by step progress towards defined learning targets
Implications for early years care and education:	Routines planned and adapted with sensitivity to the age and stage of development of the children	Focus on children's current interests and how provision can be made to further these	Design / evaluate systematic programmes for the repetition / practice of desirable skills
Other insights:	Use of parents' knowledge of their child's development	Children's behaviours can be intriguing and informative	Observational data highly significant

2.5. Psycho-dynamic theory

In complete contrast to behaviourism, the focus of interest in psycho-dynamic theory is the unconscious mind and how babies' and young children's inner lives and experiences may shape their development. The role of observation is to recognise what is happening in order to understand a child's feelings, relationships and motivations. Observation of children is also a method of understanding how infancy and childhood may affect adult personality (Freud, 1901; Bick, 1964; Miller et al, 1989).

Freud's (1940) account of psychosexual stages of human development was based upon his interpretations of his adult clients' descriptions of childhood experiences, not upon observations of children. Fawcett (2009:43) recognises the influence of Freud's ideas: "Valid or otherwise Psychodynamic ideas, particularly the importance of early experiences for later well-being, have had some influence on child care and education practice". This is partly through the work of Susan Isaacs (1930, 1933), a trained psychoanalyst and an associate of Melanie Klein, who provided detailed observations of the children at the Malting House experimental school in order to understand their experiences.

Psycho-dynamic ideas are not influential in the initial training of UK early years practitioners or in child care and education work (David et al, 2003) but the psycho-dynamic method of infant observation is a key aspect of psychotherapy training, pioneered by Esther Bick (1964). It is also used for the continuing professional development of social workers (Trowell and Miles, 1991) and, more recently, for early years practitioners (Elfer, 2005, 2007; Elfer and Dearnley, 2007). It usually involves weekly, one hour visits to a family home in order to follow the development of a baby or very young child throughout a year of their life (Miller et al, 1989; Briggs, 2002). The approach to observation is challenging, as the observer aims to be neutral and non-participant yet fully tuned-in to the infant's inner thoughts and feelings. No notes are taken but very close attention is paid to the non-

verbal signals of the infant and the features of any interaction between the child and parents, particularly the mother. A detailed account of the session is written up in which, as far as possible, the complete sequence of events is recalled and described. The observation accounts (Piontelli, 1986; Rustin, 1989) are somewhat different from the objective, factual, narrative records which child care and education students are encouraged to aim for (Hobart and Frankel, 1999; Sharman et al, 2004). They have a distinct emotional quality and incorporate both description and an introspective response, often expressed in terms of psychodynamic theory.

The influence of close observation training in developing the sensitivity of the observer is evident in a fascinating study of the development of 30 pairs of twins (Piontelli, 2002). In describing the methodology for this longitudinal research, and discussing the use of video recording, the author emphasises the advantages of the human eye for: “the perception of subtle, interpersonal, emotional dynamics as well as a deeper and broader view of behavioural phenomenon” (Piontelli, 2002:10).

Psychodynamic influences and current practice

For social workers, who may work with families under stress and children at risk, the ability to make sensitive observations and appropriate assessments is vital and research has indicated the value of child observation in their training (Trowell and Miles, 1991; Trowell et al, 1998; Tanner and Le Riche, 2000). Elfer (2005, 2007) suggests that understandings from psycho-dynamic theory should also inform methods of child observation in child care settings. His view is yet to be more fully embraced, however, two key ideas from this theoretical tradition do influence how children are cared for and the ways in which their actions are viewed.

The first of these psychodynamic lenses for interpreting behaviour is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Rutter, 1991). Each child’s responses to separation from their main carer are carefully monitored and managed in an attempt to minimise the

trauma of transitions, particularly when starting nursery. To provide a continuity and individual attention for each child, day nurseries are often organised according to key person groups (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994; Elfer et al, 2003). It is likely that each child's key person will have responsibility for record keeping and may use observations of the child as a means of building relationships with the child and family (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005).

The second understanding, linked with this perspective on children's development, is of observing the potentially therapeutic benefits of play. Bruce (1999; 39), for example, suggests that children "will sort out life's confusions and make sense for themselves as they play". This, once again, can be attributed to the influence of Susan Isaacs (1930) who advocated play as an escape to or from real life, allowing children to act out their frustrations and emotions within a context in which they could gain control.

Childcare students are unlikely to learn about this psycho-dynamic tradition in any depth or detail. Freud's psycho-sexual stages of development are outlined (e.g. Tassoni et al, 2002; Bruce and Meggitt, 2006) and the work of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Winnicott may also be discussed, but quite briefly. Perhaps this is because psychoanalysis is seen as a specialist skill, usually taught and applied in therapeutic contexts, or it may be that the inaccessibility of the unconscious mind limits this approach to observing and understanding children's development.

Interpreting babies' behaviour or children's play acts in terms of unconscious sexual phantasy (Rustin, 2002) is sometimes uncomfortable and even shocking to readers not versed in psychoanalytic ideas. Sometimes, too, the accounts seem unsympathetic, for example the following description of a ten month old baby: "After the summer ...he looked even more blank and also terribly fat. He smelled unpleasant, was covered in scratches, and he constantly and noisily sucked his

tongue” (Piontelli, 1986: 39). It is possible, however, that child care professionals’ tendency to phrase observations in neutral or positive terms, and their reluctance to record problems or difficulties in negative ways, arises from a defensive inability to face up to children’s difficulties or emotional pain (Youell, 2002).

2.6. Social constructivism

Vygotsky (1934/1986) also recognised the centrality of emotion, and the origins of thought in affect and motivation, although this area of his work is little known (Mahn and John-Steiner, 2002). Social constructivist¹ theories, based on the ideas of Vygotsky, are best known for an emphasis on learning as human activity, occurring in social, cultural contexts, mediated by language and other symbol systems and understood in relation to historical societal traditions (Hedegaard, 1995; John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996; Palincsar, 2005). Vygotsky’s interest in the social nature of learning has been contrasted with Piaget’s focus upon the individual, although this criticism may be inaccurate and unfair (Bidell, 1992; Matusov and Hayes, 2000; Daniels, 2005). Indeed, Piaget (1950/2001:171) wrote: “The human being is immersed from birth in a social environment which affects him just as much as the physical environment. Society, even more, in a sense, than the physical environment, changes the very structure of the individual.” Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter One, it is Vygotsky’s theory of the social construction of thought which has promoted the concept of learning as socially mediated and has inspired interest in the importance of social environments for promoting development.

¹ There are many options to choose from in labelling this theoretical perspective and the various schools of thought which have developed from Vygotsky’s original ideas (Daniels, 2001). Wertsch et al (1995) suggest that ‘cultural-historical’ and ‘sociohistorical’ theory are the most appropriate terms when discussing the work of Soviet psychologists whilst the term ‘sociocultural’ may refer to the ways in which Vygotsky’s ideas have influenced Western social sciences. Matusov and Hayes (2000) equate the reconstruction of Vygotsky’s theory by US social psychologists with the neo-classical rebirth of ancient Greek culture in later times and argue that it is this new theoretical approach which can be labelled sociocultural. Whilst for the discussion of the conceptual framework I have adopted the term ‘sociocultural-historical’, following Anning et al (2009), here I have chosen ‘social constructivism’ as this is how Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development is referred to in the training of the participants in this study (Tassoni et al, 2002) and also the label given to this theoretical perspective by Raban et al (2003).

Vygotsky's work became known in the West in the 1970s. It was translated and edited to appeal to this audience (Daniels, 2005) and, consequently, subsequent academic attention has mainly focused upon the two widely available key texts: *Thought and Language* (Thinking and Speech) and *Mind in Society* (Valsiner, 1988). English educationalists' understandings of the range and depth of Vygotsky's writings are, therefore, limited, incomplete interpretations which have evolved within their particular cultural context (Burmenskaya, 1992; Daniels, 1993, 2001, 2005). In other words, it must be accepted that contemporary knowledge of social constructivism is socially constructed, as are ideas about its application to pedagogy and practice in the early years. Three elements of Vygotsky's educational theory are discussed here, in relation to the implementation and interpretation of child observations.

The general genetic law of cultural development underpins Vygotsky's account of human learning, and stresses the interdependence of social and individual processes in the construction of knowledge. Children's cognitive development is explained as appearing firstly on a social level, between people, and then becoming internalised, as skills and knowledge within the child; therefore, "Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships" (Vygotsky, 1981: 163). Observations of children, from this perspective, concentrate upon learning activities, in social context, for: "it is only in movement that the body shows what it is" (Vygotsky, 1978: 64). Rogoff (1998) proposes three planes of analysis, personal, interpersonal and community / institutional, which correspond with Vygotsky's view of inter-psychological and intra-psychological functioning and offer lenses through which early childhood teachers can observe children's interactions and understand their own participation in their learning (Fleer and Richardson, 2004).

The social formation of the mind is emphasised in the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978: 86) defines this as the distance

between a child's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and their higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." This idea has been much debated and differently interpreted: as scaffolding for individual tasks (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Greenfield, 1984); as general instruction to promote desired development (Hedegaard, 1990; Chaiklin, 2003); or as a collective process of social transformation (Engeström, 1987; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Whichever of these interpretations is adopted, the implication for observing children is to focus on understanding how learners are making progress and can be supported in their further development. This accords with Vygotsky's (1986: 203) analogy: "If the gardener decides only to evaluate the matured or harvested fruits of the apple tree, he cannot determine the state of his orchard. The maturing trees must also be taken into consideration."

A third component of Vygotsky's theory is his view that human activities and interactions, including cognitive processes, are mediated by cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997; Vygotsky and Luria, 1930/1993). Whilst these tools can be as simple as "casting lots, tying knots and counting fingers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 127), extending human ability to make decisions, remember something or perform simple arithmetic, the term also refers to more complex symbol systems, including spoken and written language, which are powerful tools for the shaping of human intellectual abilities. Kozulin (2003) emphasizes the complex interrelationship of human mediation with the use of symbolic tools in education. Observation may promote educators' awareness of children's developing use of cultural tools, and the impact upon their learning (Egan, 2003; Dijk, 2003) and it is also possible to view child observation itself as a pedagogical tool, supporting the thinking and actions of child care and education workers (Cowie and Carr, 2009).

Social constructivist influences and current practice

The Basic Development curriculum, offered in the early years of some Dutch primary schools, provides a strong example of the application of Vygotskian theoretical principles to practice. The educational objectives for this holistic approach are represented in a circular diagram (Janssen-Vos, 2003) with well-being, curiosity and self-confidence at the centre, aspects of personal and social development in a middle circle and specific motor, cognitive and language skills around the outer circle, a very different design from the compartmentalised, linear stepped progression towards early learning goals, indicated in English curriculum guidance (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009a). The teacher's role is in assisting performance, through participation in joint activities, guided by different didactic strategies employed to broaden and deepen children's activities (Janssen-Vos, 2003). The associated observation method is described in the 'HOREB' manual (Janssen-Vos, Pompert and Schiferli, 1998 / 2001). This provides a book of ideas for meaningful activities, a logbook for recording short term planning, general observation and reflection on implementation of plans, and "Special attention plan" (Fijma, 2003:157) templates for recording learning plans and achievements for individual children, which are incorporated into diaries and portfolios to maintain a record of progress. Thus teachers have a challenging double role to play within Basic Development as they both participate in and observe and reflect on the activities and interactions (Van Oers et al, 2003). These are complex and demanding tasks (Fijma, 2003) but teachers are given systematic assistance in learning to use the logbooks and diaries, through collaborative work with teacher educators and academic researchers, which has been shown to boost their confidence and raise the quality of observations (Van Oers and Holla, 1997).

Van Oers (2003) describes this approach to observation and documentation as the creation of developmental narratives for and about the children. The aim is not objective assessment, although comparison between the observational accounts and children's performance on standardised tests show the teachers' judgements to be

reliable (Van Oers, 1999), but rather a storying of learning, structuring experiences so that they can be revisited. The same understanding of observation and assessment is at the heart of the Learning Story method, associated with the Te Whākiri curriculum in New Zealand (see Chapter One, above). Carr (2001) and Peters (2009) argue that this type of narrative approach captures children's learning effectively, in ways which can be revisited, providing feedback to learners and enabling educators to reflect upon and develop their pedagogy.

Anning, Cullen and Flear (2004:1) suggest that, in recent years, early childhood education has experienced “a theoretical sea-change that has seen individualistic developmental explanations of learning and development replaced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning”. This echoes the hailing of a “sociocultural revolution” (Voss et al, 1995:174), recognising learning through social interaction in a variety of contexts. One consequence of this has been a move towards a more holistic approach to documenting children's learning (Anning et al, 2004), as exemplified by the methods described above. Yet even in a book devoted to considering social and cultural approaches to early childhood education (Anning et al, 2004, 2009) English contributors, Tymms and Merrell, (2009) focus on the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) baseline assessment project and the adaptation of this measurement tool to enable international comparisons of cognitive development and school success. The emphasis on skills testing, accountability and judging school effectiveness accords more closely with objective, developmental models of “assessing whether a child is conforming to a set of standards” (Dahlberg et al, 1999: 146) suggesting that approaches to observing children's learning in early childhood settings in England are not aligned with sociocultural theory.

2.7. Postmodern perspectives

The five theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter, so far, are all associated with the academic discipline of developmental psychology. Social constructivism in

psychology, however, is closely associated with social constructionism (Burr, 2003) with its origins in sociology, although there are differences in ontological beliefs between these perspectives. For example, whilst both traditions are in agreement about the socially constructed nature of knowledge, social constructivists argue a role for objects in the making of meaning whereas for social constructionists meanings are discovered only through interaction between people (Crotty, 1998). Nevertheless, sociocultural theories of young children's learning have much in common with the 'new' sociology of childhood (Matthews 2007, Hedegaard and Fler, 2008). The sixth perspective, postmodernism, has multi-disciplinary origins in and across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Working within this theoretical approach single definitions of any kind, including a description of postmodernism itself, are not possible as understandings are considered to be partial, constantly shifting, and subject to change. Any concept or activity, including that of child observation, is open to reanalysis and questioning, especially in relation to values, choices, equity and the exercise of power. When interpreting what is seen and heard, multiple voices and perspectives must be acknowledged and considered (Burman 1994, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; MacNaughton 2003).

Postmodern perspectives have been applied to child observation, which is criticised as a "technology of normalisation" (Dahlberg et al, 1999), a tool used to classify and categorise children in relation to predetermined categories produced from developmental psychology. Morss' (2003) view accords with this critique, offering a variety of alternative ways of looking at children and childhood and suggesting that early years educators must recognise their own knowledge of children and be prepared to act upon it.

Postmodern theorists argue against the possibility of explaining complex phenomena, claiming that it is only possible to have provisional understandings of the world at a local level. They, therefore, question the importance of scientific generalisations, considering them to be oversimplified "big pictures or grand

narratives about humanity's progress on its journey" (Hughes, 2001: 45). This is echoed by writers who argue that the dominance of ideas from developmental psychology has led to an unhelpful universal view of children and the reproduction of Western values and concepts of childhood in other societies (e.g. Kvale 1992; Burman, 1994; Morss 1996).

Another question raised is the possibility of one person being able to see, record and accurately represent an observation of a child. A true account of what a child says or does is not considered possible, thus any documentation is, inevitably, "selective, partial and contextual" (Dahlberg et al, 1999: 147). The observer must, therefore, think carefully about any descriptions, interpretations and explanations which are produced, recognising that they are subjective constructions and reflecting upon her own involvement in the process (Dahlberg et al, 1999; MacNaughton, 2003). In order to view children through various lenses, exploring multiple perspectives and different possible meanings, early years educators may engage in paired observation work and discussions, or tape record their observations so that they can revisit their observations for further analysis (Campbell and Smith, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003).

The influence of postmodern theories on current practice

From a postmodern perspective, observation is never neutral or innocent activity. Questions can be asked about whose interests are served by the processes of observation, which understandings of the child are privileged, whose voices are silenced and which views of gender, culture, social class, race and sexuality are overlooked (Smith, 2000). Foucault (1977) drew attention to the power relationships involved in observing and its use as a means of surveillance and discipline. Making children the objects and subjects of our constant adult gaze could be viewed as an exercise of social control (MacNaughton, 2005) rather than a benign, positive method of understanding children and facilitating their learning (Devereux, 2003). Attempting to redress the balance of power, Warming (2005) aims to represent and advocate for the child's point of view through the adoption of a radical approach to

observation, in which she attempts to take the ‘least adult role’ (Corsaro, 1985; Mayall, 2000) and observe by participating, alongside children, in order to understand their experiences at nursery.

Smith (2000) argues that parents are also positioned by the ways in which their children are observed. She suggests that in traditional approaches to observation, even where collaboration is achieved, professionals guide the process and relationships are unequal. She advocates for a reconceptualisation of the parent / professional partnership that recognises parental views about their children which may previously have been silenced, even when parents draw upon very different theories to explain their children’s behaviour:

“The emergence of non-traditional views such as Feng Shui is important because it points to a changing relationship between parents and professionals and observation as a practice in which subjugated knowledge is valid.” (Smith, 2000: 21).

This raises questions about which understandings of children are most helpful for promoting learning and perhaps a concern that the impact of postmodern ideas can lead to “a flight from theorising” (David et al, 2003: 24). Smith’s ideas certainly contrast strongly with the views of Athey (1991) who saw the early years professionals’ confidence in their own specialist knowledge as a strength in their work with the parents who participated in the Froebel Research Project, and a factor influencing positive educational outcomes for children.

Dahlberg and Åsén (1994:166), like Smith (2000), aspire towards “pedagogical practice based upon empowerment, participation and reflective discourse between parents, staff, administrators and politicians”. They describe the pedagogical documentation in use in Reggio Emilia, and adopted in the Stockholm Project in Sweden, as an example of a postmodern alternative, which rejects the objective developmental theories that underpin traditional child observation (Dahlberg et al,

1999). Malaguzzi (1993), however, showed great respect for the work of developmental psychologists and a strong interest in the insights that their work might provide. The pedagogista with a higher degree in psychology has a “highly regarded professional position” (Rinaldi, 2006: 167) within the Reggio Emilia approach and works with the teacher using this expertise to illuminate learning processes, revealed in pedagogical documentation, with reference to established educational philosophies and psychological theories. In reference to the pedagogista’s role, Filippini (1998:130) states: “Social constructivism and interactionism are theoretical frameworks that guide our work with both adults and children.”

All of the three perspectives, discussed in the second part of the theoretical overview presented in this chapter, call for understandings and uses of child observation which move beyond traditional, scientific methods and contribute to processes of documenting adults and children’s experiences in complex ways. The first three theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter (maturational, developmental and behaviourist) were categorised as objective, in that they seek scientific understandings of children’s development, which can be universally applied (see Table 2.1. above). The latter theoretical perspectives (psychodynamic, social constructivist and postmodern) are described as subjective, because they accept and value interpretative accounts of children’s development, which are related to particular contexts. These are summarised in Table 2.2., below:

Table 2.2. Summary of three subjective theoretical approaches to child observation			
Theoretical perspective	Psycho-dynamic Analysis of unconscious	Socio-cultural Social psychology	Post-modern Critical theories
Major theorists	Freud, Bick	Vygotsky Bruner Rogoff	Various (Foucault, Derrida, Bauman) Burman, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence
View of the child	Complex, vulnerable, rich inner life, unconscious mind	Actively engaged in co-constructing understandings through interactions with experienced others	No single view. Children possess rights and should be considered full, active members of society
Role of the adult	Recognising and analysing emotional responses	To establish shared meanings and promote further development	Support child's development of identity and knowledge
Purpose of observation	To understand and promote healthy emotional development (a key tool in training)	A tool to promote learning and inform educational activity	To stimulate a dialogue about the child / activities. As a means of identifying inequality
Observer stance	Subjective, engaged, seeking understanding of unconscious processes	Subjective, engaged, aiming to capture and understand learning in context	Subjective, critical, reflexive, recognising own viewpoint
Methods of observing children	Detailed close observations, recalled and written after the event.	Participant, recording learning via Learning Stories and portfolios	Variety of approaches and input to document children's lives and progress
Implications for early years care and education	Seeking awareness of psychological and emotional barriers to effective learning	Engaging with others to review and plan learning and teaching strategies	Family / community involvement to consider children's achievements
Other insights	Emotional impact on the observer; observations reviewed in supportive groups	Discussion of observations important for co-construction of knowledge about the child / children	Observer may confront how her own experiences affect and connect with those of a child

2.8. Conclusions: the contemporary debate and an alternative possibility

In the above review, six key perspectives which underpin approaches to observing children and interpreting observations, have been categorised as either objective or subjective (Driscoll, 2005). This polarised view of different theories is echoed in current debates about the nature and purpose of child observation. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) criticise the use of observations to record a child's progress in relation to norms informed by theories from developmental psychology. They advocate instead an ideal of pedagogical documentation, which seeks to understand a child's learning processes through the use of documentation, dialogue, critical reflection and deconstruction. Other writers highlight the same dichotomy: Carr (2001) criticises traditional convergent assessment and proposes, as an alternative, divergent assessment, using narrative observations and encouraging children to participate in the creation of learning stories. Drummond (2003) reflects on the tensions between a long jump model of assessment, observing in order to measure children's learning against pre-set goals, and other models in which observational assessments provide clues for possible directions of learning and adults and children work actively towards shared goals. Fler and Richardson (2004), too, characterise traditional observational assessment as objective and individualistic and propose alternative methods, which are subjective and allow recognition of children's participation in sociocultural activity.

These arguments imply that a choice must be made, which seems to conflict with a view that practitioners may operate using insights from more than one theoretical perspective (Raban et al, 2003; David et al, 2003). A common theme, however, both in the past and the present, is an attempt to reconcile opposing philosophies. Many pioneer educators maintained apparently conflicting beliefs. Stanley Hall, motivated by a broad and deep interest in children and childhood, sought insights from several different emerging traditions for understanding of child development, for example, he introduced the writings of physiologist Wilhelm Preyer to an American audience and also invited Sigmund Freud to the United States for a lecture tour (Smuts, 2006).

Margaret McMillan held contradictory views of education as both an individual process and as preparation for participating in society (Moriarty, 1998; Blenkin et al 1995) and Susan Isaacs (1930) adhered to the significance of measurable developmental norms and corresponded enthusiastically with Piaget, whilst sustaining a commitment to understanding the inaccessible world of the child's unconscious mind. More recently Arnold (2009a, 2009b) has employed psychodynamic interpretations of children's behaviour alongside the constructivist analyses which characterised her earlier work (Arnold, 1999, 2003). As noted in the previous chapter, current curriculum guidance (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009a) is similarly inconsistent in espousing one coherent philosophy, as it requires practitioners to respond to children's unique interests and, at the same time, to work towards predefined learning goals.

In seeking a way of resolving such contradictions, Dewey's pragmatist position, rejecting ideological dualisms and reconciling apparent dichotomies in pedagogical praxis is potentially helpful. Saito (2003:1758) describes this as "a philosophy for a middle way of living, somewhere between resignation to the absence of common ground and a belief in an absolute common ground"; whilst Apple and Teitelbaum (2001: 180) cite an example of his approach: "... it was not a question of a choice between validating the interests of the child or the subject matter in constructing a curriculum but rather of understanding and developing the continuum of experiences that links them." Dewey's explanations of the acquisition of knowledge involve interactions and transactions between people and their environment and thus offer a means of breaking down the distinctions between objective and subjective understandings of child observation. In his view, people are constantly in touch with a changing environment, "The world as we experience it is a real world" (Dewey, 1929: 235), and interpret situations, through reflection and action, to negotiate new meanings.

For Dewey (1933/1998: 170) “*thoughtful* observing is at least one half of thinking.”² Observation is fundamental to experiential education and reflection for learners of all ages. Observation may provoke an investigation, be used to make further discoveries or serve to provide evidence to test an emerging hypothesis. Observing young children can, thus, be seen as a dynamic activity, allowing the observer to relate to the child, to apply and assess different theoretical explanations of their behaviour and yet be prepared to come to fresh understandings (Cuffaro, 1995). Biesta and Burbules (2003: 13) sum up this possibility well: “The ways in which the world can surprise us always provide input into the cycle of inquiry and action, forcing us to change our knowledge of the world and our ways of acting within it”. In the next chapters attention turns from theories informing observation to the ways in which practitioners act within the world of the early years setting, in using observation as an aspect of pedagogy during their first year at work.

2.9. Summary

In this chapter I have provided a discussion of six key theories, all of which influence contemporary understandings of child care and education and observation of young children. I have examined each perspective in turn, with a particular focus on implications for implementing and interpreting child observations. This review will provide a basis for identifying and locating the research participants’ understandings of child observation work, in relation to theories introduced during their training. It will also be useful when investigating the methods of observation in use in the research settings and the assumptions associated with these approaches.

Whilst every one of the theoretical perspectives examined in this chapter presents different characteristics, I have argued, following Driscoll (2005) that each might be identified with either an objectivist or subjectivist paradigm, thus representing opposing sides in a current debate about appropriate methods of observation in early

² Author’s italics in the original text

years care and education. I then suggest that Dewey's notion of transactional knowledge might present an alternative viewpoint, allowing practitioners to utilise understandings from seemingly opposite traditions. This idea will be further explored in relation to learning in the first year of work (in Chapter Four) and the epistemological basis for the research (in Chapter Five) and may prove fruitful for understanding processes of observation and of professional growth. In Chapter Three, I turn from an analysis of understandings of observation, based primarily upon major theories from developmental psychology, to an exploration of uses of observation as a pedagogical tool, drawing upon the ideas from the history of early childhood education and care and from contemporary curricula.

Chapter Three - Uses of child observation

“Observation is the foundation of education in the early years”

(Hurst 1991: 70).

3.1. Introduction

This chapter moves from a discussion of understandings underpinning child observation to an analysis of its use in practice in early childhood care and education. The distinction drawn here (and in the research question) between ‘understanding’ and ‘use’ is, of course, an artificial one as it is difficult to separate ideas about observation from its implementation. Carr (1993) explains that activities are governed by theoretical frameworks, which structure and guide practice. For Dewey (1933/1998: 223) whilst ideas can be self contained, theory for practitioners is “complete only when furthering some interest in life.” Likewise, Rinaldi (2006: 190-191) expresses the view that theory and practice must be intertwined in a search for meaning: “When you think it’s practice and when you practise it’s theory.” Here it is a question of emphasis; the discussion in the previous chapter concentrated upon the theoretical informants of observation, but the focus now shifts to its application in context, specifically, to a discussion of ways in which child observation has been and is used in early childhood settings. The aims of the chapter are: to analyse the value of observation as a tool for early childhood education and care; and, thus, to identify the uses of child observation that newly qualified child care and education workers may encounter and implement during their first year in the workplace.

In order to examine the extent to which child observation is an essential cornerstone of early childhood care and education (as the author of the opening quotation for this chapter contends) this chapter will consider its uses with reference to historical, international and local examples. I begin by revisiting the historical precedents for child observation in early childhood education and highlight the influence and relevance of these past of uses of observation to the present. Key themes from the work of three “philosopher pedagogues” (Härkönen, 2003: 25) are examined in

relation to requirements for the use of child observation in child care and education settings in England, as described in Chapter One. Uses of child observation in English early childhood settings are compared and contrasted with influential international work, drawing upon current literature and research. The chapter concludes by considering how insights from the past and present reveal the potential of thoughtful observation of children as a means of achieving worthwhile ends in care and education.

3.2. Uses of child observation – historical insights

There is considerable pride in traditions of early childhood care and education in the UK and Europe with educators looking to the past as a means to understand and inform the present (see for example: Webb, 1974; Bruce, 1987; McAuley and Jackson, 1992; Nutbrown et al, 2008). Anning (1997) argues that an analysis of the past can support our understanding of the present and anticipation of the future in early childhood care and education and Nutbrown and her colleagues (2008), likewise, see all early childhood educators as both inheritors and makers of history as they respond to and build upon vision and actions of pioneer educators.

McAuley (1993) identifies observation of children as a central and influential characteristic of the work of the pioneers of early childhood education. Here the ideas and influence of three of these historical figures are discussed: Montessori (1967b:106), well known for her exhortation to “observe the child”, and McMillan and Isaacs, whose work is particularly significant for early childhood education in England (Luff et al, 2009).

Dr Maria Montessori (1870-1952) – pedagogy based upon scientific observation

Montessori pioneered an approach to education firmly rooted in scientific observations of children and was described as “the woman who looks at children as a naturalist looks at bees” (Loeffler, 1992:7). Her observations led her to view the child as active and motivated to learn; an idea of the child shared by Piaget, as discussed in Chapter Two, who was a supporter of the Montessori movement

(Kramer, 1988) and likely to have been influenced by the time he spent observing in a Montessori school (Lillard, 2005). Montessori (1912) saw her schools as laboratories of experimental pedagogy where she could investigate how children developed and learned. Her educational approaches and materials were based upon this empirical study and then trialled within the classrooms, with Montessori and her teachers observing the children's responses (Montessori, 1912; Lillard, 2005). Based upon insights from these observations, each aspect of the Montessori curriculum is broken down into small steps during which skills and knowledge are gained in order to enable the child to master tasks.

Three main uses of child observation are evident within the Montessori Method. Firstly, teachers were advised to be very attentive to the children, detecting their needs, noticing and understanding changes in behaviour and responding appropriately. Interestingly, Montessori also advocated that teacher should develop self-awareness in order to distinguish their own feelings from those of the children (Lillard, 2005). Secondly, observation is used to assess children's interests:

“The teacher will note whether or not the child is interested in the object, how he shows his interest, how long he is interested in it, and so on, and she will take care not to force a child's interest in what she is offering”

(Montessori, 1967b:107).

Thirdly, Montessori teachers also use observation for evaluating children's work in progress although this watching has to be very subtle as adult surveillance, “even a look” (Montessori, 1967a: 280) could disrupt the concentration of a child engaged on a task. These three observational strategies together form the basis for facilitating the learning of each child within a group.

Margaret McMillan (1860 – 1931) – observation to rate well-being and progress

A British contemporary of Montessori, socialist campaigner and nursery education pioneer, Margaret McMillan also used observation as a means of understanding and promoting children's development. She, too, emphasised child study as a key aspect of the training of child carers and educators (Moriarty, 1998). Her trainees visited

children in their homes to observe their growth and development, thus venturing outside the sheltered environment of the nursery school to understand the broader social circumstances in which the children and their families lived (Bradburn, 1976). In turn, the Nursery School was designed to be seen and observed by the surrounding community (McMillan, 1919). McMillan shared with Montessori a commitment to overcoming problems of child poverty, and reducing its negative effects, through the provision of holistic care and education which promoted all aspects of children's well-being and enabled them to achieve their potential. Almost a century later, this vision of high quality early learning and care as a means to reduce inequality and improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged circumstances remains, and is enshrined in UK Government policy and legislation (DfES 2004a, 2004b; HM Government 2004).

In McMillan's Open Air Nursery School in Deptford, London, child profiles were maintained charting each child's achievements and progress according to certain pre-set categories (McMillan, 1919), a form of record keeping which presages the individual child records, often incorporating checklists, which are maintained in many contemporary child care settings. Moriarty (1998) points out that this profiling implied that methods of care and education should be directed towards enabling children to achieve the behaviours detailed in the profiles. Similarly, current practice may be constrained by lists of early learning goals, with teaching and assessment directed towards these, thus limiting opportunities for experiences which are not directly related to achievements that can be recorded on individuals' profiles.

Susan Isaacs (1885 – 1948) – observing in order to understand children

Isaacs, too, designed checklist style, Infant Admission Record cards and made recommendations for their use in Wiltshire schools (Isaacs *et al.* 1936; Baker, 1993). Her most famous observations, however, were detailed narrative observations of the children who attended the Malting House experimental school in Cambridge (Isaacs, 1930; 1933). As head teacher of the school, she completed meticulous accounts of

the children's spontaneous play within this environment and, like Montessori, used this work as a basis for the creation of positive educational experiences. Using psychoanalytic theory to interpret her observations, Isaacs identified the importance of early emotional development and advocated provision for children's fantasy and self-expression, within a framework of routine, to support social and intellectual development (Isaacs, 1933; Smith, 1985).

Isaacs' uses of observation demonstrate how accounts of children's chosen activities can provide illuminating information for the adults who work with them. Moreover, she highlights the keen awareness of young children that can be achieved:

“by patient listening to the talk of even little children, and watching what they do, with the one purpose of understanding them, we can imaginatively feel their fears and angers, their bewilderments and triumphs; we can wish their wishes, see their pictures and think their thoughts ..” (Isaacs, 1929:165)

Some common principles

Analysing the work of these three pioneers, with a focus upon their ideas about child observation (as outlined above), some common beliefs and values relating are evident. These include: respect for children; the desire to gain a broad understanding of children's growth, together with insights for their well-being; the use of observations to plan educational programmes and design resources; and observation of the effects of context, in order to provide a positive environment to promote learning, health and psychological well-being. These three influential women also displayed a sense of satisfaction in the processes of observation, as Dewey (1933/1998: 256) noted, “the persons who enjoy seeing will be the best observers”.

3.3. Respectful uses of child observation

Montessori and McMillans' active roles in the provision of services for children, together with the promotion of child health and protection of children from harm, are well recognised (for example in Kramer, 1988; and Bradburn, 1976). They are less acknowledged as pioneers of participation, appreciating young children's views and

listening to their voices, yet their attitudes and also the words of Montessori and Isaacs (cited above) seem, perhaps surprisingly, contemporary. It could be argued that their work exemplifies the present-day precept that “good information about childhood must start from children’s experience” (Mayall, 2000:121). These pioneer early educators are especially valuable as role models as they were interested in careful and observant listening and were, primarily, intent upon translating their findings into worthwhile educational practices (Drummond, 2000). Isaacs (1933:19) did not just attend to those children who responded as a teacher might wish but “was just as ready to record and to study the less attractive aspects of their behaviour as the more pleasing.”

This thoughtful watching of children, in order to understand their perspectives and interests and plan their care and education, is advocated in contemporary practice (for example, Drake, 2001, 2006; Selleck, 2001; National Strategies, 2009a). Since the publication and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), arguments for open-minded, responsive observation (aimed at understanding and appreciating children’s lives and achievements and acting to promote their care and extend their learning) have been framed in terms of respecting and upholding children’s rights (for example, Nutbrown 1996, 2001; Santer and Griffiths, 2007). Article 12 (UN, 1989) concerns the child’s right to express views on matters concerning them, which has prompted specific attempts to listen to children’s voices and viewpoints (for example, Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; MacNaughton et al 2003; Dahl and Aubrey, 2005; LTS, 2006). Observation of children can be seen as a strategy for listening, particularly when children cannot verbalise their views (Elfer, 2005) and may provide a means for adults to understand what children are trying to say and to support them in expressing their views.

Clark, Kj rholt and Moss (2005) offer a critical examination of approaches to listening to young children in early childhood services. Their book includes eight examples of research and practice, from six European countries, all of which contain elements of observation and reveal its importance as a means of attending to and

incorporating children's views when improving their care and education. The methods of observation employed vary but are characterised by participatory roles for the adult observers. Rinaldi (2005:24), for example, fully recognises the adult role in what is recorded when aiming to create pedagogical documentation, capturing children's ideas as part of a process of shared learning "each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter." Within the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) adults' accounts, based upon qualitative observations, provide part of a repertoire of ways of seeing provision from the children's points of view. Similarly, subjective understandings are acknowledged by Warming (2005) who, through her active adoption of a 'least adult role' (following Corsaro, 1985), reveals how some children are skilled in keeping themselves hidden from adults' sight.

These children who keep themselves hidden from view raise some doubts about the use of observation as a way of listening to children. Silin (1995: 84) questions the "uncensored celebration of voice", as privileging certain social and cultural groups, and asks "What if we considered the ability to remain still as a critical social skill and silence an essential aspect of our humanity?" Svenning (2009), too, wonders if we are listening in ways that are good enough, and showing sensitivity towards children's potential embarrassment at their behaviours being recorded, recounted and discussed.

If we uphold a view of the child as a person with rights and agency then he or she should, as far as possible, have a say in what is observed and documented and have a role in directing educational activities (DfES, 2007; Alderson, 2008; Palaiologou, 2008). Kjørholt (2005a; 2005b) warns, however, that following a 'rights-based' approach may lead to some superficial ideas and practices when attempting to listen to children; and an over-emphasis upon the child as a rational, autonomous and competent being, which risks neglect of the child's need for sensitive, supportive care. She speaks of the importance of adults having sensitivity and listening to children's unspoken words, and highlights the need for observant attention to body

language (Kjørholt, 2005a). It is to this use of observation, as a way of relating to children and promoting their emotional well-being that this discussion now moves.

3.4. Observation for children's well-being

Both Montessori (1912) and McMillan (1919) sought to improve children's health and welfare and also saw close, warm bonds with the children as a key aspect of this work. Montessori (1912: 12), for example, wrote: *"The interest in humanity to which we wish to educate the teacher must be characterised by the intimate relationship between the observer and the individual to be observed"*. It was Isaacs (1929, 1933) who showed particular commitment to observing in order to interpret children's unspoken words and to understand their emotional lives. Isaacs' interpretations of children's thoughts and feelings, and her ability to separate her own emotions from these of the children and to understand her own feelings in terms of children's projected emotions, are born of extensive psycho-analytic training (Gardner, 1969; Sayers, 2001; Graham, 2009). This adult competence to attend to and understand babies' and young children's' body language and to be receptive to, and 'containing' (Bion, 1962) of their emotions is an underestimated and undervalued aspect of work with young children (Elfer, 2005, 2007).

Elfer (2005, 2007) highlights the need for recognition of the affective dimensions of observant practice within day care and emphasises, with Trowell and Bower (1995), that emotional growth is embedded within relationships with others. Selleck (2001:89), too, writes of the importance of key persons' "attuned observations" for understanding children's feelings within a nursery environment and responding to babies' and toddlers' cues in order to support them in making sense of their surroundings. This corresponds with the argument that it is only when every baby and toddler experiences focussed attention and appreciative responses that day care will match the experiences of young children who receive high quality care within their family (Honig, 2002; Parker-Rees, 2007).

Fox (2003), in a personal account of training in psychoanalytic observation, demonstrates the insights that an openness to children's feelings and the meanings of their play can offer to an early years teacher whose concern is the promotion of education, in the wider sense. Like Isaacs (above), she is prepared to admit that "childhood is not all unalloyed happiness" (Fox, 2003: 14) and to observe and interpret the emotional tensions of classroom life. She highlights the difference between responding to children's arguments by restating school rules or by recognising and affirming what children are doing and feeling; and examines the challenge of looking beyond technical aspects of writing or art work to the messages that children might be trying to convey.

Thus observation of children can be seen as an opportunity to see things from a child's perspective, to get to know and relate to children in meaningful ways (Perry, 2004). This is demonstrated in the use of 'profile books' at Fortune Park Children's Centre, which aim to capture "every aspect of a child's life" (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005: 92) and may offer support through stressful situations (the birth of a sibling and coping with unpleasant daily medication being two such examples) as well as celebrating achievements. The importance of using observation to create environments which meet the emotional needs of children is shown in a perceptive comment from a child evaluating her day care centre: "There was not that kind of grown-up there who takes care of children, just that kind of grown-up who looks after children" (Monica cited by Eide and Winger, 2005: 71). There is a potential conflict of interests, though, between accepting the "child as being" (Papatheodorou, 2008: 9) part of a community, whose human worth is rooted in belonging and mutual interdependence (Kjørholt, 2005a; Elfer, 2007); and a focus upon the individual "child as becoming" (Papatheodorou, 2008: 9) whose progress is objectively mapped and measured.

3.5. Observation as a means of identifying the progress of individuals

McMillan's (1919) teachers observed and charted children's health, growth, physical abilities and self-care skills. This has been criticised as individualistic and limiting

(Moriarty, 1998, *see above*), which is perhaps unfair as McMillan's concerns were broad with aspirations for young children to enjoy an improved quality of life and for nursery education to be a means of social regeneration (McMillan, 1919; Nutbrown et al, 2008). A similar tension is evident today with all encompassing Every Child Matters aspirations for children and the wider society (DfES 2004b, HM Govt. 2004; National Strategies, 2009a) being promoted alongside a narrow focus upon each child's individual achievement in relation to specific learning outcomes (DCSF, 2008; National Strategies, 2009c, 2009d; QCDA, 2009b).

Montessori (1912) based her method upon observing individual children in order to identify their abilities and recognise opportunities for teaching. Moriarty (1998), though, traces the origins of the teacher's role as observer and monitor of each child to Edmond Holmes' (1911) critique of whole class teaching. She argues that he influenced a pedagogy based upon following and fostering individuals' development. It is ironic that the approach that he advocated has become a means of assessing children's abilities and monitoring the effectiveness of their nursery education, as Holmes' writing was motivated by strong objections to the system of 'payment by results' (Nutbrown et al, 2008) and his personal view was that the effects of education were within the hearts and minds of children and so beyond measurement.

Observational assessment of every child is now a part of the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: "Providers must ensure that practitioners are observing children and responding appropriately to help them make progress from birth towards the early learning goals" (National Strategies, 2009d: no page). There are two aspects to this tracking of progress: the first is formative, with the aim of building upon acquired skills; and the second summative, assessing achievement of developmental milestones according to the identified outcomes for the six areas of learning. The EYFS makes explicit reference to Assessment for Learning (DfES 2007) a strategy based upon formative assessment, which has been implemented in other phases of schooling in England (see QCDA, 2009a) following the influential

publication on this topic by Black and Wiliam (1998). Observation is used for formative assessment of progress when evidence from what is seen and recorded is used as a basis for work with the child (DfES, 2007). Selleck (2001: 90) suggests that looking carefully at what children are doing, and where their interests lie, enables practitioners to observe the “received curriculum” and use insights from this to tailor their pedagogy. This is achieved in Reggio Emilia, through ‘progettazione’ as an educational strategy based upon observation, interpretation and documentation (Rinaldi, 2006); although the focus is not upon the progress of each autonomous individual but of each child as a protagonist in relation to others within the group.

The challenge for practitioners in England is that children’s interests and progress must be developed with reference to the pre-defined learning outcomes of the Foundation Stage curriculum. In Cowie and Carr’s (2004: 96) terms, this represents the plotting of achievements along a set route rather than “negotiation and navigation of individual and collective learning trajectories.” According to Wood (2008:110) interpretations of children’s activities are only ever partial “where defined learning goals and curriculum content are the main indicators of progress and achievement.” This accords with Dewey’s (1916) view that teaching towards specific, externally imposed goals limits educational experience, as it results in a separation between the learning activity itself and the outcome of the activity. In his view, effective education is based upon dynamic aims which emerge, in sequence, from an activity. This corresponds with a contrasting of extrinsic ‘performance goals’, which focus on judgements of ability, with more educationally meaningful ‘learning goals’, which prioritise learners’ effort, interest and understanding (Dweck 1986, 2006; Katz and Chard, 2000; Carr, 2001; Carr and Claxton, 2002). Glassman and Whaley (2000) provide an example of the latter by illustrating how, within a carefully documented project approach to early childhood education, teachers can identify possible aims and then support children in recognising and realising the aims for themselves.

The main summative assessment is completed at the end of the Foundation Stage of schooling, when most children are five years of age but summer born children are still aged four, via the creation of a Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) (QCA, 2008; National Strategies, 2009d). Baseline testing of children at the start of schooling became a statutory requirement for maintained primary schools, in England, from 1998 (DfEE, 1997). This was replaced, in 2003, by the Foundation Stage Profile, a single national baseline assessment scheme completed at the end of the Reception year. It comprises of thirteen scales which cover aspects of the six areas of learning. There are nine points on each scale. Teachers make a yes/ no judgement about the child's achievement of each scale point, based upon observational evidence (at least 80%) and broad knowledge of the child. Such individual profiling of children on school entry, via baseline assessment, is designed to be a tool for planning curriculum and measuring progress (Tymms and Merrell, 2009). Through the collation of information about their skills and attainment, the relative progress of children can be compared with others with similar baseline profiles. The original intention of this form of assessment was to get to know children's abilities, enhance teaching and learning, and evaluate educational provision (Sainsbury, 1998). In England it is now the first part of a national system of testing designed to achieve these means but also to hold teachers and schools to account; in Penn's (2008: 10) terms a way of "seeking proof that the regime of the nursery is working."

In the Foundation Stage Profile the one-to-one testing characteristic of earlier baseline schemes (Sainsbury, 1998) has been replaced by observational assessments. This naturalistic, contextualised assessment increases validity (Lockett, 1996, 2000; Mortimer, 2001) but also introduces possibilities of teacher bias, although the outcomes are treated as reliable, numerical data. It is argued that whilst validity, reliability and consistency of baseline results are important for comparisons across different classrooms, the accuracy of group means is more important than the precision of individual scores (de Lemos and Doig, 2000). Nevertheless, attaching particular numerical scores to children, based upon FSP judgements, may lead to early labelling of young children. Cripps (2009), head teacher of a primary school,

recognises the opportunities and entitlements on offer to children in the Foundation Stage but expresses unease with the potentially limiting categorisation of children, according to their attainment, which occurs when they enter the school environment. Nutbrown (1998) and Broadhead (2006) also argue that if educators focus upon the targets judged by the FSP then some significant aspects of children's learning may go unexamined and overlooked.

Hatch and Greishaber (2002) discuss the changing ways in which child observation is used in parts of the United States and Australia. They conclude that an emphasis upon standards and accountability has influenced a move away from the use of child observation to develop meaningful curriculum to "a technology for monitoring and evaluating academic progress in relation to a set of externally imposed standards" (Hatch and Grieshaber, 2002: 231). This climate of accountability has also been noted in research in English settings, with priorities in curriculum planning being to ensure coverage of the six areas of learning and the observation and assessment of five-year-olds in school reception classes sometimes reduced to "making the greatest number of ticks in the shortest possible time" (Adams et al. 2004: 84).

Moss (2006a, 2006b) critiques English early years settings as institutions of technical practice and the prescriptive curriculum a manual for technicians. He contrasts centralised early years policies in England with approaches in other European countries, whose kindergartens provide democratic spaces where decision making is participatory, creating possibilities for diversity, new thinking and innovative practices. This is particularly significant in relation to observation and assessment. Drummond (2003) and others (including Nutbrown 1998, 2006; Carr, 2001; Fleer and Richardson, 2004; Broadhead, 2006; Ellyatt, 2009; Peters, 2009) stress the importance of observational assessment in early childhood which focuses upon children's strengths, achievements and potential, in relation to one another and the learning environment. In their view positive, holistic uses of observation, to highlight what children know and what they are learning, in context, can play a vital role in constructing children's identities as confident and capable learners.

3.6 Observation as the basis for curriculum planning

The challenge is to go beyond monitoring and assessing what each child can or cannot do and, in the spirit of Montessori and Isaacs, to use careful observations of children as the basis for providing rich opportunities for their learning. This is not a simple task, and there is evidence that even skilled practitioners in well respected settings find this area of practice challenging (Moyle et al, 2002; Ofsted, 2004; *see Chapter One, above*). Here three different, but related, uses of observation for curriculum planning are considered in turn: observation as a means of co-constructing curricula; observation for supporting and promoting learning; and observational tools for evaluating the learning environment.

Selleck (2001) argues that there should be no certainty or absolutes when setting curriculum for young children but, rather, the curriculum within the child should be fostered through following the child's inclinations, being energetic and responsive, and embracing the child into the community. As suggested above, this is realised in 'progettazione' in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, which are based upon a 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi, 2005). In summary, this approach is based upon a belief that knowledge is constructed and interpreted between people and that children are capable and active participants in this process. The role of the observant adult is to listen actively and make sense of what children are saying and doing in order to promote their competence in making and expressing meanings, through actively promoting the development of projects. This is a complex task as it involves making sense of multiple viewpoints and supporting children to do this too. Tape recordings, photographs and video and note taking are part of this process, capturing the 'languages' of the children and providing 'documentation' to make the learning visible. Decisions are made, on the basis of this looking and listening, about the resources, techniques and suggestions to be offered to the children as each project progresses. The documentation also serves to display the learning process to others and to allow children to revisit and reflect upon their learning (Rinaldi, 1998, 2005, 2006).

Forms of documentation are vital to the pedagogy of other successful early childhood curricula. In the Netherlands, the Basic Curriculum (Van Oers, 2003; *see Chapter Two, above*) and, in New Zealand, Te Whākiri (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996; *see Chapter One*) both use narrative observations to capture and co-construct meaningful experiences and understandings. Carr (2001: 101) expresses this as integral to the educational process and fundamental to a “transformation of participation”, in which Learning Stories are used to encourage and deepen learning. Observation, in the Learning Story approach, is structured according to the requirements and opportunities in different local settings and is focused upon describing children’s achievements and dispositions towards learning. Observations are discussed and interpreted collaboratively and, along with photographs, work samples and comments from participants, form part of the documentation which then becomes the basis for decisions about new opportunities for learning (Carr, 2001; Podmore, 2006; Peters, 2009).

Whilst in the curricula mentioned above documentation is at the heart of the pedagogical process, in other approaches to early childhood education its role in supporting learning is less clear. Within the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009a) there is an emphasis upon observation of children’s play for informing curriculum planning. Broadhead (2006), however, highlights a lack of understanding of progression in learning within the early years curriculum and considers that policies which stress the achievement of targets limit opportunities for educators’ observations to inform learning processes. Whereas in emergent curriculum approaches, where outcomes are flexible, careful observation of children’s interests and inclinations is fundamental to assist learning within a zone of proximal development; when the focus of observation is on specific skills and developmental outcomes a brief noting of the short term achievements of the individual child is sufficient. Where certain levels and standards are set then reference to these will influence the direction of future learning. Ellyatt (2009) suggests that, even when this is not explicit, non-verbal signals from adults will indicate to children what is valued and targets and outcomes may take priority over

community and creativity. In contrast, where “children’s “pathways of learning” (Nutbrown, 2006: 124) are developed with reference to their developing dispositions towards learning, then routes can be “multidirectional, locally contextualised and emergent” (Cowie and Carr, 2009: 113).

Even where specified outcomes are in place, there are examples of a ‘middle way’ where accountability, in relation to standards, is combined with observational strategies in order to tailor a pre-set curriculum to particular children’s interests and promote their learning. The evaluation of ProjectLINK (Hallam et al, 2007) shows enhanced outcomes on classroom quality measures, for language and literacy, when incorporating personalised, observation based, assessment and planning with Head Start Child Outcomes. Likewise, in an Australian context, Perry et al (2007) demonstrate that learning stories can be used alongside a framework of learning outcomes to identify and document children’s mathematical ideas, displayed during play activities. Brown (2007) identifies Winconsin early childhood educators’, responses to policy as ‘rhizomatic’, accepting the standards setting process but expanding this to incorporate valued diversity within early childhood programmes. Similarly, effective practice in Wingate Community Nursery School (DfES, 2006; Beels, 2004; Miller, 2006), and in other English settings, for example, the Pen Green Centre (Whalley et al, 2001) and Fortune Park Children’s Centre (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005) provides evidence that confident and committed practitioners can combine their observation skills with the demands of a set curriculum to create exciting learning opportunities for children.

A third way in which observation is used in the provision of early childhood curriculum is through the use of formal tools such as observation rating scales. In England the Effective Early Learning (EEL) project, initially a research project and now a quality improvement scheme (Pascal and Bertram, 1997; Amber Publications, 2009) uses the child involvement and adult engagement scales, devised by Laevers (1994), as tools for the evaluation and development of provision. Versions of the programme for babies (BEEL) and primary schools (PEEL) have also been devised.

Case studies of practice from the early studies (Pascal and Bertram, 1997) demonstrate the positive influence of looking closely at children's experiences and adult responses for instigating change. The rating of involvement signals in children (such as concentration, energy, persistence and precision) is complex and, to achieve high inter-rater reliability, resources are needed to provide the necessary mentoring. Training is also required for the researchers, advisors and practitioners who use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms et al, 2004) as a means of evaluating the quality of early learning environments. Thompson (2009) explains how local authorities and individual settings are using the early childhood rating scales in order to audit provision and plan improvement. With self evaluation now a part of the Ofsted (2009b) inspection process for early years settings, schemes using observation scales may be adapted and updated as a basis for enhancing the curriculum through observing the wider environment and children's responses to it.

3.7. Observation as a means of fostering communication and community

Centres' shared development work using observation rating scales illustrates that curriculum provision for children can be enhanced when it goes beyond individual practitioners planning for individual children and becomes, instead, a cooperative endeavour. In Reggio Emilia the view of the child, first expressed by Malaguzzi (cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999: 50), is as "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children". This echoes Dewey's (1933/1998) view that a key aspect of experience is the human dimension and, thus, social and relational aspects link children's experiences and learning within different contexts. Moreover, activities are not educative experiences in themselves but, rather, it is the shared interactions of the teacher and students as they engage with the activity that makes a worthwhile learning experience (Dewey, 1938/1997; Howes, 2008). The 'documenting in relationship with others' (Moss, 2005: 27) which occurs in the *progettazione* in Reggio Emilia exemplifies a sharing of understandings in which children and educators create and capture educative experiences (e.g. Morrow, 1997; Davoli and Ferri, 2000; Sturloni and Vecchi, 2000).

The ‘lived utopia’ (Melucci, 1989) of the approach to early childhood pedagogy in Reggio Emilia has provided inspiration for other programmes, in different cultural contexts, which feature both children and adults learning in collaboration via the preparation and discussion of documentation (for example, those reported by: New, 1990; Katz and Chard, 2000; Dixon, 2001; Giudici et al, 2001; Trepanier-Street et al, 2001; Iraqi, 2002; Stirling Council, 2003; Haigh, 2007; Bancroft et al 2008). In Sweden, early childhood institutions involved in the Stockholm Project, (Dahlberg et al, 1999) worked on observation and pedagogical documentation, moving away from observing and recording designed to assess and classify children. The alternative was to “swim in observations” (Dahlberg et al, 1999: 135) in order to examine and critique pedagogy and understand children’s explorations and co-constructions of their world. This is well illustrated by the example of teacher Anna’s experience of documenting what was said and done during a project about time (Dahlberg et al, 1999). Analysing her documented observations alone, with the children and with parents and colleagues, gave her the confidence to make pedagogical judgements, ask relevant questions and encourage the children’s meaning making.

In the Te Whāriki curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996), too, the co-construction of Learning Stories acts as a “conscription device” (Cowie and Carr 2009: 106) which can bring teachers, families and children together in sharing and valuing similar educational goals. Their definition of conscription is a positive one, derived from the medieval French language: ‘writing together’. A more cynical view might be that work within school home partnerships is often closer to the contemporary meaning of conscription, as enlistment, as participants do not necessarily have equally powerful voices (Smith, 2000), which is perhaps particularly true when aims and learning outcomes are pre-specified within national curricula and leave little room for negation. The Te Whāriki curriculum document, however, has open aims, with broad emphasis upon participation and the development of positive dispositions towards learning and it is implemented flexibly within local communities (Carr, 2001; Nuttall, 2003; Peters, 2009).

Cowie and Carr (2009:108) stress that “Learning Stories are designed to reflect and enhance reciprocal and responsive actions and support atmospheres of trust and respect.” The participation of children and families, with teachers, allows for parents to understand what they and the kindergarten staff value as learning, and may also challenge teachers’ assumption about children. This is valuable on an individual level, as building a relationship with each learner, appreciating who he or she is and what he or she can do, provides a credit model of assessment, in which knowledge and skills are recognized (Carr, 2001; Podmore, 2006; Peters 2009). More broadly, too, expectations of parents (Cork, 2005; Davis-Kean, et al 2009) and teachers (Rubie-Davies et al, 2006; Hinnant et al, 2009) have been shown to have a significant impact upon educational achievement, with outcomes likely to be more positive if children’s potential is affirmed at an early age. For children, aspirational views of themselves as learners are more likely to be created and to lead to increased confidence and attainment (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Carr, 2002; Gipps, 2002).

Documenting learning stories places value on what has been observed and allows for shared planning of future learning. Learning stories are created for, and focus upon, individual children but consideration is given to the experience of groups too, particularly in relation to the ‘contribution’ strand of Te Whāriki (Podmore, 2006, 2009). One of Broadhead’s (2006) criticisms of FSP assessments is that they do not enable understandings of peer and educator-pupil interactions, and thus limit practitioners’ understandings of learning processes. Orientation to observing from a collective perspective, in line with a socio-cultural theoretical approach, is, however, not straightforward for educators (Fleer and Richardson, 2004; Fleer and Robbins, 2007). Nevertheless, taking into account personal, interpersonal and institutional planes of analysis (Rogoff, 2003) enables recording of richer observations, which include valuable details of context and the emotional engagement of participants.

3.8. Dynamic, relational approaches to child observation

The arguments in this chapter have been developed in the light of the ideas and work of three key philosopher pedagogues (Montessori, McMillian and Isaacs), yet

Yelland and Kilderry (2005) advocate a shift away from accepting historical accounts of good practice, towards embracing a more questioning approach to developing contemporary views of learning for today's society. Malaguzzi (1998), however, advises that it is necessary to meditate upon the work and writings of earlier pedagogues in order to develop new theory and practice. Similarly, it is not possible simply to take exemplary approaches from other contexts and transplant them into English settings. It is, however, possible to identify principles and to aim for shared aims and understandings of how observation can be used to benefit children's care and education.

At the end of the previous chapter I proposed a basis for understanding observation as part of a dynamic cycle of inquiry and action, based upon Deweyan insights into making sense of and using information. This can be further developed to include ideas about the uses of observation, as discussed here. For Dewey (1933/1998), as for Hurst in the opening quotation of this chapter, observation provides a valuable foundation for thinking, indeed education is defined as a training of perception. The main purpose of schools and other institutions: "is to develop powers of unremitting and discriminating observation and judgement" (Dewey, 1928/1984: 113). This might apply to students of various ages but also to their educators as:

"only through the continual and sympathetic observation of childhood's interests can the adult enter into the child's life and see what it is ready for, and upon what material it could work most readily and fruitfully."

(Dewey, 1897/1974: 436)

Observation might be part of training students in scientific methods, and a key element of educators own intellectual enquiry, but there is also an emotional dimension as observation is particularly important when engaged in the complexities of dealing with people: *"The more mechanical a thing is the more we can manage it; the more vital it is, the more we have to use our observation and interest in order to adjust ourselves properly to it"* (1924: 180). Thus Dewey (1938/1988) encourages only those with a genuine enjoyment of being with children, and a capacity to

understand them, to enter the teaching profession. He recognises that, like Monica in Eide and Winger's (2005) research (see above), children quickly become aware of those who work with them merely from a sense of obligation.

Thus observation is, as suggested above (in Chapters One and Two), part of a process of experiential learning and goes beyond this, too, as a potential means to worthwhile ends in care and education. If inspiration is sought from the passion of the early pioneers and from contemporary work in early childhood settings, it is possible to appreciate the potential of thoughtful observation as a multifaceted aspect of practice.

3.10. Summary

In this chapter I began by referring to the ways in which three key pioneers of early childhood care and education used observation. Different dimensions of observation, drawn from their work, provided the starting points for analysis of contemporary uses of observation as a means of: listening respectfully to children; ensuring their well-being; tracking developmental progress; planning curriculum; and enhancing communication and community. In terms of the current research study, the ways in which newly qualified practitioners employ child observation can be related to this repertoire of uses. As with the discussion of understandings (in the previous chapter) this exploration of the uses of observation provides an ecological context; placing the current case study within a macro-system of historical and international influences and an exo-system of government policy and legislation. This continues in the chapter which follows, considering practitioners' experiences of work.

The themes discussed above, particularly the importance of community and of reflection upon curriculum planning as a stimulus for professional development, are explored further in the next chapter, in which the focus moves from analysis of the underpinning understandings and practical uses of child observation to its significance for newly qualified practitioners who undertake the complex and challenging task of observing children during their first year of work.

Chapter Four - Observation as an aspect of work in early years settings

“The teacher of little children is not merely giving lessons. She is helping to make a brain and nervous system, and this work which is going to determine all that comes after, requires a finer perception and a wider training and outlook than is needed by any other kind of teacher.”

(McMillan, 1919: 175)

4.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses upon the third and final part of the research question, by exploring child observation as an aspect of early years practitioners’ work. The previous chapters have presented thematic accounts of understandings of child observation drawn from theory, and of uses of observation in early childhood education and care. In the light of those reviews, this chapter offers an analysis of research relating to practitioners’ understandings and uses of observation during their first year at work.

The three sections which form the first part of this chapter do not look specifically at child observation but do provide important context for the study. The position of early years practitioners and their attitudes towards their job are considered through discussion of research accounts of nursery nurses’ work and of studies which examine the skills of child care and education workers. This is followed by a review of some understandings of early workplace learning, which have relevance to the current study of early years practitioners’ observation skills during their first year of employment. The training of early years practitioners, and their preparation for the workplace, is then briefly explored, principally through reviewing the two extant studies of child care and education students’ college learning.

In the second part of the chapter, in three further sections, the focus moves more particularly to child observation as an aspect of training and work. The place and nature of child observation in the training and work of social workers is considered and offered as a contrast to the approach taken in initial training for early years care

and education. Observation is then examined as a valuable tool for the continuing professional development for early years practitioners. Finally, the single previous research study which has investigated newly qualified practitioners' understandings and uses of child observation, in an Australian context (Greishaber et al, 2000), is considered and critiqued.

4.2. Some characteristics of child care and education practitioners' work

Discussing a University of Wisconsin study, of a federal government 'Dictionary of Occupational Titles', Howe (1977) pointed out that occupational ratings placed all early years practitioners (Foster mothers, Child care attendants and Nursery school teachers) as equivalent in skill to Parking lot attendants and Mud-mixer-helpers. Their job was perceived as slightly less complex (in terms of handling people, data, and things) than the Horse pusher or the Offal man (who shovels ice into the poultry offal container). Women's status and perceptions of early years work have undoubtedly improved since the 1970s but, in many ways, early years practitioners are still 'invisible professionals' (Robins and Silcock, 2001). Pay is low, often the national minimum wage, and hours are long, especially in the private and voluntary sectors where staff salaries are largely dependent upon income from fees paid by parents (TUC/Daycare Trust, 2008; Evans, 2008).

The profession remains a female domain: 98% of early years practitioners, in England, are women (TUC/Daycare Trust, 2008). The government, however, aims to raise the number of men in the childcare workforce in England (DfES, 2001; Owen, 2003; MiC, 2009). The argument that an increased number of men are needed to raise the skills and status of the profession (Cook, 2005; Rolfe, 2006; TUC/Daycare Trust, 2008) and provide positive role models (Cook, 2005; CWDC, 2009a; Spence, 2009) is resisted by Osgood (2006: 289) who argues that "childcare should be valued for the feminised practice and commitment to emotional labour."

In England, diverse early years provision has led to varied qualifications and titles for early years practitioners and different understandings of their roles (Penn, 2000;

Robins and Silcock, 2001; McGillivray, 2008; CWDC 2009b). There is also a hierarchy in which career progression to work in schools is an aspiration (Penn, 2000; Osgood, 2005) although early years teachers themselves are not necessarily secure in their status (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006). Nevertheless, in all types of early years roles, practitioners' vocation for and commitment to their work with children and families is a strong, and valued, motivating factor (Penn and McQuail, 1997; Moyles, 2001; Robins and Silcock, 2001; Osgood, 2005). Cameron (2005) aspires to a vision, by 2020, of a high quality integrated care and education system staffed by well paid graduates. In the meantime the reality is quite different with increasing "steerage from the state" (Osgood, 2006b: 188) adding demands and pressure to practitioners' workloads.

Goodfellow (2004) emphasises the importance of practitioners identifying dimensions of their own professional wisdom. The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) framework (Moyles et al, 2002), which was generated in close dialogue with early years practitioners, indicates their appreciation of the complexity of their roles. With key statements reflecting 'professional', 'principle' and 'practice' values (Moyles et al, 2002), SPEEL captures the relational aspects of early years work, sometimes "left unexplored or unvoiced" (Penn, 2008: 3). Findings from this study also show that early years practitioners see themselves as supporting development "within an enabling, facilitating and observing role" (Moyles et al, 2002: 130) and resist being described as "teachers". This links with current investigations into social pedagogy (Boddy et al, 2005; Moss, 2006c; Petrie et al 2009), based upon European models, as an alternative professional model for those who work with children. Whilst this holistic approach accords with practitioners' descriptions of their work, it is at odds with an individualistic and achievement driven culture (Papatheodorou, 2008; Ellyatt, 2009), which contradicts the equal relationships and community connections emphasised in social pedagogy.

4.3. Entering the workplace

Experiences of starting work have not been studied or theorised with reference to early years practitioners. Here attention is paid to research relating to other professions which draws upon contextualist theories (as discussed in *Chapter One*) to address early career experiences, and is thus directly applicable to the current study. For example, for Lave (1988) learning occurs as a result of genuine participation in meaningful activities, and knowledge is never completely decontextualised. This view raises questions about the transfer of understandings and skills from one context to another as, unless settings are very similar, this is unlikely to occur successfully. The implication for the current study, of child observation, would be that methods and formats should be consistent in training and in subsequent work. Alternatively, assessment of trainees' child observation skills could be related to an ability to participate in the observation procedures in use in their work placement rather than requiring the compilation of an observation portfolio as a separate academic activity.

For Lave and Wenger (1991) workplace practices, which shape and are shaped by participants, serve to define a community. A 'community of practice' does not have rigid practices which new members must acquire and perform but, rather, these are negotiated by participants, including new members of the community, and may be developed and re-formed as they are performed. Child observation could be viewed as a practice within the nursery community and so, according to this view, the new participant might both influence and be influenced by methods in place in the work setting. The dynamic and evolving nature of practices gives scope for newly qualified practitioners to bring understandings of child observation from their training and work experience and to combine these with the new information about observation procedures in the work setting

In further work on communities of practice, Wenger (1998) characterises workplace learning as legitimate peripheral participation. New entrants gradually learn to become members of the community and to perpetuate and expand existing practices.

Edwards (2005) points out that this type of account of socialization into work communities focuses upon what is done, rather than what is learned and understood, and thus fails to offer a genuine explanation of how knowledge and skills are produced or transferred. If all observation work in early years' settings was effective and exemplary, then Wenger's (1998) view would suffice, however, the findings which prompted this research indicate some difficulties with observation in early years settings (Moyle et al, 2002, Ofsted, 2004, see above), implying that new practitioners could have difficulty in adapting to and integrating with this aspect of practice in the community that they have joined.

A slightly different perspective is offered by Greeno (1997, 2006) who considers importance of the affordances that environments offer for the continuity of activity and learning in changing situations. He argues that the capacity to identify common patterns, in differing situations, facilitates application of what is learned in one context to another. If skills and concepts are learned in situations where the learner's agency is limited, for example by following clearly prescribed procedures, then it is likely to be more difficult for the learner to think and act authoritatively in a new context (Greeno, 2006). This links closely with the ecological theoretical framework for this study, as Greeno's insights highlight the significance of contextual influences upon individuals within particular environments. Newly qualified early years practitioners' knowledge and skill in observing children must, therefore, be analysed within the context of the institutions in which they are working with recognition that their personal agency may be limited by external factors.

Eraut (2007) also considers the significance of both individuals' experience and contextual factors for successful workplace learning. Findings from the LiNEA project (Eraut, 2007, Eraut et al, 2008), which studied the early career learning of groups of nurses, engineers and accountants, are presented as mirrored triangles of learning factors and context factors which impact upon workplace learning and performance. For the individual, confidence grows from meeting challenges with feedback and support. Within the workplace, allocation and structuring of tasks,

relationships with colleagues and opportunities for participation all contribute to levels of successful progress and job satisfaction. Eraut's view is echoed in the critical perspectives adopted within this thesis, which consider both socially constructed and individual experiences in relation to the theory and practice of observing children.

4.4. The training of child care and education workers

Studies of the experience of child care and education workers' education and training have drawn upon different theoretical perspectives, looking predominantly at features of their learning (Alexander, 2001, 2002) and their acquisition of vocational habitus (Colley, 2004, 2006). As the opening quotation for this chapter suggests, work with young children is complex and demanding. In the previous chapter insights from pioneer early childhood educators were considered, in relation to the uses of observation for skilful early childhood pedagogy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the importance of observation within their approaches, both Montessori and McMillan devised teacher training courses with hours devoted to classroom observation. Montessori's trainees were required to watch the children and take detailed notes, and then transcribe these as the basis for in-depth discussions with the teacher trainer. McMillan (1919: 268) emphasised the recording of observations as valuable for developing insights about young children:

“the student writes down the small happenings of every day the new words that have been mastered, happenings in the bath-room, in the shelter, in the herb garden, all the progress of the day. As her knowledge grows, the different parts of the diary-work enlarge. She traces the effect of diet on a rickety child, takes account of abnormalities, knows what to ask about and learns how to observe. Such work as this tells even in examination papers.”

As discussed above, in Chapter One, observation continues to play a part in the present day training of childcare and education workers, yet Alexander (2001, 2002) characterises their learning as an uncritical copying of practice in the work placement rather than thoughtful and meaningful learning. She describes child care

and education students as starting at the beginning with every new written assignment and unable to transfer knowledge between the course units or from college classrooms to the workplace. If this is the case, it may offer an explanation for the gap between observation in training and in practice. Alexander (2001) attributes the difficulty in applying theory to practice to the lack of relevance of the college based knowledge, with its emphasis upon developmental theory; and also to students' dispositions for learning, arguing that their experiences within the education system and in training result in superficial engagement with learning (Entwistle, 1997) and a helpless rather than a mastery approach to learning tasks (Dweck, 2000).

In Alexander's (2001, 2002) view, without mastery of knowledge about work with children, students cannot think critically about incidents in their training and construct reliable knowledge upon which to base their future work with children. This concurs with Penn's (2008: viii) description of training courses for work with young children as "limited" and "politically dictated" with an emphasis upon learning what to do rather than how to think. Both Penn and Alexander are critical of competence based schemes and others, too, have questioned the efficacy of an instrumental approach to initial training which focuses upon the demonstration of performance skills rather than empowering students to engage in reflective and responsive practice (Tarrant, 2000; Edwards and Protheroe, 2003).

Alexander (2001, 2002) notes that the students in her study characterise themselves as 'being good with children', which she interprets as possessing traits such as patience, kindness and an aptitude for team work. In the discussions of dispositions for learning, however, these personal qualities are not further explored. Colley (2004, 2006) moves the debate from the cognitive to emotional dimensions of training for work with young children and, using the concept of 'vocational habitus', discusses how students develop an identity as professional carers. Drawing on the concept of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) she presents a gendered view of child care work as a means for young women to gain respect through a process of

managing and presenting acceptable emotions. The students in her study give accounts of their learning which emphasise the role they play in children's development, controlling their feelings when under stress and developing emotional capacities which enable them to perform within their chosen occupation.

Whereas Alexander (above) noted a separation between work placements and college training, Colley (2006) sees vocational education and training within the further education college as promoting a distinctive culture which orients students towards the work place and the job that they aspire to undertake. The necessity of acquiring certain personal characteristics, such as gentleness, sensitivity, enthusiasm and effort, is presented as a hidden curriculum which successful students embrace (Colley, 2004, 2006). Whilst this explains how early years practitioners gain an appropriate professional identity and adopt certain values it does not provide clues about the implementation of specific tasks, such as child observations, although it might be deduced that these would be conducted in ways compatible with a caring ethos. Studies of training for social work, and of continuing professional development for early years practitioners, indicate that observing children and analyzing those observations may provide opportunities for students to make connections between new situations and their previous knowledge and experience, thus respecting a commitment to care whilst enabling thoughtful learning.

4.5. Observation and professional training in social work

The effective uses of psychodynamic methods of close observation (often referred to as the Tavistock approach), within social work training, highlight the potential of child observation work to promote deep, reflective learning (e.g. Trowell and Miles, 1991; Briggs, 1992, 1995, 1999; Trowell et al, 1998; Tanner and le Riche, 2000; King, 2002; McMahon and Farnfield, 2004; Miles, 2004; Quitak, 2004; Fawcett, 2009), which Alexander (2001, 2002) believes that vocational child care courses may lack. As discussed in Chapter Two, the method of observation used is distinctive and different from the scientific methods of observation advocated for courses for childcare and education students. It is unclear, however, whether it is the

specific method which is effective, as a key characteristic of the Tavistock approach is the weekly seminar group whereas observations undertaken for childcare courses are conducted and interpreted individually and assessed only once they are complete. Within the context of this regular meeting, of a small group of observers, observations are presented and the content explored and discussed under the guidance of an experienced facilitator. Through this experience meaningful patterns and trends emerge from discussions of several observations over time (Bick, 1964) and such deep insights support the observer in linking personal experience with the acquisition of theoretical and professional knowledge

Tanner and Le Riche (2000) further argue that experience of intentional, focused close observation during training can facilitate the transfer of learning between contexts. They cite the example of a first year student, Jenny, whose engagement with an infant and child observation project prepares her for the complexities and subtleties of assessing a 78 year old man, Sidney, who has dementia. With the support of a practice tutor, Jenny reflects upon the significance of attachment relationships throughout the life cycle and uses observations of Sidney to analyse his current experience, empathise accurately and plan for his care in ways which will promote his rights. In childcare and education contexts, too, close observation can be a useful tool for examining some of the ambiguities and complexities of professional practice. Elfer and Dearnley (2007), for example, record the value of using psychodynamic methods of observation as part of a model of continuing professional development which recognises the emotional demands of caring work and supports staff in their interactions with children and parents.

4.6. Observation and continuing professional development

Selleck (2001: 85) advocates that those who are recruited, trained and supported as early years practitioners must be people who are in touch with their own emotions and inner states of mind, possessing “intellectual curiosity – a culture of ongoing professional development.” The work of Vivian Gussin Paley reflects this approach

with texts based upon observational accounts and reflective discussions of her own practice, notably of storytelling and fantasy play (e.g. Paley, 1981, 1984, 1988, 1991, 2004, 2010) and also addressing challenging issues including fairness (e.g. Paley, 1993) and racial diversity (e.g. Paley, 1989, 1995). A similar enquiry based approach to professional development is seen in the use of documentation in the Reggio Emilia approach, both in the early days, when this compensated for teachers' limited training (Malaguzzi, 1998) and in the present, as part of a process oriented pedagogy that is centred upon observation, documentation and re-cognition (Rinaldi, 2006).

In the current context, in England, observing children is identified as one element of effective practice, part of planning, assessing and evaluating learning, and also as an area in which training is needed to increase effectiveness. Elements of the SPEEL framework (Moyle et al, 2002) are incorporated within Key Elements of Effective Practice (DfES, 2005) document which offers guidance for professional development. There are several research studies which have reported uses of observation of children as all or part of a strategy for professional development. The Effective Early Learning project (Pascal et al, 1994; Pascal and Bertram, 1997; Pascal et al, 1997), for example, used structured observations as a tool for evaluation and improvement of practice. Case studies, from a variety of early years settings, showed that the process of using Child Involvement and Adult Engagement scales (Laevers, 1994) during this project enabled action planning, which led to improvement in provision of learning experiences for children, as measured by increases in average scores on the Child Involvement scales (Pascal and Bertram, 1997). In some of the reported cases, developing strategies for observation of children was an element of the action plan and in all cases the value of the observational techniques used in the study was acknowledged. For example, a nursery assistant, working in a private day nursery, after carrying out a short observation of a child commented: "I can't believe how much I normally miss" and she identified a need to observe more and become more focused (Pascal and Bertram, 1997: 117).

Lockett's (1996, 2000, 2002) work, likewise, provides examples of rewarding, participatory continuing professional development activities focussed upon observation and assessment. His research involved 'mini-investigative' and 'action-type' co-research projects with early years practitioners informed, in turn, by understandings of schematic play behaviours (Athey, 1990; Gura, 1992), measurements of involvement as evidence of effective early learning (Pascal and Bertram, 1997), the documentation practices of Reggio Emilia and multi-voiced learning stories (Carr, 2001). What he reports are effective professional development exercises with experienced, reflective, early childhood practitioners which resulted in highly positive opportunities for shared explorations of learning processes, increased involvement in complex and creative play by children, and the interest and participation of parents.

Two features of the Effective Early Learning project and Lockett's initiatives are common to other successful professional development projects with early years practitioners, in England and elsewhere, which have been based upon child observations (e.g. Blenkin et al, 1996; Elfer, 2005, Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Broadhead, 2006; Manning Morton, 2006; Podmore, 2006; Garbett and Tynan, 2007; Bancroft et al, 2008). The first feature is a democratic approach to the research, in which early years practitioners themselves direct the examination of their practice; and the second is the presence of an external expert³ to listen and sustain reflective dialogues to support participants' increasing self awareness and professional self confidence. The depth of these learners' experiences contrasts with that of the students undertaking initial training, as described by Alexander and Colley (discussed in 4.4, above).

4.7. Research into child observation as teachers' work:

Just one research study reports recently qualified early childhood teachers' experiences of using child observation in different workplaces, in contemporary

³ I have used the term 'expert' here to denote a person with knowledge and experience, for example advisors who have extensive experience of work in settings and / or who are academics in the field

early childhood programmes in a state in Australia (Greishaber et al, 2000). Child observation was chosen as a focus because of its central importance in valued traditional early childhood curricula. Here, critical consideration is given to the scope and focus of this research project and its implications for the current study.

In Australia, as in the UK, increased central government control of early years education, a high level of professional accountability and pressure from workplace policies and procedures, all appear to affect practitioners and influence their approaches to teaching and learning (Grieshaber et al, 2000; Anning et al, 2004). The study participants are early childhood teachers who have recently completed their training courses. Their experiences are similar to those of participants in the current study, as their training placed emphasis upon learning about young children through child study and becoming skilled in the use of child observation. The research, however, aims to document changes in professional demands and expectations, which their more experienced colleagues might be in a better position to assess and comment on.

The choice of open-ended survey and small group discussions, via teleconference, enabled the practitioners' voices to be heard and ideas to be shared, in line with the study's aim of stimulating critical reflection about early childhood teaching. The limited response rate to the survey (just 12%) implies that more opinions could be gleaned to gain a wider picture. In addition, the verbal responses of participants would need to be corroborated with an examination of actual workplace practices to substantiate evidence about the uses of observation. Whilst time and distance may have been a barrier to closer involvement with the practitioners in the Australian research, the current study has enabled me to engage with participants in the settings where they work.

Findings indicate that the purpose of observing children is changing and that traditional methods of recording observations may be under threat. Assessments of development appear to be replacing holistic insights into children's capabilities. No

evidence of the existence of this former golden age is offered and announcing its demise may be premature as it could be that asking for critical incidents, where observation informed decision making, and stressing the uses of child observation led to functional rather than more holistic, reflective examples. For this reason, in my study, I have endeavoured to gain a wide picture of observation practices through sustained engagement and participant observation, in addition to interview questioning. One particularly interesting aspect of Greishaber's research is the inclusion of a resistant, dissonant voice challenging the usefulness of written child observation. It is also notable that this voice echoed other practitioners' experiences, which serves as a reminder that small-scale research into professional practice needs to attend to opposing viewpoints.

This Australian project points to the need for more analysis of the purposes of observation in early childhood programmes, particularly insights into ways in which child observations inform curriculum decisions. The study highlights the influence of workplace demands and expectations on uses of child observation and exposes some of the problems, especially time pressures, which constrain practitioners (Greishaber et al, 2000). These factors are all highly relevant to the current research into the experiences of new practitioners in the UK.

4.8. The potential importance of observation as early years practitioners' work

The significance of a cycle of observational inquiry and action, introduced above (in Chapter One) has relevance here with Dewey (1904/1974) proposing that trainee teachers learn first by observing interactions between teachers and children in the classroom. This is close to the approach taken in the professional development models, considered above, where care and learning processes become the foci for observation and reflective analysis and discussion. This is different from observation in early years practitioners' initial training where the emphasis is upon recording aspects of the development of individual children.

A reflective, experiential approach to observing moves the observer away from looking at the child in isolation and towards a broader analysis of contextual and pedagogical influences, questioning, for example, how the environment might be adapted, materials introduced or ways of relating to the child adapted in order to improve each child's experience and promote well-being and growth. Broadhead (2006) emphasises that worthwhile pedagogy depends upon full commitment to young children's learning, with a focus upon factors both within and beyond the child. Within this context "well-structured and well-focused observations and respectful and engaging interactions stimulate learning both for educators and for pupils" (Broadhead, 2006: 195).

Another contrast between learners' experiences in competence based initial training and those occurring within positive professional development exercises can be seen in terms of the setting of aims. Dewey (1916/2007) writes of the importance of true aims in education being personal, flexible and related to educational activities and educative ends within a context. The aims of observation in successful professional development projects can be seen in this way, decided by those involved and directed towards educational means. Dewey (1916/2007: 85) rejects externally imposed aims as rigid, remote and limiting "rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish." Alexander's (2001, 2002) critique of initial training and the experiences of Australian educators within a regime of central control and high accountability (Greishaber et al, 2000) are located within environments where aims are dictated by external authorities.

4.9. Summary

In this third and final part of the consideration of literature, which underpins and informs this exploration of child observation, I have reviewed studies of early years practitioners' training and practice. The outlining of attitudes towards practitioners' work and findings from research into training provide important background for the study. Whilst these, to some extent, present a deficit view of the early years practitioner, it is clear that newly qualified practitioners are taking on a demanding

role for which their training is likely to have orientated them but not necessarily prepared them to transfer knowledge and skills to the workplace. Contextual factors in those workplaces are expected to impact upon their observation of children in early years settings. This provides a rationale for the ethnographic approach taken in this study.

The examples of research into early years practitioners' professional development tell a different and more optimistic story and present possibilities for the creation of more positive professional identities. Considering the value of observation training for the professional development of social workers provides an interesting point of comparison and insight. The difficulty of observation and any potential discomfort or trauma for the observer is well recognised in social work but this emotional dimension is not acknowledged in child care training. Psychodynamic approaches to observation allow for recognition and analysis of the responses of the observer as well as the observed. The role of the seminar group is also significant and this reflective sharing of understandings is also a feature of the other successful approaches to the use of observation for professional learning.

There is a contrast between the professional development projects, which demonstrate proactive uses of observation as a catalyst for internal change, and the Australian study which found practitioners' understandings and uses of observation to be a response to external change. Using some insights from the study by Grieshaber et al (2000) the next section of the thesis (Part Three, Chapter Five) addresses the methodological approach, chosen to investigate newly qualified early years practitioners' understandings and uses of child observation.

Conclusions to Part Two – the conceptual framework restated

Chapter Four, presented a research based account of observation as early years work, and captures the interplay between contextual factors and practitioners' experiences. In exploring the status of the profession, the nature of training, and the complexities of practice, questions are raised about practitioners' preparedness to respond to demands within and beyond the workplace. In the light of this, I conclude this part of the thesis by revisiting the conceptual framework (introduced in Chapter One, section two) and linking it explicitly with underlying principles from the foregoing literature review. My intentions are: to highlight the relevance of the research; to explain the basis for the data collection and analysis; and to indicate the potential of this study to contribute to knowledge in the field of early childhood education and care.

The new theorisation of understandings and uses of child observation, argued in this thesis, is achieved by employing a Deweyan approach to the enquiry (Dewey, 1933). The model of experiential learning, as illustrated in Chapter One, Figure 1.1, is utilised both to support the researcher in developing knowledge and to appreciate the early years practitioners' task when observing young children. For the researcher, the literature presented above forms the context within which the research was undertaken and represents the knowledge base which can be drawn upon to support interpretations of what is experienced and to create new ways of knowing. Likewise, early years practitioners, in their observations of children, may link what is seen with what is known to inform their judgements and subsequent actions. In both cases, meaning is made within the particular culture of the early years settings and the wider educational system.

This making of meaning in context can also be related to other ecological contextualist theories. Thus, the six dominant theoretical perspectives (discussed in Chapter Two) and the historical insights from the work of the pioneer pedagogues (explored in Chapter Three) are highlighted as influential aspects of the historical and cultural context in which observations of children occur. In Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) terms, they can be seen as a significant part of the macrosystem that influences what occurs in the meso and microsystems of the lives of children, families and practitioners within early years settings and researchers. Taking a sociocultural-historical view, the principal theories and traditional practices of child observation can be seen as cultural influences and tools, which new practitioners may internalise and appropriate. The examples of current practice, in all three chapters of the review of literature, serve as examples of how contemporary understandings and uses of child observation are influenced by and build upon significant theories from developmental psychology and the valued traditions of early childhood pedagogy. They also indicate the position of individuals (researchers and practitioners) and their communities within this wider culture and the pressures exerted by external forces, particularly government policies. The view of the person is not that of a powerless victim of environmental circumstances but as pro-active, with the potential to respond in positive ways to produce growth and improve pedagogy. It is with this view of researcher, the participants and the context for the research that I now discuss the methodology for the study.

Part Three – Methodology and methods

Chapter Five – Exploring and explaining the research process

“Only by those who care explaining to others how it is will the world of early childhood come to be valued as it should be.”

(Anning and Edwards, 2006:167)

5.1. Introduction

Bassey (1999: 39) defines research as: “systematic, critical and self critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom.” He characterises the aim of educational research as “informing educational judgments and decisions in order to improve educational action”. It is to these definitions that this study aspires. Edwards (2002) emphasises that interpretative educational research, as a social science involving close and active engagement in the field of study, is demanding and challenging. As the quotation chosen to head this chapter suggests, I accepted the challenge through a motivation to illuminate an aspect of early childhood care and education; by listening to practitioners’ explanations of their work, in the systematic manner demanded of a researcher, and offering my own, observation based, account of their world.

Following advice to be a “methodologically self-conscious researcher” (Clough and Nutbrown, 2001: 31) and to provide as transparent an account of the research process as possible, in the first part of this chapter I will: give a rationale for the choice of research methodology, with particular reference to the use of case study and an ethnographic approach; examine my own role as researcher; and explore some ethical issues. The second part of the chapter focuses more specifically upon the different elements of the research design, introducing the participants and research settings and discussing the methods of data collection and approach to data analysis.

5.2. A theoretical rationale for the methodological approach

Biesta and Burbules (2003:1) contrast ‘research about education’ with ‘research for education’ and this study aspires to be the latter, aiming to contribute knowledge that is relevant to early years work and has the potential to inform pedagogy. This thesis has already drawn upon Dewey’s insights into processes of thinking and learning and these explanations of knowledge acquisition also have relevance for understanding and implementing educational research. Just as parallels exist between children’s playful experiences and adult educators’ observations of this learning (Luff et al, forthcoming), so there are similarities between Dewey’s account of experiential learning and the qualitative research process. The acts of observing, and of linking what is seen and heard with extant knowledge, in order to gain meaning from experience and create new understandings (Dewey, 1933/1998), are essential to the process of human thought and also to the researcher’s task. Whilst these meanings are individual, understandings become shared through open communication and cooperative enquiries within communities, who possess common values (Dewey, 1927/1998). Biesta (1994: 299) proposes the term ‘practical intersubjectivity’ to describe the development of shared understandings of practice within educational contexts. This corresponds with Wells’ (1999) definition of knowing as using, creating and sharing representations (in Chapter One, above). Thus the epistemological and ontological position, from which this thesis is presented, is that knowing is active, offering possibilities and ‘warranted assertions’ (Dewey, 1938/1986: 146) rather than certainties; and results from making sense of interactions with others within a shared environment.

What are sought here, therefore, are contextualised understandings of how knowledge and skills in child observation are put into practice. The key source of knowledge about observation of children, and the ways in which this translates to practice is, therefore, accessed via exploration of the experience of new practitioners. Accepting that knowledge in the social world is created and recreated between people, as a dynamic meaning system, the source of knowledge on this chosen topic is the actions and voices of participants within the contexts of their

workplaces and is accessed and developed through interactions with them. This desire to see and understand the context in which practitioners are observing children is consistent with the broader ecological and socio-cultural theoretical approach informing the study, which recognises the way in which the context “shapes and is shaped by those who participate in it” (Edwards, 2004: 86). One of the motivations for undertaking the study was to develop understandings of how skills, knowledge and understanding gained during a college course translate into professional practice in early years settings and, further, to use insights gained from the study to inform practitioner educators so that professional knowledge can be developed, or “co-constructed” (Daniels, 2001), in training and then adapted and further expanded to benefit children, and the staff who work with them, in different early years care and education settings.

Stake (1995) uses the metaphor of an artist’s choice of medium to describe the selection of a research approach and Wolcott (2005), likewise, draws parallels between fieldwork and art. The analogy is helpful as, for empirical research to be worthwhile, the skills and knowledge and interests of the researcher must combine with a methodology, which is consistent with the research questions and theoretical stance; and likely, in the hands of that researcher, to provide effective and meaningful interpretations of raw data to offer answers to the questions posed.

5.3. Case study as a strategy

The use of case study builds upon a tradition in educational research which had its beginnings in the US (Wolcott, 1973) and later gained recognition in the UK (Simons, 1980). Whilst definitions of what constitutes a case study in educational research vary (see, for example, the discussion by Bassey, 1999) what is agreed is its usefulness as a means of investigating an area of concern in detail in order to discover meaning and draw conclusions, which may then inform practice (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003; Wolcott, 2005).

Creswell (2007) suggests that case studies should focus on practices or programmes that have not previously been studied in depth. This corresponds with the main purpose of this research (as introduced in Chapter One) which seeks to explore the experiences of newly qualified child care and education workers as they carry out observations of children in their workplaces during the first year of employment. The chosen methodology has to be one in which the work lives of the participants can be documented in detail, appreciating the circumstances in which they work and allowing their activities to be witnessed and their voices to be heard. Yin (2003) recommends case study design in research situations where it is difficult to separate the variables of the phenomenon of interest from the context. As argued above, this applies well to the study of child observation, as it becomes meaningful when viewed as a process occurring within different nursery settings.

In ecological terms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) a case study approach enables exploration of meso and micro systems embedded within existing macro and exo systems. Rogoff (1998, 2003) writes, similarly, of personal, interpersonal and cultural planes of analysis, with a focus on any one of these having the others in the background. Case study methodology provides the opportunity to understand how national policies (from the exosystem) are implemented, to see the impact of training (a feature of the mesosystem), and to view early years practitioners both as individuals and as part of a staff team within the context of their work settings (in the microsystem). Hays (2004) highlights illumination of the impact of policy as one of the strengths of case study.

Case study research does not exist *‘to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it’* (Stake, 1995:43). It offers great potential for describing how observation of children is used as an aspect of workplace practice. The approach also enables empathy for the subjective experience of people in specific social contexts (Wolcott, 2005) and thus for understanding the meanings of experience for those involved in it. In a case study it is possible to appreciate, through the eyes and in the

words of practitioners, how they make sense of child observation in early years workplaces. The chosen sources of data ensure that findings are based on what practitioners were observed to do as well as what they said and this match between interview responses and their observed practice is explored. Through examining practitioners' work in this way it is possible to gauge the impact of the wider environment upon the work lives of individuals and so understand some of the affordances and constraints upon practitioners' understandings and uses of child observation.

The ways in which new practitioners' knowledge and skills are deployed and developed, and the challenges that they face when using observation to inform planning, to monitor and evaluate activities and experiences, or to keep records in order to document a child's achievements could only be understood over time. In seeking understanding of a case, a 'snapshot' is insufficient and what is required is the documenting of lived experience over time. Maslow (1987) distinguishes between stereotyping and true cognition, alerting the researcher to the need to attend closely to experiences and see them in detail, thus aiming to avoid blind categorizing and over-simplification. This calls for a methodology that allows for a topic to be considered in depth avoiding a superficial overview. Case study, demanding the practice of spending time in real life settings, enables the researcher to discover more about what life is like for the participants.

Stake (1995) differentiates intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study approaches. Intrinsic cases arise from curiosity and interest in the distinctive features of a particular case; whereas instrumental cases require the study of people or programs to answer a research question, in order to gain more general understanding of an issue. Collective case studies are instrumental in nature but allow for the study of more than one person or setting to contribute to the inquiry. This collective approach is chosen here as early years practitioners are not an homogenous group. The inclusion of participants of various ages and backgrounds, from varying

geographical areas and working in different types of early childhood care and education setting reflects the diversity of early childhood provision in the UK, to some extent. Each person and setting within this study is not a separate case but informs the shared, collective case to maximise what can be learned about understandings and uses of child observation.

5.4. An ethnographic approach

Collecting data through time spent in everyday environments and seeking participants' perceptions of their social situations are both key characteristics of ethnographic research (Scott and Usher 1996; Bryman, 2008; Walford, 2001). The ethnographic principle of "considering relationships between the appropriate cultural, political and social levels of the research site and the individual and group's agency at the research site" (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004: 545) is also in harmony with the ecological and socio-cultural theoretical perspectives which contribute to the conceptual framework for this study

This study of newly qualified childcare workers is also ethnographic in the sense that it aims to understand participants' lives and give their accounts "high status" (Walford, 2001: 10). What is it like to be a child care and education worker, in a nursery or school, trying to complete child observation tasks as part of her daily work with young children? I have tried to record and represent the practitioners' voices, whilst recognising that any account of their experiences and the meanings that they give to them are filtered through my own interests and understandings, as Denzin (1998: 319) writes: "The Other who is presented in the text is always a version of the writer's self."

To understand the participants' perspectives it was necessary to spend time carrying out fieldwork alongside them, getting close to their lived experience in the settings in which they work. The study was carried out in two nurseries and one school for one academic year (from September 2004 – July 2005). This is not the long term

engagement undertaken by some ethnographers; Wolcott (2005) suggests that a two year period of fieldwork is standard. Nevertheless it covered the whole of the practitioners' first year of employment. Fortnightly day-long visits to the settings for sustained period of time provided sufficient time to ensure familiarity with the settings, enable relationships to develop and allow focus on the practice of child observation within the contexts in which it is carried out.

Woods (1996, 1999) argues that educational activities are complex and open ended and therefore must be studied via long term fieldwork in order to develop a satisfactory analysis. Data needs to be collected within the cultural context, in order to illuminate how behaviours are shaped by place and time (Rose, 1990; Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). Pettigrew (1997: 338) defines such processes as, "a sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context." This is true of the current study of child observation as, during periods of immersion in the different early years environments, I have aimed to see into the lives of the participants (Woods, 1996) to gain a sense of the uses and methods of child observation, the time allocated to child observation tasks and how the process of observing children is affected by policies and procedures within and beyond child care settings.

5.5. The role of the researcher

In ethnographic terms, my engagement as a participant observer, with prior experience of early years teaching and of working and assessing practice in early years settings enabled me to gain an insider or 'emic' perspective. This brought useful knowledge of policies and procedures and an ability to understand the work contexts and coordinate data collection within the daily routines. LaSala (2003) warns, however, that with such familiarity comes the risk of assuming common understandings rather than attending to participants' unique experiences. As a visiting volunteer and researcher in the settings, rather than a member of the staff team, I also held an outside or 'etic' perspective which provided a certain distance from the activities of the settings and the work lives of the practitioners.

I remain very aware that in a small scale qualitative study, such as this one, the role of the researcher carries huge responsibilities. Research may be viewed as a tool, controlled by the researcher (Anning and Edwards, 2006) or the researcher seen as a designer, devising and adapting the tools required for her work (Clough and Nutbrown, 2001). The function of the researcher herself as a primary instrument, in the gathering and analysis of qualitative data, is highlighted by Merriam (1998) and by many other advisors on research methodology (e.g. Stake, 1995, Robson, 2002, Cohen et al, 2007). Whilst this active position is very positive, in terms of responding to participants and accessing meaningful information within early years settings, the accountability for the quality of the study is great and the potential influence of researcher bias on the investigation must be recognized (Stake, 2010). Indeed, such “dangerous bias” may be embraced as the necessary personal involvement required to “come to know” participants in a meaningful way (Oakley, 1993: 221).

In order to expose the nature of the personal beliefs and values, which determined the choice of topic and affect this study, a brief description of my background and interests is required. A qualified primary school teacher, with 20 years experience of work with young children, in different contexts, I brought my own set of professional values and expectations and together with concerns about current early years care and education provision in the UK. As Edwards (2002) emphasises, educational researchers undertake their work with a belief in the importance of education and an aspiration that educational opportunities can be enhanced. As a woman studying women working within a predominantly female workforce (Penn, 2000), I am also strongly aware of the low pay and status of early childhood practitioners and keen to highlight the challenges of their daily work and their specialist knowledge and skills. Closer in age to their parents and managers, I felt some concern about establishing an equal research partnership with the younger participants, especially in the early stages of the study.

Recent experience of teaching on early childhood and education courses meant that I had an understanding of the nature of their initial training and preconceptions of what newly qualified practitioners know about observation. Familiar with visiting work placements as an assessor, I faced the challenge of establishing myself in a new position, as a researcher, and making sure that my intended role was clear to all participants. Stake (1995) highlights the complexity of researcher roles, characterising different potential research positions as: teacher; advocate; evaluator; biographer; theorist; or interpreter. All of these are, to some extent, relevant to my own role within the study reported here; however, the exploratory nature of the research question, and the theoretical position I have adopted, means that the key role is that of an interpreter making sense of what was observed.

Throughout the study it was my intention to work in a manner which was both reflexive, in terms of awareness of my own influence upon the research process, and reflective, in considering what was appropriate to the conduct of the research (Aubrey et al, 2000; Wellington, 2000). Recognizing that my presence would make some difference within the early years settings in which the research was carried out, I tried to develop reciprocity and ensure that any impact was beneficial to the participants and to the children in their care (Aubrey et al, 2000; Ochsner, 2001).

5.6. Ethical considerations

In line with this aim, the choice of methodology was underpinned by a perception of the potential benefits of ethnographic case study for the researcher, the participants and the readers (Woods, 1996; Aubrey et al, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Undertaking a sustained period of research in settings offered opportunities for collaboration and for a mutually beneficial relationship with the participants. This relational understanding is identified by Koehn (1998) as a distinctive feature of a female ethical approach. It gave participants a chance to be attended to at length and for their voices, not often heard, to be reported. It may also have promoted their reflective practice as, when their situation was presented through a researcher's eyes, the familiar may have been seen and understood in a

new way. It has been suggested (Donmeyer, 1990) that case study offers positive opportunities for learning, as people are less resistant to lessons and implications from a remote yet similar setting than to criticism of their own practice. Reading case study reports is often as interesting as reading a story thus offering potential for democratising research and making findings accessible to a wider readership. The reader can participate in making their own assessment of the descriptive evidence and considering the writer's analysis. For child care and education professionals there is the opportunity to make comparisons between the case study settings and their own experience and consider the extent to which the interpretation and assertions from the research findings are relevant to them.

These aspirations for the research work to make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge and be of practical value correspond with what Dewey (1920/2004) termed meliorism, an intent to improve quality of life through human effort. Following this argument, perhaps, if the outcomes of the research are worthwhile this may justify any minimal discomfort or inconvenience felt by research participants. I was, however, constantly aware of my presence as a guest in the research settings, and sought to be unobtrusive and also to support participants as much as possible by assisting with necessary tasks whilst working alongside them during the day (Aubrey et al, 2000).

Success in building and maintaining supportive, friendly relationships raises further ethical questions. When a participant researcher becomes well integrated into the community, staff may relax and forget that they are being observed. Whilst this adds to the validity of the study, the participants may behave in a way that they do not wish to be noted and recorded. Additionally, participants may interpret the help and support which the researcher gives as a commitment to themselves and the research setting which goes beyond a short term relationship for the duration of the project (Ochsner, 2001; Rogers, 2003).

Ethical considerations also provided motivation towards the completion of the thesis and associated presentations and publications. Cannold (2001;186) warns:

“When the researcher fails to complete her study and / or fails to publish useful results or anything at all, the participant’s time has been wasted. She has participated in research that has gone nowhere and helped no one”

It is possible to argue that unfinished or unpublished work may have some useful outcomes, perhaps in developing the researcher’s own knowledge and providing understandings which she can then use in her own life and work. Nevertheless, a moral obligation to participants who have volunteered to be part of a research project is an important stimulus towards the production of worthwhile work.

Ethical issues and concerns provided a basis for reflection throughout the research process, and continue to inform decisions about publications based upon the work in the thesis. The research also conforms to the ethical standards required by Anglia Ruskin University and carefully followed the expected procedures and ethical conduct for the duration of the study. An application was made to the University Research Ethics Committee and approval was received in writing before the field work began (Appendix A). Verbal and written information about the study was given to the potential participants. A general information sheet about the research was provided, together with specific letters which gave information about involvement in the study for newly qualified practitioners and for mentors / employers. These were given to the potential participants during my first, introductory, visit to each setting, together with verbal information about the research.

In order to ensure that each participant made an informed decision to participate, based upon substantial understanding (Coady, 2001; Beauchamps and Childress, 2009), on my second visit I went through the written participant information with them, offering further explanation of the study and answering any questions or concerns. At that point I asked the participants to sign the consent form, together with an additional verbal reminder that they could change their mind about

participation at any point during the study. These signed consent forms were stored securely, filed separately from data to preserve the anonymity of participants. Whilst the participants complied with this system I was aware that the wording of the consent form and the requirement for a witness to their signature were rather intimidating. An incident occurred during the research which made me aware that my understandings of confidentiality were not necessarily shared by the participants. At the end of her second interview 'Kel' (a pseudonym chosen by the participant) made a witty comment about child observation helping her driving skills and then said '*Your students will laugh when they hear that, Paulette!*' I was very surprised that, knowing I was teaching at university, she assumed that undergraduate students might hear, or hear about, her responses. Having carefully followed set procedures it is easy to forget that ethical protocols are not necessarily understood in the same way by researchers and participants and may need to be discussed and renegotiated during the research process.

5.7. The initial exploratory study

In this latter part of the chapter I shall focus on the practical aspects of the research design, explaining the research strategies and data collection techniques. Firstly, the preliminary, exploratory phase of the study is described. Details of the main study are then discussed and explored, including: selection of case study participants and research settings; the conduct of the fieldwork; and the chosen methods of investigation and analysis.

The research began with a preliminary phase, in July 2004, during which the ideas of fourteen final year child care and education students (from a class of further education students to whom I had access) were elicited using group interviews. This group of participants were completing their course and applying for their first jobs and so their views and experiences were expected to be similar to those of participants recruited to the main study. Bryman (2008) suggests that investigating the responses of a group who are similar to those who will be recruited for the main

study is a legitimate approach to try out research tools, such as the schedule for semi-structured interviews used here (see Appendix B).

As in other studies of trainee childcare and education workers (Alexander, 2001, 2002; Colley, 2004, 2006), a Further Education college provided the setting for the initial exploratory study. This enabled participants to feel comfortable and for their responses, about the content of their course, to be related to the classroom context. This had implications for the data collection, though, as observation is both taught in class and implemented in work settings. Questions asked in college may elicit different responses from the same questions asked in a work placement. There were, however, great practical advantages in meeting and talking to several students in a college classroom. Wenger (1998) claims that practical experience dominates and even over-rides what is taught, suggesting that students were able to draw on their work experience in the college context.

An interview schedule, based upon the research questions, was devised and used to elicit and explore the participants' views about the value and purpose of child observation (Appendix B). This was used with three focus groups (one with four students and two with five) and their responses reflect their understandings of child observation and confidence in their abilities to use observation in the workplace (Appendices C and D). The findings from this initial exploratory study are discussed elsewhere (Luff, 2005) and provided a basis for similar questions, which were used at the beginning of the main study, addressed to participants who had recently left college and started work in early years settings (Appendix E) .

5.8. The collective case study

The main period of fieldwork covered one complete academic year, from September 2004 until July 2005. This enabled me to work with the newly qualified participants throughout their first year of employment. As this was an exploratory, qualitative study the plans for data collection were flexible (Rossman and Rallis, 2003) and I aimed to adopt a “fluid, intuitive approach” (MacNaughton and Rolfe, 2001:12)

allowing methods to be developed and refined as the research progressed. The aim of the data collection was to explore and appreciate participants' understandings and uses of child observation during their first year at work in an early years setting. Fortnightly fieldwork visits to the early years settings took place throughout the study, during which participant observation was undertaken, and semi-structured interviews were conducted at the beginning, towards the middle and at the end of the study (Appendices E, F and G). Some documentary evidence, such as nursery publicity brochures and observation and planning proformas, was also collected.

The research population

Bryman (2008) defines the research population as all the people who could potentially be informants for the study. For this investigation this included everybody, in England, who completed either a CACHE Level Three Diploma in Childcare and Education, or an NVQ Level Three in Child Care and Education in Summer 2004 and began work in an early years setting before September 2004 (on a contract of at least a year to allow for participation throughout the study). From this group of potential participants a small number were invited to take part in the study. In addition to these key participants, other informants were their workplace mentors who were able to offer a different perspective to further inform the topic of child observation and the application of knowledge and skills in this area when entering the workplace.

In recruiting participants for this project, I aimed for a purposeful selection of informants (Rossman and Rallis, 2003) who met the criteria for membership of the research population (as outlined above) and were interested in taking part in the research project. The head teachers or managers of the settings in which these potential participants worked also had to agree to their participation.

Grieshaber (2001) warns against the temptation to treat a potential research population as an homogenous group. She argues that recognising and focusing on the heterogeneity of a group involved in a study is an "important equity

consideration” (Grieshaber, 2001: 143) and may also facilitate the trustworthiness of data. With this in mind, the participants were selected as diverse members of a group of newly qualified early years practitioners. They were of different ages, varying ethnic backgrounds and have followed different routes into the childcare profession.

The participants were recruited in two ways: firstly, asking college leavers; and secondly approaching settings who were employing newly qualified staff. In the first case, participation in the study then depended upon securing a post and the head of that setting agreeing to involvement with the project. Hollie, from a school (referred to as ‘red’ setting was recruited in this way. Recruitment via settings was more fruitful and two different day nurseries (‘blue’ and ‘green’ settings), both of which had several employees who had just completed a level three qualification, agreed to participate. The following table provides a list:

Setting ⁴	Participant	Qualification	Other details
Red (school)	Hollie	CACHE Diploma	White, age 19 yrs
Blue (day nursery)	Charlie	CACHE Diploma	White, age 19 yrs
	Diane	NVQ3	White, age 30 yrs
	Emma	CACHE Diploma	White, age 19 yrs
	Harriet	NVQ3	White aged 18 yrs
	Stella	NVQ3	Black, aged 19 yrs
Green (day nursery)	Denise	NVQ3	White, age 40 yrs
	Kel	CACHE Diploma	Asian, age 20 yrs
	Mij	CACHE Diploma	Asian, age 19 yrs
	Saira	CACHE Diploma	Asian, age 19 yrs

Table 5.1. List of main participants in the study

The settings for the study

Early years care and education in the UK is offered in a variety of forms, which includes: pre-school playgroups; not-for-profit community nurseries; private day nurseries; local authority run early years centres; and state school nursery and reception classes. My original plan was to identify a newly qualified participant from each of these six types of early years setting. I recruited just one participant

⁴ All settings are referred to by a colour code rather than by name

through approaching college leavers, Hollie, who worked large nursery and infant school during her final college work placement. She was happy there, well liked by staff, children and parents, and when a vacancy for a post in one of the Reception classes arose for September 2004, she applied for the job and was successful. As Hollie had volunteered to take part in the research, I approached the school and the head teacher and the curriculum leader for the Foundation Stage (who was also the class teacher with whom Hollie would be working) and they were happy to support her participation in the project.

My next strategy was to approach potential employers directly, discover whether they had a new employee who was recently qualified at level 3 and, if so, whether they and the employee would like to participate in the study. Different types of early years settings in three localities (an inner London borough, an outer London borough, and a part of Essex) were identified from contact lists available from the Children's Information Service, letters were sent out and followed up with telephone calls. This was a time consuming process, particularly as it was the summer and many heads of settings were on annual leave. Telephone conversations during this stage of the research meant that family centres were eliminated from the list of potential settings as I learned from discussions with managers of these settings that, due to the demanding nature of their work with children in need and their families, they aimed to recruit staff with at least two years post-qualifying experience. Two further sites were recruited at this stage, both private day nurseries (blue and yellow) but in different local areas.

Blue nursery is part of a small chain of nurseries in London and the South East of England. Part of the nursery policy is to encourage staff training and professional development so the manager expressed interest in the project. She reported that she had failed to recruit satisfactory staff from recent interviews with newly qualified students holding the CACHE Diploma at level three, commenting that they seemed immature and ill prepared for the realities of life in a busy day nursery. There was, however, one member of staff who had recently completed her Diploma and four

others who had achieved, or were due to complete, NVQ Level 3. This setting participated in the study until a change of manager⁵ in December 2004 led to their withdrawal from the study.

At brand new, purpose built, yellow nursery the first manager was very interested in collaborating with a research project. She thought that being involved in the project would be a source of support for her new staff, referred to as her “fledglings”. Three newly qualified members of staff were employed (two eighteen year olds who had just completed their full time college course and a woman in her mid thirties who had completed her NVQ Level 3 whilst working (at a school and a playgroup). I met these three people, discussed the project and they seemed interested and happy to participate. When the manager left, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, access to this research site became much more difficult. The acting manager, previously the deputy manager, was less keen to be involved with the project. I met with her and discussed her reservations. She was preoccupied with filling the places at this new nursery and felt that the staff were busy settling new children and developing ways of working. Involvement in the project was an added pressure, so they withdrew.

Following the loss of the yellow setting I met an ex-colleague now working in a not-for-profit nursery attached to a college. This nursery (known as ‘green’ setting) provides crèche facilities for staff and students’ children, places for children of students studying at another institution, a few places sponsored by social services and paying members of the local community. Green nursery had employed three newly qualified staff with the CACHE Diploma and also had a member of staff who had just completed her NVQ three qualification. I visited, discussed the project, and they were happy to participate. This and the other settings (summarised below) were visited on a fortnightly basis, from September 2004, with participant observation and semi-structured interviews employed as the main methods of data collection.

⁵ The abrupt changes of manager in both blue and yellow settings during this study indicates the vulnerability and lack of job security of nursery managers of private day nurseries who are quickly dismissed and replaced by the nursery owners. This could be an area for further investigation.

Colour code	Type of setting	Area	CACHE DCE	NVO 3
Red	School reception class	Outer London	One participant	None
Blue	Private day nursery (large)	Rural Essex	One participant	Four participants
Green	College day nursery (small)	Inner London	Three participants	One participant

Table 5.2. Summary of settings involved in the study

5.9. Participant observation

In this research, observation was both the key means of data collection and the topic under study. Throughout the study, I carried out fortnightly fieldwork visits spending time in each of the research sites observing the daily work of the participants, including tasks involving child observation, and recording these observations as hand written field notes. Observation was a significant method of data gathering because it served a dual purpose. Firstly, it provided a method of seeking answers to the research questions through watching and recording how newly qualified practitioners used child observation from day-to-day, as they progressed through their first year in employment. Secondly, by using observation myself, I gained additional insight into the role of an observer and appreciated some of the decisions and challenges which faced participants in this aspect of their work.

I adopted a participant role in the early years settings through working alongside the staff. In many settings students on work placements, volunteer helpers (often parents or grandparents) and other visitors are a familiar part of daily life. Early years practitioners are usually constantly busy with many tasks to attend to and an additional adult to assist with these is likely to be made welcome. As a researcher who was also prepared to be a volunteer worker I was accepted by the staff and children and aimed to be less intrusive than a non-participant observer. Several writers define observer roles along a continuum from total participant, through participant-as-observer or observer-as-participant to passive observer (Gold, 1958; Adler and Adler, 1987; Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2008). My role was that of observer-as-participant in which my position as a researcher and observer was

known and agreed to by all members of the nursery staff but where my involvement as a volunteer worker provided me with a vantage point for noticing routine daily child observation tasks occurring. This role also allowed the staff and children to habituate to my presence over time, enabling me to witness the typical routines of the settings unobtrusively (Adler and Adler, 1998).

This participant role had other advantages. Garfinkel (1967) called on researchers to become skilled in the area of work they intend to address arguing that you can only describe work in a particular occupational setting if you are already a competent practitioner. Others share this opinion that true understanding comes from doing and an appreciation of the culture of a group and the relationships, experiences and understandings of its members can only be gained if researchers “adopt the roles of people being studied” (Hammersley et al, 1994: 54). As a qualified and experienced early years professional, I consider myself well equipped to research early childhood care and education in this way. The opportunity to become a participant observer also allowed me to revise and update my professional experience (Darlington and Scott, 2002) and to gain a fuller understanding of practice in each context. I did sometimes struggle, however, to achieve a balance “between engaged commitment to the field and the capacity to offer an informed and research-based interpretation of it” (Edwards, 2002: 124).

In this particular study my stance as a participant, attempting to observe the life of the setting and the work of the staff whilst carrying out basic duties in the nursery, provided a strong basis for understanding the perspectives of the practitioners as they combined observations of the children with all their other daily tasks. In addition to gaining first hand experience alongside the research participants, I also aimed to make a contribution to the life of the settings. Coady (2002) reminds researchers that participants are doing them a favour when agreeing to take part in a project. As mentioned above, from an ethical viewpoint help and support with wiping noses, mopping floors and other daily tasks may, to some extent, have repaid busy participants for their involvement with the research project. Prior familiarity

with different types of early years settings, a period of orientation spent at each research site at beginning of study plus the length of time spent in each classroom or nursery enabled me to observe and understand a range of activities that were relevant to the research (Rolfe, 2001). I aimed to develop “a cultivated power of scanning” (Hammersley et al 1994: 59) and so ensure that the less obvious features of child observation practice in each environment were not overlooked. Throughout the study my observations were recorded as handwritten field notes, sometimes jotted down as I observed and sometimes written from memory immediately after the field work visit.

The advantages of observing naturally occurring events within an everyday context have been documented in many research methodology and methods texts (see for example, Friedrichs and Ludtke, 1975; Burgess, 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Darlington and Scott, 2002). Gomm (2004) argues that once the researcher is accepted into the setting, observation provides an unobtrusive method of data collection with a potentially high level of ecological validity. In addition to being able to understand the practitioners’ observation work in context, I was able to explore aspects of child observation work that participants may not have mentioned when asked, or cannot explain. Gomm (2004: 221) acknowledges that is not always possible to articulate practice: “For many social activities people do not know how they do them or notice what they have done”. For this reason, close scrutiny of the research site through observation was an important means of gaining insights which were crucial to my understanding of the topic (Hammersley et al, 1994). As expressed in the discussion of ethical considerations, above, I was concerned as a researcher not to be exploitative of busy child care and education workers (Grieshaber, 2001). As observations were conducted as they worked, it was not time consuming for participants and did not take them away from their daily work with the children.

Observation also presents challenges, and its effectiveness as a research tool is dependent upon the abilities of the observer. If the researcher does not have good

skills in attending and observing then important data may be overlooked (Creswell, 2007). The informal nature of records of participant observation could be challenged as lacking in rigour. Sadler (2002) notes the potential for observer expectancy effects, where instances are noted and recorded which provide evidence to support an emerging argument whilst potential data that may be contradictory is ignored. Whilst recognising that my personal biases and assumptions may have influenced what was noticed and the sense made from it, the nature of the research question was open and I was genuinely interested to find out the different ways in which practitioners understood and used child observation. I am aware of the partial nature of the observational records, despite sustained periods of engagement with the settings. I remain conscious of the 'window of observation' (Bryman, 2008) and the limitations of what is seen and unseen, recorded or not, analysed or not, reported or not. Whilst I am claiming to present an honest account of what I saw and heard, I am not claiming that it is the only account that could have been presented or that it could not be developed in the light of additional information. The limitations of observations, including the difficulty in accessing thoughts and feeling through this method of data collection, are partly compensated for by the use of interview alongside observation and it is to this method that the discussion now moves.

5.10. Semi-structured interviews

In addition to participant observation, interviews were used as a method of data collection to gain insights into the meanings that early years practitioners give to their child observation work. Semi-structured interviews, with the key participants, and their mentors, were undertaken at three points during the study: at the outset; near the mid-point; and towards the end. Spoken language is seen as significant in the creation and discussion of meanings ascribed to activities by early years practitioners; and in the construction of common understandings in collaborative research projects (Anning, 2004; Anning and Edwards, 2006). Interviewing can be viewed as an inter-subjective process (Cohen et al, 2000) of constructing reality, to which both the interviewer and interviewee contribute and which affects both people (Hammersley et al, 1994). Stake (1995: 64) suggests that: "the interview is the main

road to multiple realities”; allowing each person interviewed to tell their story and describe their unique experiences. In this study the interviews were intended to give voice to the participants, encouraging them to express their own accounts of their experiences and for these to be listened to, heard and reported in the research (Walford, 2001). Cannold (2001:179) points out that interviews may capture voices which are “habitually marginalized”, which could apply to early years practitioners, who are not a powerful or vocal group of people.

Whilst recognising the value of interview as a research tool, I also accept its limitations. Thus, I do not claim that data collected in this way represents a definitive, permanently truthful account but rather may “inform us of what the person interviewed is prepared to say about the topic in the social context time and place of that interview” (Walford, 2001:95). Responses constructed in an interview can be affected by inaccurate perception, imperfect memory and incomplete knowledge (Walford, 2001), or the interviewees’ desire to enhance their account of their activities (Convery, 1999). For this reason, information gathered at interview was not the sole source of data, as evidence from participant observation was used to corroborate what early years workers said about child observation during interviews.

Participants working in nurseries are usually busy, and specific adult to child ratios must be maintained at all times during the day. It was, therefore, difficult to withdraw people from their daily work to be interviewed. I was also reluctant to take up their break time with work-related discussions. Consequently, the planned interviews were short and focused. Walford (2001) asserts that the relevance and manageability of the interview data is more important than the quantity of talk that is collected. This also meant that participants’ time was well used and not wasted with unnecessary questioning and prolonged discussion (Cannold, 2001).

Interviews took place within the early years settings, withdrawing to a quiet place within the nursery or classroom, where possible, to avoid distraction and excessive background noise on the audio recordings. For the first interviews a schedule was

devised (Appendix E), similar to the one used in the initial exploratory study (see above and Appendix B), comprising a list of five open questions, based upon the research questions. This was used to elicit and explore the participants' views about the value and purpose of child observation. Similar questions were used in the mid-point and at the end of the study (Appendices F and G) to follow up topics from previous interviews and to illuminate data derived from participant observation (Travers, 2001).

In Stake's (1995) opinion tape recording interviews, for future listening, transcription and analysis is time consuming and unnecessary, unless an audio-presentation is to be included in the research report. Walford (2001: 90) points out the irony of qualitative researchers, aiming to provide ethnographic accounts that contrast with non-natural research methods, claiming that recorded speech, collected during "these very strange and artificial situations called interviews", is a highly reliable source of evidence. Bassey (1999) however, points to the advantages of recording, particularly the fact that during a recorded interview the researcher can focus on conducting and directing the interview, and can then listen to what was said afterwards to capture more detail.

With the participants' permission, I recorded the interviews using a small, voice activated, micro-cassette recorder⁶. The recorder was positioned in an unobtrusive place, within the range of the built in microphone, and switched on as the interview began. Once the interview was completed, the tape was labelled, in the colour code allocated to the research site, with the initial of the participant's first name and the date of the interview. Tapes were stored in a secure place and listened to again during transcription and analysis (see below).

Expert opinion is also divided as to the nature and value of transcriptions of interviews, which can vary from a written summary of the interview, capturing key ideas and conveying the meaning of what was said (Stake, 1995), or a partial,

⁶ An Olympus Pearlorder J300

annotated transcript (Walford, 2001) to a detailed typed reproduction of the whole taped conversation with each word, pause and vocal inflection included in as precise a manner as possible (Swann, 1994). The form of transcription chosen here reflects the aims of the study. Bassey (1999) points out that transcription can form the first task in reducing the data to manageable proportions, in preparation for data analysis. Following this advice, I transcribed the words spoken in each answer as fully as possible with punctuation added to give the speech the meaning that I heard expressed, for example a full stop to indicate a pause between one topic or idea and the next or commas between items which are listed. To preserve the features of spoken language (such as inflections and pauses) lost in this form of transcription and to retain a sense of the context in which the text was produced (Graddol, 1994, Walford, 2001), I listened to the audio tape alongside the re-readings of the transcript during analysis. This approach also allowed for a readable account of the interview to be returned to the interviewee for checking and further comment (Mayall, 1999). Transcripts were coded in the same way as the micro-cassette tapes (see above) and stored as text files on a password protected user area of a personal computer. Back-up copies were saved on a memory stick and kept in the same secure location as the tapes; copies of the transcripts were printed and filed securely.

5.11. Data Analysis

Systematic analysis of interview data and observational fieldnotes (detailed in Part Four, Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, below) was undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of child observation as an aspect of new practitioners' work. For each part of the research question the data analysis was approached in a slightly different way. In exploring newly qualified practitioners' understandings of child observation, the analysis began by considering interview data and then corroborated this through examining participants observation notes; whereas, for analysing uses of observation this order was reversed. When considering experiences within the workplace the focus was on the individual participants within the context of the early years setting and the analysis moved between the field notes and interview data to interpret their experiences. The chosen conceptual framework for this research (as

discussed in section 5.2 above and in Parts One and Two of the thesis) required a method of data analysis which enabled an exploration of the participants' understandings of, and relationships with, the work environment which surrounds them. As in other qualitative studies, the aim was to provide answers to the research question through offering descriptions and explanations based upon a set of specified analytic categories (Huberman and Miles, 1998).

5.12. The trustworthiness of this study

The trustworthiness of research is of particular importance in applied fields, such as education, where findings may influence practice (Merriam, 1998). Quantitative research is based upon, and judged by, established scientific standards. These are: objectivity, including careful control of variables; reliability, involving accuracy of measurement and low level of error; validity, in terms of truth and replication of results; and generality or external validity, achieved by representative sampling of the population to which the findings may be applied (Burns, 2000; Harrison, 2001; Hughes, 2001). Whilst some researchers apply these same principles when discussing the credibility of qualitative research (e.g. Mason, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2001); other authors argue that differences in underlying beliefs and values require different lenses to be used for evaluation, and alternative criteria applied when establishing methodological and interpretive rigour (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hammersley, 1992; Altheide and Johnson, 1998; Richardson, 1998; Mertens, 2005).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) were pioneers in offering methods for ensuring the quality of naturalistic enquiry which corresponded with those used to judge quantitative research: confirmability (objectivity); dependability (reliability); credibility (internal validity); and transferability (external validity). Here, this research study is discussed in relation to these criteria, whilst also making reference to comparable standards and terminology proposed by other qualitative researchers.

It is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to provide the reader with “depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (Firestone, 1987: 19; Merriam, 1998). Dependability and confirmability are achieved when written accounts of a research study are perceived to be internally coherent and plausible, corresponding with readers’ expectations, based upon their own experiences and knowledge from other texts (Adler and Adler, 1998; Mertens, 2005). Here I have sought to offer sufficient detail about the research process, the data, and my interpretation of it, in order to provide confidence in the research.

In this study I wanted to understand how newly qualified participants used observation in the workplace as well as how they expressed their views of child observation. Understanding aspects of people’s work, in this way, involved both interviewing them about their day to day tasks and also observing their activities in the workplace (Travers, 2001). Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 4) suggest that using a combination of methods “adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation” and Edwards (2001: 125), likewise, recommends this approach as supportive of a “quest for rich data”.

My aim was to authenticate the research findings (Atkinson, 1990) through demonstrating the accuracy of responses (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) and to reduce bias (Edwards, 2001). For example, descriptions of observing children offered in an interview were informed by observing the participant at work in the nursery, and by seeing examples of written observation records. Similarly, interviews with work place mentors provided evidence that informed my interpretations of data from interviews with the newly qualified practitioners. These sources of data are summarised in table 5.3. (below).

Such methods could be described as triangulation (Huberman and Miles, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001; Edwards, 2001) although Richardson (1998: 358) proposes “crystallization” as an alternative metaphor. Triangles, she argues, are rigid and two dimensional whereas crystals combine “symmetry and

substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach.” This concept of crystallization is attractive as it retains a sense of the importance of structure and internal consistency, to enhance validity, whilst allowing for a research topic to be viewed from different facets and acknowledging continuing growth and change as an understanding of the area of study develops (both during the project and in the future).

<u>Setting</u>	<u>Participants</u>	<u>Interviews</u>			<u>Obs. field notes</u>	
<u>Red</u>	Hollie	X	X	X	Yes	Yes
	Janet (M) ⁷	X	X	X	Sept.- Dec.	Jan. - June
<u>Blue</u>	Charlie	X			Yes	
	Diane	X			Sept.–	
	Emma	X			Nov.	
	Harriet	X				
	Stella	X				
	Tessa (M)					
<u>Green</u>	Denise	X	X	X	Yes	Yes
	Kel	X	X	X	Sept.–	Jan.–
	Mij	X	X	X	Dec.	July
	Saira	X	X			
	Joan (M)	X	X	X		
	Lily (M)	X	X			

Table 5.3. Summary of the data collected to inform the case study

In addition to the use of multiple data sources, the credibility of this research is also enhanced by persistent observation (Mertens, 2005), the sustained time spent in fieldwork enabling sufficient data to be collected and patterns of behaviour observed over time and at different times of day and in varying circumstances (Lofland,

⁷ M indicates Mentor

1994), for example, observing the participants through different day nursery shifts (including early morning starts and evening finishes) and over the seasons of the year. This also results in reduced researcher effect, as the participant observer becomes accepted within a setting and is thus inconspicuous and unobtrusive, with minimal impact and influence upon the research participants (Adler and Adler, 1998). Data collected in this way has potential to capture and represent the voices of the research participants (Hughes, 2001) and I aimed to achieve a correspondence between the participants' perception of their social world and my portrayal of it (Mertens, 2005).

In addition to the participants themselves recognising the account of the research, transferability requires provision of description from the data in order to draw readers in and allow them to understand and appreciate the research contexts. From reports which possess sufficient 'verisimilitude' or 'vraisemblance' (Adler and Adler, 1998: 88) readers may judge the relevance of the research and decide whether the claims made can be justified (Preissle and Grant, 2004). Rubin (1976) refers to this type of recognition as the 'aha' standard of validity; whilst Stake (1995:85) uses the term "naturalistic generalisation" to describe the way in which a case study report should enable a reader, who is familiar with the topic and context, to link what is reported to their own understandings and experience.

Following the tradition of case study research (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995), in the three chapters which follow I, therefore, report a story from the field (Darlington and Scott, 2002) through providing a thematic analysis of data. This is divided into three chapters, each of which corresponds with a part of the research question. Guided by these research questions, the analysis is largely data driven (Edwards, 2001) but informed by extant knowledge of the field (as explored in Chapters Two, Three and Four, above). In Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, which follow, the data is organised according to broad categories with related themes. For each of these themes, illustrative examples from the data are presented in order for the reader to be able to understand and respond to the findings.

Summary

In this chapter the methodological approach to the study has been explained and methods of data collection and the conduct of the study described. I have argued that a collective case study, using an ethnographic approach, enabled contextualised consideration and interpretations of newly qualified early years practitioners understandings and uses of child observation in their places of work. Participant observation, combined with semi-structured interviews, provided evidence of participants' activities and ideas which, when subjected to thematic content analysis, offer insights into the pedagogical processes involved when observing young children. The following chapters, which form the next part of the thesis, explain and present the analysis of data and the key findings in relation to each part of the research question.

Part Four – Data analysis and presentation of findings

“... the processes of analysis , evaluation and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always ongoing, emergent, unpredictable and unfinished. They are done through the process of writing, itself an interpretive, personal and political act. They are like a dance”

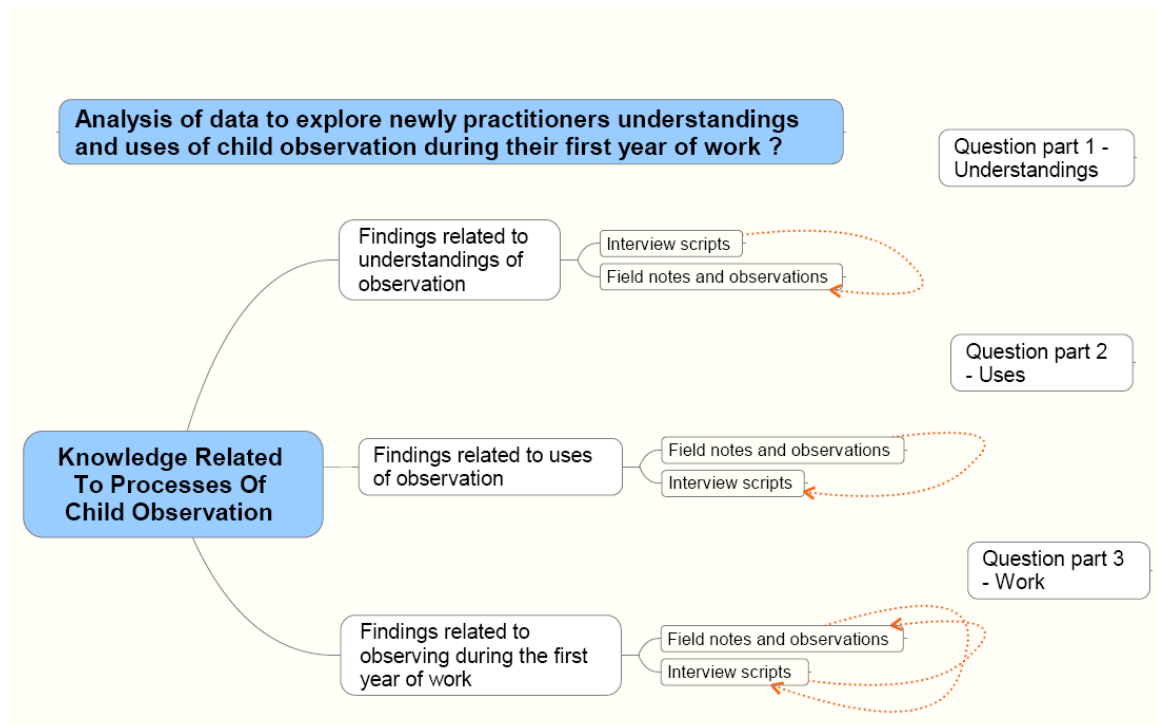
(Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 275-6)

In this fourth part of the thesis, I present an analysis of the research data and the key findings. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) describe the process of analysis as a means of moving between the raw texts of the data and the research concerns, in order to understand how the data may bear upon the issues under exploration. Dey (1993) suggests that categories identified during processes of qualitative analysis should mirror the data and serve an analytic purpose. Thus, the themes that are identified and discussed here represent a focus for thinking about the field notes from participant observations, and the associated interviews, and their interpretation.

The research question (How do newly qualified early years practitioners understand and use child observation during their first year of employment in early childhood settings?) is broken down into three constituent parts and each is used, in turn, as a lens with which to view the data. In Chapter Six, evidence for the influence of the major theoretical perspectives (i.e. biological, psychodynamic, behaviourist, constructivist and socio-cultural views, as explored in Chapter Two) is sought, together with indications of the informal understandings and explanations of behaviour that practitioners bring to their observations of children. In Chapter Seven the focus is upon ways that child observations are used for care and education (as reviewed in Chapter Three) with an emphasis upon methods of observation in use in early childhood settings. Then, in Chapter Eight, observation is considered as an aspect of work and a means of professional learning for early childhood practitioners (linking with the perspectives discussed in Chapter Four). The analysis for each chapter is guided by an awareness of the conceptual framework (as outlined in Chapter One and Four): the meanings of child observation and its uses in the

workplace are understood as dynamic interactions; experiences embedded and interpreted within social and cultural context (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992).

For each part of the research question the data is scrutinised differently, illustrated in Diagram 6.1, below. To gain insights into practitioners' understandings of child observation the analysis begins with their words and those of their mentors, from the interview scripts, and findings from this source are then considered in relation to how these understandings are enacted, based upon evidence from participant observations. To then explore how practitioners use observation this approach is reversed, with the observational evidence of child observation in use in the daily life of the settings being analysed and then compared with what practitioners said about uses of observation when interviewed. The final part of the question, relating to uses of observation at work, revisits the data for a third time to consider how both interviews and observations illuminate the practitioners' progress during their first year of work.



6.1. A diagrammatic representation of the approach to interrogating data in order to explore each aspect of the research question

Chapter Six - Understandings of child observation

- Paulette: *Jacob was lining up the insects and saying “Which one’s the biggest? Which one’s the next biggest?”*
- Lily: *He does use a lot of mathematical language.*
- Paulette: *Yes, then he was saying “Which one’s the longest?” Then, when we were playing with the dough I was copying what he was doing, moulding play dough round my hand, and when it fell off he said “Oh, you’ve destroyed it!”*
- Lily: *He talks as he thinks, you know how some children will think for a little while and then talk but with him whatever he’s thinking he comes out with straight away and if there’s something he wants to say he’s not shy to say he’ll just say it. With me I don’t say what I mean straight away. I’ve got to think before I say. I go over in my head what I should say or how I should say it but with him he just says what comes in his head.*
- Paulette: *It’s helpful for observation to know what he’s thinking!*
- Lily: *Yes!*

(Extract from interview with Lily)

6.1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the first part of the research question: how do practitioners understand child observation? My aim is to explore how the research participants understand what observation is, what it is for, and also the understandings that they use to assist in the interpretation of their observations of children. The opening dialogue captures a key difficulty with this area of the investigation. As Lily admits, not everybody can articulate their thinking and their understandings as fluently as four year old Jacob does. It is a limitation of observation, as a research technique and as a pedagogical tool, that intra-mental processes cannot be seen but only inferred from what’s enacted as a result of the understandings. As we see with three year old Jacob, young children are likely to express their ideas through self-directing or egocentric speech (Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1978) but as thought processes

become internalised it is more difficult to ascertain what others think. As with the participants in this study, it is possible to ask people directly about their beliefs and theories, using interview techniques, but the answers may be difficult for them to express. Lily (above) explains how she prefers to rehearse ideas before she feels she can express her thinking clearly.

Bearing in mind these challenges, in this chapter, interview data are used as a starting point for identifying participants' understandings of the nature and purpose of child observation. The aim is to listen to the voices of practitioners expressing their own understandings of their child observation work. Findings from the thematic content analysis of the interviews, with newly qualified practitioners and also their mentors, are then cross referenced to field work observations of their everyday practice. The progress of the data analysis, using NVivo2, is described below, recording the processes and the judgements made during the thematic analysis. Following a summary of the coding procedures, to illuminate how the themes were derived from the data, each of the identified theoretical constructs (a formal view, based upon developmental understandings of ages and stages of children's growth; and an informal view, based upon intuitive understandings displayed in everyday practice) is then more fully explored and explained, via description of their associated themes, supported with examples of evidence from the research data.

This endeavour to identify understandings of observation relates to two key aspects of the conceptual framework guiding this research. Firstly, highlighting theories as aspects of culture, prevalent within ecological systems, which influence the observation of children; and, secondly, to appreciate how understandings brought to the dynamic task of observing children lead to decisions and actions concerning their care and education.

6.2. The process of data analysis

The first stage in the analysis, using NVivo2 software, was a process whereby each of the interview documents was browsed in turn and the text coded, by generating and using ten themes. These themes, were created in two ways: the themes ‘norms’ and ‘next steps’ were established prior to the coding process, based upon my initial analysis whilst undertaking, transcribing and re-reading the interviews, in the light of the research question and the theoretical perspectives outlined in chapter two (above); the remaining themes (‘accurate result’, ‘basis to work from’, ‘I remember that’, ‘Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner’, ‘process’, ‘talking about it’, ‘what you’re looking for’ and ‘wouldn’t work here’) were “in-vivo codes” (Gibbs, 2002:34) arising from words and phrases in the interview texts, which captured repeating ideas (Auerbach, 2003) within the participants’ responses. Each theme was given a short, written description to summarise the key concept that it referred to. The documents were then each examined for a second time to ensure that all responses which exemplified each of these ten categories were assigned to each of the themes, an approach described by Kelle (1995) as signpost coding. Browsing each theme in turn showed all the extracts of text coded for every one of the themes, or “nodes” (Gibbs, 2002: 16) (see Appendix J for an example of part of a node report). The Nvivo software also provided the facility of moving easily between the coded text and the interviews from which they were extracted, in order to consider and reconsider the participants’ words in their original context.

Examination of the data coded for each of the themes then led to reconsideration and refining of the ten themes, to arrive at the six themes shown and exemplified below, in table 6.1: ‘accurate result’, ‘I remember that’ and ‘what you’re looking for’ referred to various approaches to observation, and so these were merged together under one new thematic heading, ‘approach’. Similarly, ‘talking about it’ was incorporated within ‘process’ and also borne in mind as a potential code to use when analysing the data for uses of observation and observation as a means of learning in the workplace.

Table 6.1. List of themes with associated descriptions and examples:		
Themes	Description	Example (from interview data)
<i>Approach</i>	How observations should be undertaken	<i>If you see something happening it's that ability just to recognise it. To know what you're looking for as well, which I think is so important, perhaps try to home in on personal and social skills (Janet, red)</i>
<i>Basis to work from</i>	Ways in which work with children is grounded in observation	<i>You see what a child's doing on Monday or Tuesday and then by Wednesday you think of an activity from what's going on and incorporate it and by Thursday or Friday you can see how they do with it (Saira, green)</i>
<i>Next step</i>	Observation as a means of identifying a stage of development and possible next stage to move on to	<i>I do the checklists and then at the bottom ... I write an evaluation about what I would do with this child next, what sort of activities I would set out to help them reach a certain learning goal (Kel, green)</i>
<i>Norms</i>	Age-typical child development as a focus for observation	<i>You realise why its happening because of the normative measuring chart and all that. You can see if they're at the right stage (Holly, red)</i>
<i>Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner</i>	Mention of specific theorists	<i>We did Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner and seeing what they thought about it all means you can relate that to what happens (Denise, green)</i>
<i>Process</i>	Capture a sense of observation as something complex	<i>At the moment we've got a certain child bullying another child in this room so what we do is write it down extra observations about the child and any problems we've seen with the child like any accidents or emotional problems (Harriet, blue)</i>

In order to establish relationships between text coded according to different themes, the themes were reviewed and moved, in turn, in order to find and show connections between them. Thus the themes, were organized into a simple hierarchy with each theme linked to one of two overarching categories. In NVivo terms, the “free nodes” (themes) were assigned to one of two “tree nodes” (main categories) (Gibbs, 2002:31). This is represented in table 6.2 (below). The themes norms, next steps and named theorists all emphasise ages and stages of typical child development and thus relate thematically to the first category, a ‘formal view’ of child observation; whilst the remaining nodes, which represent a common concern with practicalities and processes, are organised under the second category, reflecting an ‘informal view’.

Table 6.2 The two main categories with their related themes	
Formal view (developmental)	= Focus on age-related stages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms • Next steps • Named theorists 	
Informal view (practical)	= Focus on each child and ways of working
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach • Basis to work from • Process 	

6.3. Formal view

The category ‘formal view’ describes a theoretical construct characterised by an emphasis upon identifying and using normative ages and stages of child development as a way of framing observations of children. The three themes identified within this category (‘norms’, ‘next steps’ and ‘theorists’) all fit within a traditional, developmental perspective towards understanding child observation. Below each of these themes are described and explained, in turn, using examples from interviews and then observational data.

Norms - child observation and normative accounts of child development

This theme, which encapsulates conceptions of children's sequential progress in different areas of growth (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic) emerged very strongly as a central way of understanding of child observation. The significance of knowledge about typical development is evident in responses to interview questions about the importance of observation (Appendices C and I) and when choosing preferred statements about the purpose of observation and justifying choices (Appendices D and H).

Evidence from students completing their course, taken from focus group data and also examples of course materials and samples of written work in the initial exploratory study; and from newly qualified practitioners, via initial and subsequent interviews and observation of their practice, suggests that learning about ages and stages of normative child development provided a strong rationale for observing children during training. This is exemplified in this extract from an interview with Charlie (*blue, interview 1*), who described the child study she undertook for her NVQ3 award:

"I had to observe three children to find what stage of development they're at and then I had to, from the observation I had to, summarise that and then compare it to the norms and see if my child that I observed, it was the same child for all three observations and see if that child was at the correct stage if they were on a par or behind."

Charlie's account is typical in mentioning comparison to text book norms, in order to judge whether children were at expected stages of development for their chronological age. Observing children in order to look at different areas of development was also common, for example Emma (*blue, interview 1*) reports: *"I had to do ones on memory, sensory, gross motor development, fine motor development and a few other things."* The response of one of the students who participated in the focus group during the initial exploratory study (Appendix C)

displays confidence in the competence gained in understanding of varying age groups ages covered by the course:

“We can see the difference between babies, toddlers and key stage one, if we had to work with an older age group, say secondary school, we wouldn’t know about that but we’ve learned a lot about younger children and how they’re different at each stage.”

This reflects coverage of the CACHE (2003) syllabus for the Diploma in Child Care and Education (DCE) which required the students to complete 20 observations covering ages from birth to seven and a range of developmental topics. The underpinning knowledge of child development now extends to age sixteen years (CACHE, 2009).

This knowledge of normative child development is expected and required by workplace mentors⁸. One nursery manager’s expectation of new staff with level three qualifications was that they should “... *have child care and child development skills. To be able to observe the children and get a picture of where the children and their development are at*” (Joan, green, interview 1). The experienced teacher working in the reception class (red) setting, with Hollie, admired child care students’ abilities to conduct focussed observations and analyse specific aspects of development and considered that her own skills in these areas had developed as a result of working with students and newly qualified practitioners.

These understandings of developmental norms were used to inform the observation of children in practice. All practitioners spoke of recognising children’s skills and abilities, comparing these to age-related expectations, and focussing upon how children were progressing. Stella (blue, interview 1) summed it up like this:

“There’s always times when you realize that a child can recognize their own name and you didn’t know before or they can recognize letters or they know their colours or they know their shapes where, if you didn’t observe them, you wouldn’t really know. They don’t exactly tell you they don’t say ‘Oh I

⁸ Evidence from initial interviews with mentors in the three research settings.

know this' so observing does help you know what they know and to realize their development..."

When observed in practice these understandings of development are enacted in several ways. Milestones are seen and celebrated. For example, in baby rooms⁹ the emergence of significant gross motor skills, especially crawling and walking, are greeted with excitement by staff, as are first words, new words and the acquisition of independence skills (e.g. using a spoon to feed, hanging up a coat). Sometimes these new skills are recorded in observations, or captured with photographs, but always they are reported from one staff member to another and discussed with parents. In green nursery, in which all the children meet together at certain times of the day, the older children in the nursery engage with the babies and toddlers and share the adults' interest and delight in their progress. The mealtimes are communal and provide opportunities for informal interaction:

"The under-tuos have their own table, a round table so that the children face one another during the meal. It is visited by older children especially at the end of lunch time when they are getting up to wash their hands. They stop by the table and discuss with Kel the fact that Jean-Paul can now feed himself. Chanel, one of the oldest children in the nursery, tells Kel that when she is older she is going to 'be a teacher and have a baby in my buggy' and work at the nursery with Kel. Later, she asks Kel 'Can Jem crawl now?'"

(transcribed from observation field notes, green, May)

Another aspect of the 'norms' theme is the use of observation for the identification of developmental delay; of monitoring development in order to identify difficulties or disabilities if children's development is not conforming to age-typical norms. When interviewed the practitioners talk of noticing particular problems and being alert to sign of impairment. This seemed to occur rarely when observing in practice. In the under twos' room of green nursery there was concern about a 16 month old girl who was not yet walking:

⁹ Noted in observational field notes for both blue and green settings

“When F (tutor with a background in physiotherapy) came in to visit the placement students Mij mentioned their concerns about Tilly. F clearly didn’t want to give a professional opinion but she played with Tilly whilst speaking with Mij and the students and then made some suggestions for games to play - rolling a ball to and fro when Tilly was sitting opposite them, playing “row your boat” and encouraging her to rock backwards and forwards and side to side (to develop muscles / core strength?). She also suggested advising the mother to speak to the health visitor.”

(transcribed from observation field notes, green, Feb.)

The most active concerns were expressed in relation to challenging behaviour. During the year there were children in each setting who caused concern and observation was drawn upon as a strategy to monitor the difficulty. For Tarique (who joined red setting) several members of staff (Hollie, two teaching assistants assigned to support him in the morning and afternoon, and midday supervisors at lunchtime) all complete observations during the first 15 minutes of every hour and also write down any incidents which give cause for concern¹⁰. In the two year olds’ room in blue setting, where Harriet was room supervisor, twin boys who tended to bite the other children were observed by the nursery Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)¹¹ and, in green setting, experienced mentor, Lily, asked me to observe three year old Jack, a key child assigned to her whose demanding behaviour she perceived as immature¹². In each of these cases observations are understood as a way of pinpointing a developmental difficulty and identifying a strategy in order to ameliorate the problem. This belief in the ability of adults to set targets and foster growth is characteristic of the next theme to be discussed.

Next steps - promoting developmental progress

Another understanding, which featured alongside discussions of child development, was the role of the early years practitioner in encouraging children to make progress

¹⁰ Evidence from field notes, red, March

¹¹ Evidence from field notes, blue, November

¹² Evidence from field notes, green, April

onto the 'next step' or stage in their development. This could be where there is evidence of developmental delay, as participants identified hearing difficulties, visual impairment, behaviour problems (as mentioned above), emotional problems and lack of spoken language as areas which had been or could be identified through the use of observation and then addressed. For all children, the mentors and managers saw observation as a means of identifying developmental tasks to focus on with each child. One nursery manager said *"If they observe first, directly and precisely, there's something to work on and develop with each child"* (Joan, green, interview 1), whilst the school Foundation Stage coordinator commented, likewise: *"you've got to have that understanding of what a child can do and it's ok having that understanding but then you've got to be able to use that understanding to bring them to the next stage"* (Janet, red, interview 1).

The students' responses in the initial exploratory study demonstrated this same understanding, for example *"you can observe children and see how they're progressing and help them onto the next stage and see if they're developing or not"* (see Appendix 1) and most of the newly qualified practitioners understood their role as promoting the next steps of development, sometimes giving simple examples. Kel (green, interview 2) talks about using the Birth to Three Matters documents (DfES, 2003) for planning *"to help the child to go further in their development"* giving an example based upon the "Competent Learner" element of this framework she explained:

"because I've been observing them I know how they are and then I can get the equipment that's appropriate for them and that will help them to gain further skills because the more challenging it is for them the better for them because once they've completed one challenge I'll get another puzzle that's harder because it's got more pieces, for the older ones. And then the little ones I do the same with them once they find the shape sorters really, really easy then it will be the puzzles or something, you know, and once they've done the puzzles and they're used to it then it will be a harder puzzle and then just build it up."

This understanding was also evident in the record keeping for green nursery where, following a suggestion from the Ofsted inspector, specific targets for each child were listed and reviewed on a six weekly basis¹³. Lily (*green, mentor interview 3*) explained how this worked, for herself and some of the practitioners who were involved in the research study:

“Saira does a lot of planning for her key children, like I do for mine. For Shannon I go through her folder and see what she’s achieved and what she hasn’t and plan for particular aspects and sit with her and do activities to work towards that target, like looking at a variety of books, having a favourite book and asking questions because at the moment she’ll listen to stories but I’m trying to get her more interested in books and making predictions about what will happen in a story, things like that. It might be a one-to-one activity or part of an adult led activity depending on the adult led activities that are planned. Mij, Kel and Denise will be doing the same with their key children.”

This supporting of emergent skills is a strong feature of practice, particularly in the red and green settings. Hollie, in the school setting, undertakes group tasks with children and notes who has difficulties for follow-up activities. For example, one adult-directed activity was making cylinders, with paper and a sellotape machine, and Hollie was noting who had difficulties with fine manipulative skills¹⁴. In green setting written recording of progress on activities is less common but emergent skills are noticed and supported:

“Shanara (age just two years) was sitting a table, where piles of greetings cards and scissors were laid out, and trying very hard to cut although the scissors she was holding kept slipping sideways. Saira got a pair of double handled scissors and cut with her, gradually letting her take control. Saira then let go and Shanara could cut. She cut one Christmas card into strips

¹³ Evidence from field notes, green, March

¹⁴ Evidence from field notes, red, November

and then snipped round another card. She was still cutting when her father arrived and he seemed very impressed.”

(transcribed from observation field notes, green, January)

Kel sums up this ‘next steps’ theme with characteristic humour “*that’s what we’re here for, we’re here to learn about the children and then help them and promote their learning and make them a much better person (laughs)*” (green, interview 1).

Named theorists - the role of key theorists Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner

The normative, developmental view is the main theoretical approach that is articulated. This is unsurprising as age related norms dominate the interpretation of observations in training syllabi (CACHE Level 3 DCE and NVQ3 requirements); and practice guidelines (Birth-to-Three Matters, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage and Early Years Foundation Stage) are based upon supporting and recording typical child development. On courses and in course textbooks the key ideas of major traditions and associated theorists (as discussed in Chapter Two) are presented. Making a link between what has been observed and the views of a theorist is an assessment criterion required for each of the 20 observations submitted in a student’s portfolio.

Most participants admitted, when asked in interviews, that formal theories were something looked up during their college course but subsequently forgotten. For Hollie (red, interview 1) relating her child observations to insights from major theorists was a challenging part of her course: “*the theorists were the hardest bit - to find them and then get the quotes and all that*”. When asked about theories a few months later (interview 2) she shows some appreciation of this underpinning knowledge (perhaps because she is aware that it is something that I, as an interviewer from a university might attach importance to?) but has almost completely dismissed their relevance: “*You don’t really use them, it doesn’t come into it really. It’s nice to know they’re there, sort of thing, but they don’t come into the day to day work*”. What she does value when observing children is “*knowing*

where they're at, their stage of development. Learning the milestones of development, that was helpful, that's what you need to see really".

For Denise (*green, interview 1*) theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky were of merely historical significance: *"When you compare their ideas and how things have developed and changed since they were working it's interesting"*. Whereas for Mij (an able student who was interested and engaged by the academic aspects of her course and gained top grades¹⁵) the theories are remembered and relevant but difficult to apply to aspects of her work: *"You do like link to the theories, you know Bowlby and stuff, and you do at each age and stage but you don't do much actually with the planning."* (*green, interview 1*). This is still her experience of theory by the time of the mid-phase interview: *"It's still there in your head and you kind of use it, I might think 'this fits in with Piaget' but it's for interest more than anything."*

Only Kel (*green, interview 2*) gave actual examples of how she brought theories, from developmental psychology, to bear on her observations of children. She described a one year old copying the other children and helping to tidy toys away as an example of social learning theory and referred to her own techniques in supporting children as scaffolding. Although the newly qualified participants do not explicitly discuss theory, one of their mentors (whose experience and qualifications have been gained through a practical work-based route) considers their knowledge to be superior to her own: *"looking at the theories is something that I didn't get too much chance to find out about. They have more knowledge of theories ... about play and the reasons why children play."* (*Lily, green, mentor interview 3*).

Theoretical understandings are also implied through practice. A particular example, which relates to observation, is recognition of attachment theory in the monitoring of the settling in process for each child and the key person system¹⁶. In both nurseries the initial settling-in period for the child and parent is carefully managed with a

¹⁵ Since 2000 the CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Child Care and Education has equivalence to other qualifications for 16-18 year olds and Mij's attainment is therefore equal to 3 A grades at A level

¹⁶ In the two day nursery settings (blue and green)

program of visits, where parents stay and play alongside the child, followed by gradually extended hours at nursery. Detailed information is exchanged between staff and parents during this time and parents are encouraged to telephone the nursery, to find out how their child is during the day, and phone calls are made to parents if the new child is distressed. Great attention and sympathy is shown to children who become upset during this transition time of transition and empathy, too, for parents.

In green nursery the key person system is in evidence with the names and photographs of staff and key children posted on notice boards. Depending on the staff shift pattern and the child's times of arrival and departure, the key person greets and parts from the child exchanging information with the parent. If the key person leaves before the parent collects the child she often leaves notes for other staff to communicate to the parents. In green nursery there are only two broad age groups of children (and a maximum of thirty six children attending at any one time – twelve in the under-twos rooms and twenty four over-twos) the building is open-plan in design with interaction between the two groups during parts of the day. The transition from one age group to another is staged with a child joining the older age group, in the larger room, for parts of the morning free play time in the weeks and thus gaining familiarity with the staff and the resources. Written observations are shared, too, during this time with any observational notes made during an activity in the larger room being given to the child's key person in the under-twos room. The allocation of a new key worker for the child is discussed and a person is chosen who is seen to relate well to that child and family.

In blue setting (which caters for up to 103 children) the key person system is less apparent to the outside observer. When parents and children arrive they seem to have positive relationships with all staff in each room and appear to speak with whichever member of staff is near and available, but it is in place, with key workers taking responsibility for allocated numbers of children. The key workers also hand over information to one another when the child changes rooms. This happens more

frequently than in green setting, as rooms accommodate children within narrower age bands (0-1, 1-2, 2-3 and 3-5 years). The rooms operate as four inter-linked pairs for parallel age groups which are located separately over the three floors of the barn-like building. Staff cover for one another in different rooms, to maintain legal adult-child ratios¹⁷, and so children may recognise the staff when they join a new room. Unlike the initial settling in period (above), the transition from room to room is not staged, despite noticeable distress to some children (especially one year olds), implying that the management and staff recognise the attachment to the main carer but do not ascribe significance to the bond the child may develop with their key person. ‘Age specific rooms’ is a selling point on blue nursery website and the efficient provision of age-appropriate toys and resources appears to take precedence over maintenance of consistent relationships between a child and adult key person.

To sum up, the following diagram (6.1) illustrates and summarises how understanding based upon a formal, developmental view may influence interpretations of child observation:

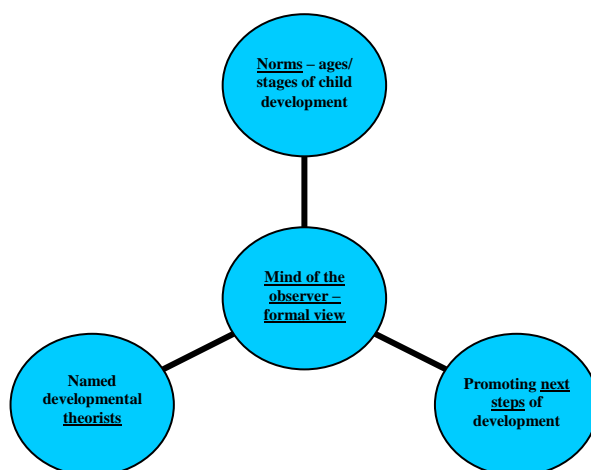


Diagram 6.2. Summary of understandings – the formal, developmental view

¹⁷ Set out in the National Standards (and now the EYFS) as 1:3 for children under 2 years, 1:4 for 2 year olds and 1:8 for children over 2 years.

6.4. An informal view

All participants expressed views which indicated that their formal understandings of children's behaviour and progress were grounded within a developmental paradigm, yet their conversations and their practice also revealed a broader set of beliefs and values. Rather than considering observation simply as a means to identify, assess and promote each child's individual development in relation to norms, they demonstrate awareness of a greater complexity in getting to know, understand and work with children. The category "informal view", therefore, represents ideas about the social and interactive processes involved in interpreting observations.

Approaches

This theme captures understandings about observations based upon the various approaches to their collection. It is noted that participants rarely take an objective, structured and scientific approach to observation, which would be consistent with the views of child development that they express and with methods taught in training. Indeed they tend to adopt more intuitive methods, such as relying on memory or looking for evidence to fill gaps in children's developmental records.

The reception class teacher, Janet (red, mentor interview 1), explains that observational assessments of the children must be carried out in the same way for each child in order for fair judgements to be made. She decides that Hollie will conduct baseline assessments of children's numeracy skills, as she does not yet have the experience to make judgement about children's language and literacy: *"... next year I'll get her doing that and if she's seen me do it this year it'll be alright but I think the maths one is really one where they're recognising the numbers, putting them in the right order, counting up objects and I think that's the sort of thing that is more clear."* Joan, manager of the green setting (mentor interview 1) similarly stresses accuracy as an element of observation skill: *"They need to write what they see, not what they think they've seen, and be very precise."* Judging from my participant observations, however, this objective approach is rarely evident in any of the three settings.

Both these mentors also place strong emphasis upon informal watching. Joan stresses that calmness, confidence and an ability to notice the wider environment are signs that the newly qualified practitioners are settling into their roles; and she expects them to be attentive to what the children are doing¹⁸. Class teacher, Janet (red, mentor interview 1) likewise, says:

“The main thing with child observation is not to intrude on their play but be able to react so if you see something happening you’ll be able to write a note. Not necessarily go out and say right I’m going to go out and make an observation of so and so doing such and such but if you see something happening it’s that ability to just to recognise it”.

She values the overview that Hollie has of the class from a vantage point at the art and craft table:

“That’s the main thing just the observations of what’s going on. Sitting here it’s an ideal opportunity to keep an eye on the building corner and see what’s going on there and to see what’s going on in the drama area.”

The practitioners confirm that this latter approach characterises their practice. Mij (green, interview 2) says: “we have to look out and with children you have to always be aware”; and Hollie (red, interview 2) speaks about how her college training in observation skills has value in the workplace:

“You pick up on things, where I think if you didn’t do the observations you wouldn’t be so aware of what’s going on around you. You do have to keep an eye open otherwise it’s just all activities going on and you don’t notice everything but where you’ve got the observations you’re observing them and you do pick up on things, I think. Well, for instance, when I’m working in the art corner Tarique could be on the computer pushing someone out of the way and I think if you weren’t really looking then you’d never notice but because I was around and keeping an eye out I’d see that.”

¹⁸ Summarised from ideas expressed in green, mentor interviews, 1-3

Generally amongst the practitioners there is a consensus that observations should have an aim and focus in relation to children's development, for example Denise says: *"You have to see what they're doing and what they aren't doing, you know? I mean we can all sit there and look at the children but you need to know what you're looking for."* (green, interview 1). However, they are not conducted systematically. Charlie (blue, interview 1) admits that she uses a mixture of written notes and recall when completing records for her key children: *"You make notes and when you come to doing your reports you can refer back to your notes. I remember most things that I see, though, and so when I come to do a child's report I think "Oh yes, I remember that!"* When then asked if she has a good memory, Charlie replies, *"Yes, yes I have, for my babies!"* Emma (blue, interview 1), similarly, relies upon bearing information in mind: *"I just notice things anyway and don't need to write it all down."* Mij (green, interview 2) explains that this is often a necessity: *You just observe and you keep it in your head, exactly what the child's done and write it all down afterwards. Sometimes it is hard to write it down quickly because you're around with all the children."*

Often observations are subjective and personal, recorded because what the child has achieved is particularly interesting or impressive to the practitioner, and then later this may be mapped on to the milestones listed in the curriculum. For example:

"Shannon sits down with a pencil and writes, she draws a circle and says it's the 'o' in 'Troy' (her friend's name). She then draws a V shape and describes it as a triangle. Saira, who's sitting nearby, notices and tells Lily (Shannon's key worker) who notes what Shannon has done, dates the drawing and keeps it as a record."

(transcribed from observation field notes, green, April)

Observations are frequently made opportunistically. Kel (green, interview 2), for example, says: *"The checklist's usually done every term time but whenever I see a child doing something I think 'yes', if he's come to a stage I'll just mark them off then as well."* Time is an important factor and most observations in the nursery

settings are made when the practitioner has time, often when there are children absent which reduces their workload, although the practitioners are also skilled at finding small amounts of time in their busy days, for example when they are supervising children's sleep times¹⁹.

The collection of written observations was often prompted by a deadline for reporting. This was observed in all three nurseries but in slightly different circumstances²⁰. In blue nursery the number of written observations increased when the six weekly recording period was ending, near the date of the parents evening and when a child was due to move to a different room. In green nursery it was prompted when the manager was planning to audit the children's profiles in advance of an impending Ofsted inspection; and, in red setting, when the Foundation Stage Profiles²¹ for the children had to be completed. Hollie (*red, interview 2*) describes the approach:

“Most of the children have a certain area that they play in now and if you see them going somewhere that they don't normally go into like, for instance Leon was over there doing an elephant the other day, painting, which is something he never really does so you put that down. And we're looking at areas like the girls doing knowledge and understanding things ... it's really just writing things down that are different.”

Basis to work from

In some ways this theme is closely related to the “next steps” theme, above, as it captures ideas about how observations guide work with children. The understandings that are expressed and enacted are, however less linear. It is not simply about identifying a developmental achievement and a target to work towards but about gaining a more in-depth knowledge of the child and responding sensitively during daily activities, including mediating the curriculum activities for each child.

¹⁹ Evidence from field notes, blue and green

²⁰ Evidence from field notes in all three settings

²¹ The Foundation Stage Profile is a mandatory assessment carried out for all children, in Reception classes, at the end of the Foundation Stage (National Strategies, 2009d; QCDA 2009)

The heading for this theme, *“basis to work from”*, came from Charlie’s (blue interview 1) response to the stimulus statements about child observation (see Appendix H) where she indicates that, for her, observations provide insights into children’s needs. This rationale for observations, as a means to get to know children in an holistic way, is echoed by other participants. Hollie (red, interview 1) says *“you can actually see where they struggle, see where they thrive and you can help them more than you could if you didn’t really observe them”* and Stella (blue, interview 1), similarly, speaks of appreciating the child and understanding where they need support: *“It might not be academic it might be emotional like how they feel about something, or anything really, and about how they’re getting on as a whole in the nursery.”*

The application of these ideas to practice is not as straightforward as the ‘norms’ and ‘next steps’ understandings (above) might imply. As Denise, (green, interview 3) points out:

“You’ve got to do lots of observations you can’t just do one and plan a big curriculum for a child, that’s not what it’s about. That’s not how it comes about. it’s not an easy process, it takes long because you don’t know the child. If a new child comes into your setting he is exploring different play, because maybe the child hasn’t had that at home so you need time to research that child.”

Saira (green, interview 2) also highlights the need for time and flexibility and explains how curriculum activities might be adapted to encourage participation:

“With the weekly planning you see what the child’s doing on Monday and Tuesday and then by Wednesday you think of an activity from what’s going on and incorporate it and by Thursday or Friday you can see how they do it, obviously if they don’t want to do it you wouldn’t force them but you’d try to get them to do it.”

There are many examples of this approach, introducing favourite toys such as cars and dinosaurs to tempt children to try activities. In blue nursery one three year old child, Freddy, always chose to play with animals and loved imaginative play and

especially role play. This enthusiasm for animals was used to encourage him to join in art activities (painting tiger stripes) and mathematical activities, with small world play equipment, like sorting farm animals into fields or putting one horse into each stable²².

Even where activities are not tailored to the individual child, strategies are employed, to personalise the learning. Hollie (*red, interview 2*) explains how she uses her knowledge of each child as a basis for adapting a handwriting activity to match children's levels of skill:

"Yes, say we're doing this (points to writing work) and you do would do it for different levels. Like people like Thomas you give them the dots and he joins up the dots, but for other children you might just give them a dot to start with and show them where they go down. So you do that and you implement it to their levels. There are ones with more support and ones without."

I have noted as a feature of the 'norms' theme (above) that observation is used as a strategy for identifying developmental delay. It is also used, however, as a basis for getting to know a child and understanding the nature of their difficulty. This approach is recommended by Joan (*blue, mentor interview 2*): *"If there's a child who's causing concern I'd say observe that child over certain periods of the day during the week to find out what caused them most difficulty or problems."* This observant attention to a child is adopted for children with identified special needs (a two year old girl with Down Syndrome and a boy who was diagnosed as on the autistic spectrum) to find ways of facilitating their participation in nursery routines. Observations are also used to discover antecedents to unwanted behaviour, for example to notice whether Jake threw books and toys on the floor more often on days when he hadn't played outside.²³

²² Evidence from field notes, blue setting.

²³ Evidence from field notes, green, February,

Processes

These explorations of children's needs (and the behaviours that cause difficulty to the staff) are not formal assessments and are likely to be discussed between practitioners and with children's parents. This fits with the final theme, 'processes', which captures some of the questions and complexities when understanding observation. These include working together as a team; responding and relating to children and families; and facing the challenges of understanding government requirements and adapting them to work in their own settings.

Hollie (red, interview 2) explains how children's needs are discussed in the following brief example, which links with the writing activity mentioned above:

"We evaluate through me and Janet talking about it and if she picks something up and I pick something up with the same child then we discuss it and decide if there's cause for concern. We talk through it rather than writing it down. Like Phoebe today - we both noticed that her pencil grip wasn't all that firm and now we can keep an eye on that and work on it."

This conversational approach characterises assessment and evaluation in all three settings. Anecdotes about children, sometimes achievements and sometimes amusing or worrying incidents, are shared with other members of the staff team and with parents.

Whereas during initial training observations were, in Joan's terms (green, mentor interview 1) "*done and let go*" now they involve more investment in the observed child, the taking of responsibility for his or her care and learning and the building of relationships: "*in the workplace you have to concentrate and develop and work on observations and it's more of a long term process.*" This is borne out in the student focus groups (*see results of the initial exploratory study summarised in Appendix C*) where observation is defined in terms of identifying abilities in relation to stages of development and only at the end of the discussion does one person comment: "*Observation is important for reporting to parents too, we haven't talked much about that.*" In practice, by contrast, communication with parents is central to the

observation process, especially in the nursery settings. It is not always a straightforward exchange of information, though, with Denise²⁴ explaining to me how she felt awkward sharing the news of Patrick's taking his first step at nursery when his mother had not been there; and other, sometimes difficult, conversations when parents had concerns about an event at nursery or when staff had to break news of minor accidents and incidents²⁵.

Staff collaborate in developing processes for observation. Denise (green, interview 2) explained the challenges of coming to terms with 'look, listen and note' requirements and the checklist produced by the local authority for use with the Birth to Three Matters framework (DfES, 2002) and especially the difficulty of deciding which of the four headings ('Strong child', 'Skilful communicator', 'Competent learner' or 'Healthy child') an observation should be recorded:

"After we did it on the two training days and then we came back K and I were talking about it and it was so confusing we had to go right the way back again and then gradually come through it and it's just taken a little while to get going in the right direction. Now it's working it's helpful and a lot better."

As well as being evident in the staff teams, this shared learning is also evident in relation to students on placements²⁶. This learning is not all one way, as Janet (red, interview 1) confirms: *"When I started to teach you didn't actually keep observations and I think I've learned quite a bit actually from the students as well over the years so it's been quite useful!"*

To sum up, just as developmental norms, promoting next steps of development and reference to a few major theorists characterised formal understandings; so subjective 'approaches' to observing, knowing the child as a 'basis to work from' and co-operative 'processes', as described above, characterise informal understandings of observation. This informal view is summarised in diagram 6.3. below:

²⁴ Evidence from Denise, green, interview 1

²⁵ Evidence from field notes in all three settings.

²⁶ Evidence from field notes in red and blue setting, especially blue, May.

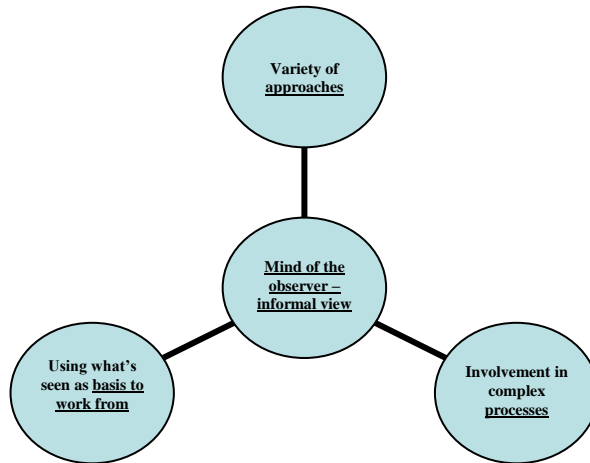


Diagram 6.3. - Summary of understandings – the informal, practical view

6.5. Summary

Through thematic content analysis of the interview and field note (participant observation) data, two categories of understanding of child observation and six related themes were identified. Practitioners display formal understandings, which are predominantly influenced by normative developmental accounts of children's growth; and informal understandings, displaying more flexible and intuitive ways of knowing children. The two types of understanding of observation are not separate and different ways of thinking about observation but, as can be seen from the evidence above, co-exist in the views that practitioners hold. This analysis of data points towards an answer to the first part of the research question: 'How do newly qualified early years practitioners understand child observation?' The practitioners exhibit both formal understandings, expressed in terms of identifying children's development and promoting progress; and informal understandings, which reveal a broader understanding of the children and capture some of the complexities of using observation in early years settings. In Chapter Nine these findings are further explored, in relation to the theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter Two (*above*). More about how child observation is understood is revealed in its uses and this is the topic for the next part of the analysis, discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Seven - Uses of Child Observation

Saira showed me J's folder (Black A4 sized ring binder with his full name, in large print on white paper, stuck on the spine and on the front together with a large photo of him – then covered with sticky-back plastic). It was beautifully organised and presented with several short observations written on sticky labels (most by Saira, some by other staff – all initialled and dated), print outs of digital photos of J engaged in day-to-day play activities, plus a few examples of his drawings (also dated), together with a copy of the 0-36 months developmental checklist with elements ticked off to show the milestones he'd reached. She seemed proud of it and of all the portfolio folders she kept for her key children

(Extract transcribed from observation field notes, green setting, Feb.)

7.1. Introduction

This chapter considers the second part of the research question: 'how do practitioners use child observation?' The aim is to analyse how child observation is utilised by staff within the daily life of early years settings. The chapter follows the same format as the previous one (Chapter Six, above) in summarising the process of data analysis and then presenting, exemplifying and explaining the findings in relation to each of the identified categories and themes. The constructs of formality and informality are, again, employed as overarching concepts. These are useful in capturing the distinction between 'formal' prescribed practice, which is implemented in order to follow set policies and procedures and fulfil the requirements of care standards and the curriculum; and more fluid and intuitive 'informal' practices which are also evident in the daily work of the practitioners.

The analysis of the newly qualified practitioners' understandings of child observation, presented in the previous chapter, began with evidence from interview data. What they, and their supervisors, said about observing children was then corroborated through analysis of data from observations of their practice. Here, in exploring the practitioners' uses of child observation, the starting point was analysis of field notes and written observations of practice within the early years settings.

The rationale for this was that, unlike understandings of observation, uses of observation in early years settings are likely to be visible to the outside observer. The approach to analysing the data for the different aspects of the research question is illustrated in the diagram presented in the introduction to this part of the thesis (see above).

The same methods of content analysis were employed but the process was begun away from the computer screen, as the handwritten observation field notes were not fully transcribed. The written field notes were considered systematically by reading of each page and annotation of the text, with words or brief comments pencilled alongside the evidence of uses of observation. This process, equivalent to the initial 'in-vivo' coding employed in the analysis of understandings (as discussed in Chapter Six, section two), served to highlight twelve recurring instances of use of child observation:

- Note making (the use of stick-it notes and labels and jottings in notebooks)
- Noting success (written or verbal marking of an achievement)
- Monitoring (recording attainment on a specific activity)
- Tracking progress (use of portfolios / profiling according to stepping stones)
- Checklists (recording developmental milestones)
- Happy charts (completion of daily record / report sheets)
- Key working (specific work relating to assigned key children)
- Reporting to parents (planned reporting and parents' events)
- Dialogue with parents (conversations about children)
- Documenting (photographs and displays of activities)
- Child involvement (children showing an interest in observations)
- Heightened awareness (quality of being observant e.g. for safety and care)

Revisiting and re-examining the observation data, in order to assign all instances of use of observation to these identified categories, provoked further analysis. The twelve uses of observation (above) captured observed uses of activity, in terms of what practitioners did, but did not portray the purposes behind the described uses. In

order for the analysis to answer the question of how practitioners use child observation, it was necessary to go beyond what was done and consider the function of the identified uses. In the light of this, the initial categories of use were reviewed and refined to six themes (listed in Table 7.1. below).

Table 7.1 List of themes with associated descriptions and examples		
Theme	Description	Example (from obs. field notes data)
Methods	Various specific ways of recording observations	<i>For a handwriting group work session, Hollie had a pre-prepared check list, to record who took part and add comments about their ability (red, March)</i>
Noticing	Practitioners seeming tuned in to children and showing awareness of their needs	<i>Diane led singing before lunch, saw child looking miserable, not joining in, smiled kindly, suggested he moved to sit beside her (blue, Oct)</i>
Participation	Opportunities for parents and children to become involved in uses of observation	<i>The older children are given turns with the digital camera when visiting the mosque. Some of these are used for the display (green, May)</i>
Reporting	Formal reporting of progress to parents (and preparation of children's folders for Ofsted inspection)	<i>Stella told me that parents' evening went well: three of her key children's parents came and were impressed with the records (blue, Nov)</i>
Support	Responding to children in ways that encourage and extend their learning	<i>Lily sees Sh sitting doing several simple jigsaws goes to find puzzles with more pieces and brings them to her at the table (green, March)</i>
Tracking	The maintaining of records relating to developmental progress	<i>Janet showed me the records: each child has an entry profile, based on assessments, colour coded for the stepping stone they're on (red, Nov)</i>

The term ‘methods’ incorporated the various ways of recording observations during day-to-day practice (thus merging ‘note-making’, and the aspects of ‘documenting’ and ‘monitoring’ which involved methods of observing and recording activities) whilst ‘tracking’ was chosen as a term to refer to the compiling of information about a child’s development (so incorporating ‘tracking progress’, ‘checklists’, and the aspects of ‘monitoring’ and ‘key working’ which were concerned with the use of written observations to record achievements). Relational aspects of ‘key working’ and ‘heightened awareness’ were combined and labelled ‘noticing’; and ‘dialogue with parents’ and ‘child involvement’ were combined as ‘participation’, which also included conversations about observations with colleagues and students. More formal discussions with parents, the daily completion of ‘happy charts’ and other cases in which observation records were offered for scrutiny, were labelled ‘reporting’. Finally, the theme of ‘support’ denoted uses of observation connected with mediating learning and designing curriculum activities.

In the analysis of practitioners’ understandings of observation (in Chapter Six) a distinction was drawn between a ‘formal’ view, characterised by an emphasis upon normative development, and an ‘informal’ view, which reflected some appreciation of the complex social and relational aspects of interpreting observations of children. These contrasting constructs were also considered in relation to the data regarding uses of observation. Once again a difference could be noted between formal uses of observation, in which the recording of progress in different areas of development was prioritised; and informal uses, characterised by responsive care and spontaneous fostering of learning. Thus, as shown in table 7.2, below, the ‘methods’ of recording observation and the ‘tracking’ and ‘reporting’ of children’s progress were characterised as themes corresponding with formal uses of observation; whereas ‘noticing’, ‘support’ and ‘participation’ were identified as informal uses. As in the previous chapter, the findings are presented using the two categories, in turn, and each of the six themes is described, in turn, to exemplify the different ways in which newly qualified early years practitioners use child observation in their work settings.

Table 7.2 The two main categories with their related themes	
Formal uses of observation	= focus on recording progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods • Tracking • Reporting 	
Informal uses of observation	= focus on care for the children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing • Support • Participation 	

7.2. Formal uses of observation

The vignette which opens this chapter, of Saira displaying a child's portfolio, provides an example which encapsulates this category. All of the practitioners who participated in this study were conscientious in fulfilling requirements for observing and recording children's learning, according to policies and procedures put in place in their work settings in response to national guidelines. This is evident in the methods employed for the recording of observation, the use of observation to track children's progress and the external reporting of these outcomes.

Methods

The methods employed for recording child observations were easily observed in all three settings. The focus, in all settings, was collection of evidence of children's knowledge and skills, in relation to the areas of learning of the Foundation Stage curriculum, jotted down when staff noticed attainment demonstrated during play or other activities²⁷.

²⁷ All the descriptions of practice in this chapter are derived from observational field notes taken in the three settings. To maintain the flow of reporting, where broad descriptions of practice are made, derived from what was seen during the whole time in the field, then specific reference to particular field notes is not made. Where a more distinct example is used then the precise source (setting / month) is noted.

In green nursery, each member of staff either had pages of self-adhesive large sized address labels or a pack of yellow stick-it notes (depending upon available stock of stationery, I think, as this varied through the year) which they kept close at hand for the purpose of jotting ‘snapshot’ observations. Attached to the side of one store cupboard, in the main room of the nursery, were plastic wallets each labelled with the name of a member of staff and a list of the key children allocated to them. If the observations related to their own key children, then the member of staff kept them until she had time to file them in the child’s progress portfolio. If the observation was of a child who had a different key worker, then the label was placed into the relevant plastic wallet. On most visits to green setting I observed at least one member of staff recording observations in this way and when I was shown children’s portfolios (as in the introductory vignette for this chapter) there were several observations for each area of learning for each child.

In blue nursery the staff carried reporter style spiral bound notebooks, or had them near at hand, and jotted notes in these. On more than one occasion I saw staff refer to these notebooks when completing daily record sheets and on one occasion I witnessed Harriet going through the pages of her notebook when updating developmental checklists for her key children (*field notes, blue, November*).

In both settings the digital camera was also used to capture evidence of children’s achievements during activities or the finished products – particularly models built with construction kits before they were broken up and put away. Photographs were also taken during special events (e.g. a sports afternoon in blue setting, in June) and visits to places of interest (e.g. a trip to the local mosque from green setting, in May). It was only with prompting from me, however (*e.g. Kel, green, interview 2*) that practitioners acknowledged that their photographs were a form of observation. I did not see photographs being taken in the reception class.

Observation notes, charted in relation to a particular activity, were most common within the school reception class (red setting). Hollie’s role within the class was

often to lead small group work related to literacy or numeracy, or to supervise an art or craft activity. When engaged with these activities, she used a printed class list on which she recorded which children participated (sometimes the activities were freely chosen and sometimes all the children in the class were required to take turns to complete the task) and made notes on their attainment. For example, one morning an activity at the craft table involved cutting out painted pictures of fruits and vegetables, for a harvest festival display and Hollie made notes on how easily each child could cut with scissors and recorded who had difficulty (*field notes, October*).

Hollie also collected observations on stick-it notes during children's free play times. On one occasion she told me: *"I'm going to do some labels this afternoon. I'll try to get some knowledge and understanding of the world ones for the girls, and creative for the boys, because they're harder to get"* (*from field notes, red, February*). She also referred to this when interviewed:

"What we're doing at the moment is just seeing if you see a girl doing like a boyish thing, stereotypical thing, and the other way round then note that on a label. Most of the children have a certain area that they play in now and if you see them going somewhere that they don't normally go into like, for instance (name) was over there doing the elephant the other day, painting which is something he never really does so you put that down. And we're looking at areas like the girls doing knowledge and understanding things - it's really just writing things down that are different."(*red, interview 2*).

In all three settings, recording written observations was rarely a priority and some days passed without my seeing written observations of any kind being noted. There did not appear to be any guidance or expectation of how many observations should be carried out in any of the settings; this seemed to be a judgement which, in the day nurseries, was left to the key worker who was completing the portfolio and, in the Reception class, by whether there was sufficient evidence to support assessments made for the Foundation Stage Profile.

Tracking

The theme of “tracking” refers to the use of observation for maintaining records of children’s progress. The evidence collected, through the methods just described, was mapped onto a checklist kept for each child. In the day nurseries maintaining these documents was the responsibility of the key person allocated to each child, whilst in the school reception class the teacher took responsibility for the record keeping.

There was an expectation in both the day nurseries that developmental checklists were maintained and updated regularly. The expectation was that this should be done every three months in green setting and every six weeks in blue setting²⁸. Charlie (*blue, interview 1*), however, described this as a monthly task: “We do tick charts in here. It’s more of a tick chart of the babies’ development. We do them monthly.” Whereas Diane (*blue, interview 1*) describes it as an ongoing process: “*We’ve got a tick chart you fill in when you feel like a child can do something you write the date they can do it.*” Stella (*blue, interview 1*) outlines the system in more detail, explaining how the anecdotal observations, as described above, map onto the progress checklists and how updating the checklists is an ongoing process but also a regular obligation (although she states the timescale as every three to six months rather than six weekly). The way in which particular developmental outcomes dictate what is attended to is also evident from her account:

“The observations we have here, we have tick charts for each of the children. So you might have something like, say if they’re very young, “is able to express themselves verbally” and you’d tick yes if they were able to do that. We have a tick chart and it covers all the different areas of developmental needs. We have observations where if you notice them doing something you jot it down, you know: “Child A was playing and they were able to say to their friend, ‘Look there’s one two three of us’”. So you tick able to count, knows how to count a group, or practising counting, and that’s ongoing. And then with each key child, say every three to six months you update their tick chart to see how they’re going along. We do have our own key children but

²⁸ Information based upon written policies and explanations from managers, as noted in field notes

obviously if you notice something from someone else's key child you might write down notes and say to the person "oh I've noticed them doing this". Or they might do an activity with them, say colours and say "so and so knows all their colours". Or you could set up an activity and do an observation then."

In green setting the introduction of the Birth to Three Matters framework meant a change from the 0-36 month record which had been in use to a new format, designed by the local authority, which was structured under the headings of the Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002) of 'A Strong Child', 'A Skilful Communicator'; 'A Competent Learner' and 'A Healthy Child'. Kel, Mij and Denise all work together to adapt to this new way of tracking the children's progress. Denise (*green, interview 2*) explains that this is not always straightforward:

"We still do the developmental records checklist every three months and obviously these observations we can use for that but we organize them under the different headings which can be difficult sometimes, now which is this? It could go under that one or that one or sometimes you think it doesn't really go under any of them, you know what and you have to think about it for a minute to decide which one it's going to go under"

There were differences between the tracking in the nurseries and the school reception class. In the nursery settings the portfolios were individual, each note recorded a positive achievement, and comparisons between children were not made. In the school setting the tracking records were compiled within one large, central lever-arch file, observations were noted in relation to the learning outcomes of the Foundation Stage, and within the file children's comparative progress was evident from the use of the colours of the stepping stones (yellow, green and blue) used to code their attainment (*field notes, red, November*). Judgements about ability, based upon observations, were a feature of practice within the school setting. For some literacy and numeracy activities children were allocated to different groups, based on their attainment.

Another difference between nursery and school was the openness of the tracking system. In green nursery the portfolios were kept on open shelves and parents had free access to them. In blue nursery the parents knew where the records were kept and could request to see them; and the child's portfolio was the basis for discussions on the parents' evening. In the school reception class (red setting) the records were kept by the teacher and parents were given verbal reports based on the information (*field notes, red, November*) and a summative report once the Foundation Stage Profile was completed at the end of the year.

Reporting

There are two main foci for reporting. One is providing information for parents:

"Staff are trained to draw out the learning objectives and to record specific learning outcomes so that you have a record of your child's achievement at the end of each nursery day."

(from the brochure for prospective parents – blue nursery)

The other is ensuring that information about children's progress is demonstrable to external inspectors. There is evidence of both these uses of observation, as a means of reporting, in this study.

In green nursery and blue nursery daily record sheets are completed, usually by the child's designated key worker, as information for parents. These are produced for all children under two and for children over two whose parents request it²⁹. In green nursery they are simply termed "day sheets" whilst in blue nursery they are called "*Happy Charts*", The label "Happy Chart" is an interesting one, implying that this is the most acceptable emotion at nursery and perhaps attempting to offer reassurance to parents. It raises questions about what is included on this type of report sheet. "*Could a key person write on a "Happy Chart" that a baby cried for most of the day?*" (My question recorded alongside observation field notes from blue nursery, October).

²⁹ From my field note observations, parents were keen to continue to receive the day sheets if their child did not yet talk and especially during the transition from one room (and key worker) to another when the child was only just over the age of two.

In my field notes (*blue, October*) I recorded “*Harriet completes the Happy Charts - she writes the same for everyone*” and questioned “*Can the ‘Happy Charts’ be termed observations?*” Certainly these charts are based upon observed information, specifically what is eaten and played with and what nappy changes have occurred. Pressure of time on staff means that these mini reports contain only brief information, which is often very general, but they are generally appreciated by parents, who often asked for the day sheet if it was not given to them when they collected the child.

In both day nurseries, reporting to parents is the responsibility of the key worker, in green setting there are lists and pictures displayed on the walls to show which practitioner is the key worker for a particular group of children. In blue nursery the reporting included a parent’s evening, which was a new initiative. Diane (field notes, *blue, November*) told me that three of her key children’s parents had attended and that they were impressed with the records and with what the children had done. In the school setting the parents’ evenings (in November and June) were an opportunity for the parents to speak with the teacher. The first meeting was primarily focused upon how the child was settling in to the Reception class, with an opportunity to ask questions, and the second one was linked with the Open Day when parents had a chance to look at the children’s work, with the child present, and also to speak with the teacher. The formal school report, which contained information about the Foundation Stage Profile results for the child, was sent out in July (after my last visit to red setting, which took place at the end of June).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most observational evidence was collected for children who attended the nursery on a full time basis and this worried staff who were key workers for children who attended part time, or children whose attendance was erratic. They felt that if an Ofsted inspector looked at a file for a child with sporadic, part time attendance they might make a negative judgement about the record keeping

in the nursery as a whole. Green nursery had its first combined³⁰ Ofsted inspection and was pleased to be graded ‘very good’ for education and ‘good’ for care. They told me that the inspector was pleased with the children’s records (*field notes, blue, January*). I noted my own feelings after this visit, which occurred very soon after the inspection: “*I felt more intrusive than usual, as if they’d been scrutinised enough.*”

Within the school system, the method of recording (*see ‘tracking’, above*) was designed to exhibit each child’s attainment in relation to individual progress through the stages of the Foundation Stage curriculum and to enable comparisons between children in the group. At the end of the year this was translated into the Foundation Stage Profile data, which would be used to measure the effectiveness of the school in supporting children to maintain and exceed levels of progress through the National curriculum, as predicted by performance on the FSP.

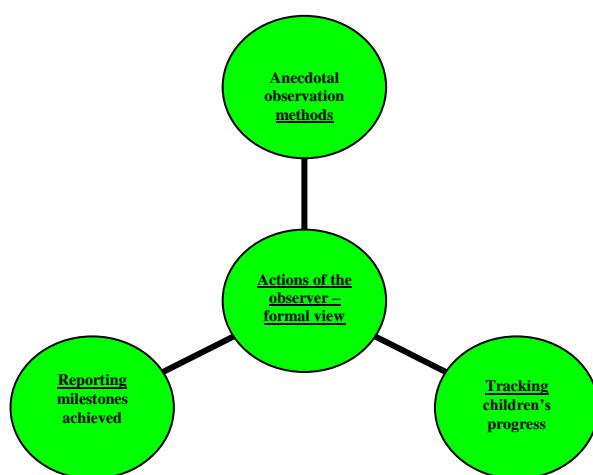


Diagram 7.1 - Summary of uses of child observation – the formal view

Diagram 7.1. sums up the three formal uses of observation: methods of recording; the tracking of developmental progress; and reporting to parents and for Ofsted.

³⁰ Prior to the introduction of national care standards, each local authority was responsible for the inspection of care provision whilst Ofsted inspected provision of nursery education

7.3. Informal uses

The category ‘informal uses’ refers to occasions when observation skills are evident to the observer but no written observations are made and / or the observation is not used for formal purposes. The themes in this category correspond with the informal understandings of observation, as identified in the previous chapter, in that they arise from the daily work of practitioners but are not necessarily part of a more structured scheme of undertaking, recording and reporting observations. Practitioners’ caring attitudes towards the children, children’s families and to colleagues are evident in the ways in which they notice children, support their learning and foster participation in care and learning processes.

Noticing

This theme captures uses of observation when the practitioners are ‘tuned in’ to the children in their care and respond in warm and sensitive ways. Being observant and ‘noticing’ what is going on is a key skill which the practitioners who were observed in this study all possess. This is exhibited throughout every day in early years settings. Even before the children arrive, in blue and green nurseries the morning begins with routine safety checks of the premises and the gardens are checked for hazards before children go out; and there is a keen awareness of children’s health and safety exhibited at all times.

It is in relationships with the children, though, that the ‘noticing’ is most in evidence. The following are a few, typical examples of practitioners’ responses to children’s distress: Diane encourages a child, who is looking miserable during the pre-lunch singing session, to move closer to her and choose the next song (*field notes, blue, October*). Stella notices that Ibrahim is nervous of the life sized toy snake and reassures him quietly, acknowledging his fear (*field notes, blue, November*). Saira supports Charlotte when she’s new at nursery, helping her to fend off unwanted welcoming cuddles from other children and join in the home corner play on her own terms (*field notes, green, January*). Hollie speaks gently to Rachel,

who has come into the classroom crying, and persuades her to explain what the matter is (*field notes, red, May*).

Kel is very warm and responsive to the babies and toddlers in her care and there are numerous instances in which she ‘notices’ the children. The relationship that she creates with Sophie is typical, characterised by engagement and humour:

“Kel sees Sophie, aged eighteen months, reaching up to place a toy car in a garage which is on top of a storage unit. In response to Sophie’s one word, “car”, Kel lifts the garage down onto the floor and says in response “Sophie is playing with the car!” Just a little later, Sophie hands Kel a toy car, again saying “car”. This time Kel repeats the word, takes the car and hides it behind her back. Kel then stretches out her arms towards Sophie with closed fists saying “Where’s it gone?” Sophie laughs and points at Kel’s right hand and says “That!” When Kel opens her hand to reveal the car Sophie takes it and they both smile.”

Kels’ observant work is also illustrated in the following example, where she supports two toddlers in noticing the crawling baby yet does not stop their play with the paper, even though the way that they use it is very different from what the adults originally intended:

“Jesse picks up a large piece of A1 sized sugar paper from the drawing area and waves it, then begins to walk around waving the piece of paper (which is very large for him to manage). Kel tells him to be careful and not to step on Jem, who is laying on the floor nearby. Owyn watches and smiles and when Jesse puts the paper down he takes it and waves it, just as Jesse was doing. Kel watches them carefully, now warning Owyn not to step on Jem! Moments later Kel helps Jesse pick up the large felt pens which have fallen on the floor. Owyn joins in and Kel encourages him to match the pens and the lids. As he does this, Kel hands the torn paper to Jesse and asks him to take it and put it in the bin. Kel then turns and says “Hi!” to Jem who has managed to crawl across the room and she smiles at him, aware of this achievement.”

(both examples transcribed from field notes, blue, June)

There are sometimes children who go unnoticed within the busy environments, friction between children which is undetected (or perhaps purposefully overlooked as part of a strategy of not attending to negative behaviour?) and some apparently insensitive responses, for example, when a baby was left sitting, crying, in a high chair whilst another baby was fed this, however, was uncommon, in my observations. It was more typical to see a carer like Charlie, *“sitting on the floor with her arms and lap full of babies and managing to comfort them all”* (field notes, blue, October)

Support for learning

The curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) requires that observation of children be used as the basis for curriculum planning. This was not a part of the formal practice in any of the three settings where, in all cases, the curriculum documents were the starting point for devising long term and weekly plans for children’s activities. There were, however, ways in which informal observant practice supported learning, notably: working alongside children to help them achieve more than they could do independently; adapting weekly planning, specifically for key children; and the displaying of children’s work and photographs, which leads to reflection upon learning.

In all three field work settings much fostering of learning was evident in day to day interactions, where practitioners observe what a child is doing and offer the immediate support necessary to promote their achievement of a goal. The following (transcribed from field notes, green, March) provides a specific example:

“Saira (in the garden of green nursery) supervises four-year-old Saffron on a wooden climbing wall. Saffron can easily climb on and off the bottom part of this structure but today seems determined to go higher. Saira stands very close by, making suggestions about where she should place her hands and feet. As Saffron gets to the top of the wall she asks Saira to hold her, which she does, reaching out and supporting her by holding beneath the armpits, in a position where she could be caught if she fell. Saira tightens her grip and

makes more suggestions about where Saffron should move her arms and legs in order to climb right over the top. Saffron appears nervous and clings on very tightly, whilst Saira continues holding, encouraging and reassuring her. This play continues with Saira watching Saffron's progress, gradually offering less help until Saffron is able to climb up, over and down this play equipment by herself, which she does, several times!

There are numerous other instances, including: Lily and Denise take a small group of two and three year old children to the library and support them in paying attention to the 'Elmer' elephant story that the children's librarian reads, though sitting them on their laps when needed and whispering encouragement and prompts (*field notes, green, October*). In blue nursery, Diane plays a sound lotto game with a group of three years olds giving small clues where needed to help the children identify the noises or notice whether they have the corresponding picture on their card (*field notes, November*). Hollie organises a printing activity in which the children create designs by covering marbles in paint and rolling them on drawing paper placed in the base of a cardboard tray. The children come to do the activity individually or in pairs and Hollie responds either by allowing the children to complete the activity independently or, when needed, structures the task step-by-step, demonstrating or reminding children of the technique (*field notes, red, April*).

This support does not just occur in activities but is also evident in self care routines where children are gradually supported towards independence. This is very noticeable at the under-twos' lunch table, in green nursery, where feeding the children is balanced with gradually encouraging them feed themselves. At lunchtime in blue nursery, too, Stella (*field notes, November*) decides to allow the children to pour their own drinks and accurately watches and judges their competence and steps in when needed offering sufficient help so the water is not spilled.

There were no formal structures apparent in any of the settings for observations of individual children to feed directly into curriculum planning. Although it is not

constructed on the basis of child observations, in its implementation the planning is personalised according to the practitioners' knowledge of the children. Mij's comment (*green, interview 2*) shows how practitioners' knowledge of children mediates the written weekly play plan: *"because we write it down so simply, say 'puzzles', anyone could just get any old puzzles out but because we're going to be there then we take the puzzles out that we think our children will use."* Saira (*green interview 1*) similarly, explains how she would tailor programmed activities to encourage her key children to participate: *"With the weekly planning you see what the child's doing on Monday and Tuesday and then by Wednesday you think of an activity from what's going on and incorporate it and by Thursday or Friday you can see how they do it, obviously if they don't want to do it you wouldn't force them but you'd try to get them to do it."*

Curriculum planning, although focused upon covering the different areas of learning and outcomes of the written curriculum, also relies upon general knowledge of the children, acquired through observant day-to-day practice. In Green nursery, for example, I observed Saira working on weekly planning for the 'over twos' with another member of staff. The plan was due to be implemented in two weeks' time and the topic ('sounds') and the specific outcomes for each area of learning (e.g. a focus upon 'behaviour and self-control' within 'Personal, Social and Emotional Development') were already set out in the long term plan. In their discussion of possible activities and their purposes they suggest playing musical games, including musical chairs, and suggest elements that specific children will enjoy and benefit from, for example that Thomas (who is interested in how things work) could take responsibility for turning the music player on and off (*field notes, green, April*).

Displays also provided ways in which the learning of individuals and groups of children was captured and could be revisited and extended upon. For example, when growing plants, pictures of the early stages of the process (children holding prepared pots and planting different seeds) provided reminders of the progress of the project as the seeds grew (*field notes, red, April*). Children were keen to talk about

experiences of their activities, displayed on tables and the walls, which also enabled visitors (including myself) and parents to understand and participate in discussions of the learning activities.

Participation

This final theme identifies uses of observation which go beyond the individual practitioner observing the child and involves the wider community with the processes of care and learning. These uses are characterised by respect for children and their families and highlight possibilities for sharing, wider contribution and the involvement of others in processes of observation and documentation.

Although key workers take individual responsibility for maintaining children's records, all staff work in teams. Reception class teacher Janet and teaching assistant Hollie are a pair whilst the others all work in groups of at least three people who share responsibility for children of a particular age. Joint discussions of children and their achievements are commonplace in all three settings. If a child has difficulties, too, this is debated amongst staff. One example of this type of participatory talk concerned four year old Daniel's use of the computer (*field notes, green, February*). All the staff in the 'over twos' room' observed his preference for playing on the computer but they had different opinions about whether it was something that should be encouraged, which led to a wider ranging discussion. Whilst Saira thought that his number skills could be developed through introducing new software, and Lily pointed out that younger children learned ICT skills through watching Daniel and playing alongside him, other staff felt that he dominated the computer area and should experience a wider range of activities and develop other skills. In weekly staff meetings, too, the key workers have an opportunity to raise any concerns about children's progress and staff offer different perspectives and opinions based upon their own formal and informal observations (*field notes, green, all year*).

A similar collaborative, professional attitude is maintained towards students, who are on work placement in green nursery (*field notes, May*). As a part of their course,

they have to complete written observations of the children and both Mij and Kel discuss these with them. Kel talks to one of the students who is uncertain about how she can record Jem's language development, and later in the day invites the student to observe and record as she interacts with him, encouraging him to vocalize. The other student gives Mij a copy of her observation of Jem's motor skills and Mij thanks her, looks at it and recognizes its contribution, promising to include the observation in Jem's record folder. There is also discussion of the children's growth, when the student comments that Jem couldn't crawl last week but now he can, Mij carefully describes the progress that Jem has made during the week.

Parents and family members, too, have the opportunity to share ideas about their children in both day nursery settings. Information is exchanged at the beginning and ends of nursery days, observed achievements and amusing incidents are reported and any worrying behaviour discussed. An example, witnessed in blue nursery (*field notes, November*) was discussions between the key worker (Harriet) the special needs coordinator of the nursery and an anxious grandmother of two year old twins about possible solutions to the challenge of them biting and hitting other children.

Children³¹ do not participate formally in the process of record keeping but informal practice shows potential for their wider involvement. The older children in green nursery are aware of their portfolio folders and, from time-to-time, ask for them to be taken down so that they can see the work and picture. In my field notes (*transcribed from green, January*) I recorded:

"Shannon pointed to her record folder on the shelf and said to me "That's my name. Get it down. It's got my picture on it!" I got it down and we looked at it together. She was especially interested in the photographs and her 'register'³² There were two loose pictures in the file and she wanted to stick them in. As her key worker was out at lunch I suggested, instead, that she

³¹ My research focussed upon the work of the practitioners and did not involve collecting direct observations of children, however, permission from Shannon's key worker and her Grandmother (who is her main carer) was given for including and reporting this particular observation

³² This was her term for the ticked checklist – equating it with the nursery attendance register, which she was also interested in (and liked to make copies of and tick children off in her imaginative play)

could draw a picture and she drew herself with a face, including eyebrows, legs and stick arms, which she called 'hands' she went to get a hole punch and enjoyed adding her picture, and my written notes to her folder.”

Whilst this is my own participant observation of Shannon, I did also observe other children, in green setting, looking at their portfolios with their key workers, especially when new photographs or examples of drawing were added.

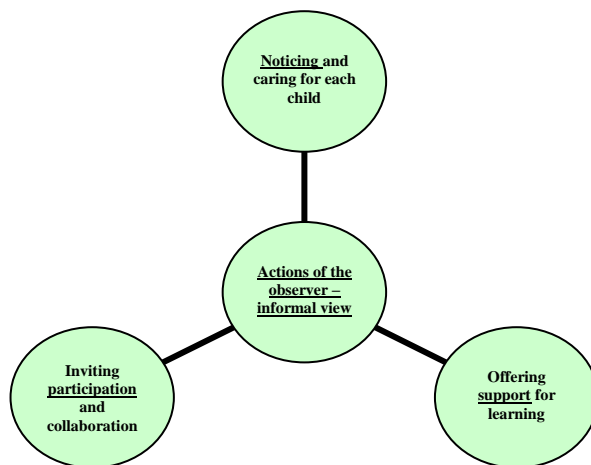


Diagram 7.2 - Summary of uses of child observation – the informal view

Diagram 7.1. sums up the three informal uses of observation: observant noticing of children and responding to them; providing immediate support for learning when it was observed to be needed; and using informal observations as the basis for participation and collaborative work with children and their families.

7.4. Summary

Overall, this analysis of data from my participant observations (recorded as field notes) and interviews provides insights to answer the second part of the research question: ‘How do early years practitioners use child observation?’ The findings indicate that practitioners engage in formal uses of observation, using mainly brief anecdotal notes to track and report children’s progress and fulfil the requirements laid down in the curriculum guidance documents. Alongside this there is evidence of

highly observant informal practice, which serves to see and support children's emotional and learning needs and to foster participation and community within the nursery environment. In Chapter Ten, these different uses of child observation are examined further, in the light of the established pedagogical uses of observation explored in Chapter Three (above).

Table 7.3. Categories and themes for understandings and uses of observation	
Formal understandings	Formal uses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms • Next steps • Theorists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods • Tracking • Reporting
Informal understandings	Informal uses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach • Basis to work from • Process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing • Support • Participation

Table 7.3 (above) lists the categories and themes from the two analyses of the data (the first looking at early years practitioners' understandings, as presented in Chapter Six; and the second considering uses of observation, as described here). This presents the formal and informal understandings and uses of child observation identified in the study. Diagram 7.3. (below) shows this in a slightly different form, which illustrates the correspondences between the different understandings and uses.

Formal understandings foreground developmental milestones, or age related 'norms', as taught on initial training courses and presented in the curriculum guidance as desirable learning outcomes. This knowledge equips practitioners for the formal uses of observation in the tasks of recording, tracking and reporting children's progress in different areas of learning. The understanding of the practitioner's role in identifying and promoting the 'next steps' of development is incorporated in the target setting aspect of tracking progress. Whilst little explicit

reference is made to ‘named theorists’, ideas from developmental psychology are seen to have a broad, indirect, influence upon the formal and informal practices within the early years settings and the ways in which children are observed. Informal understandings reflect subjective ways of seeing and relating to the children and these translate into a range of uses of observation to care for and support children and their families. All of the early years practitioners’ understandings and uses of observation occur within, and are influenced by, the specific contexts of the settings in which they work. It is experiences of observation during the first year in the work place that is the focus for the final part of the analysis, in the next chapter.

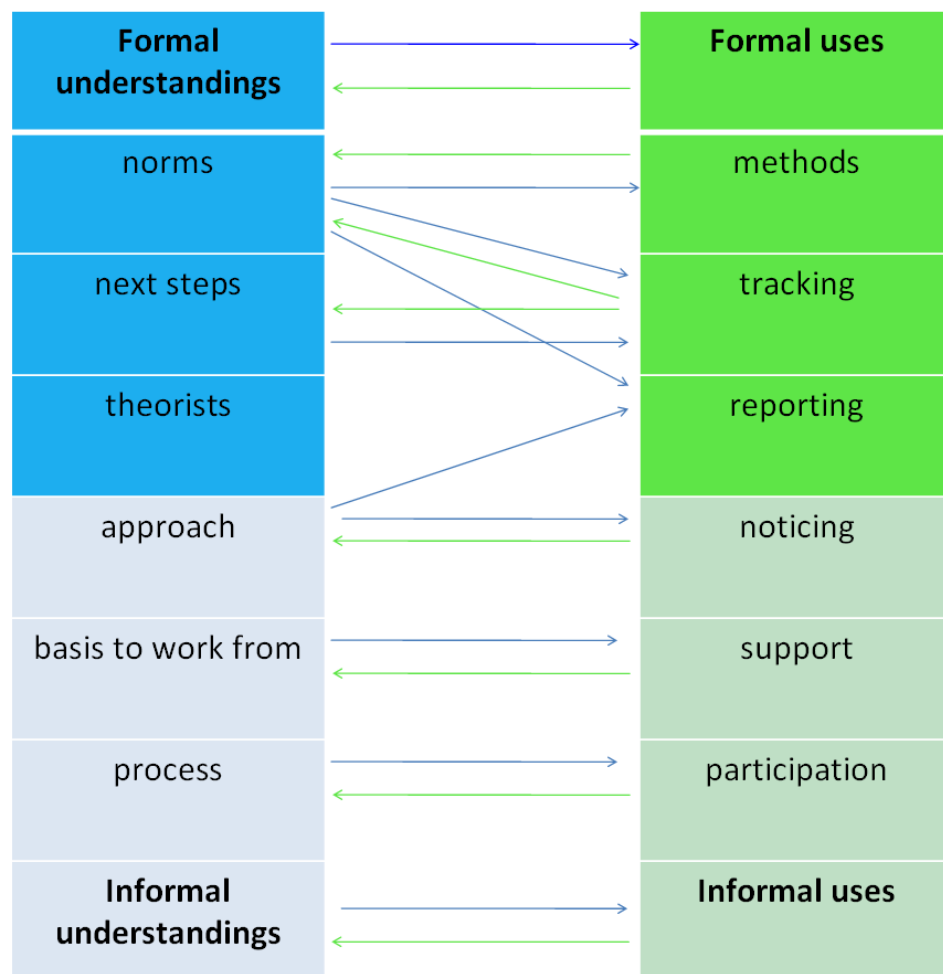


Diagram 7.3 Relationships between formal and informal understandings and uses of observation

Chapter Eight - The first year of work in early childhood settings

“The down side was finding my role in the class, it’s quite hard at first. Sarah [an experienced teaching assistant] knows me quite well and she came and found me and helped with the things I wasn’t sure about. There’s support if you listen to the advice around you. The other TAs have experience and if you’re doing an activity you can see the ways they’re doing it but you can still do it your way. It’s team spirited in this school.”

(Hollie, red, interview 3)

8.1 Introduction

Having offered an analysis of practitioners’ understandings and uses of child observation, this final part of the presentation of findings puts the themes and categories identified above (in Chapters Six and Seven) into the context of the work environments in which the research took place. In this chapter the participants’ experiences during their first year of work in early childhood settings are considered, in relation to factors which enabled and constrained their understandings and uses of child observation.

In Chapter Six, the analysis began with consideration of data from interviews, corroborated by information from observations of workplace practice, in order to identify participants’ understandings of child observation. For Chapter Seven, the process was reversed and the examination and identification of the ways in which observation was used started with observation data, from field notes, and was then compared with the ways in which practitioners spoke about their uses of observation in interviews. Here both sources of data are drawn upon together and the analysis moves between these two sources in order to identify and examine factors which influence observation as an aspect of work in early years settings.

The first part of the chapter draws primarily upon observational field notes in order to present a descriptive account of the work settings, to enable the reader to envisage the environments in which the observation work occurred. This forms a basis for the

remainder of the chapter which, like the preceding chapters in this section, offers a thematic analysis. During the process of initial coding of interview data, in NVivo2, themes were identified which related to experiences of work. Here these are categorised according to the workplace environment, focussing upon features within the work settings, although some external constraints are also identified. Alongside this, the personal qualities and development of the newly qualified practitioners are considered, in relation to their child observation practice.

As in Chapters Six and Seven (above) two main categories each with three subcategories, or themes, are identified. Whereas ‘formal and ‘informal’ were the main categories for both understandings and uses of observation, in this part of the analysis the main categories are labelled ‘institution’ and ‘individual’. The themes ‘responsibilities’ and ‘relationships’ are common to both main categories (‘institution’ and ‘individual’) but are analysed from the two perspectives. Thus, the structure of this chapter is: a descriptive account of the work settings; an introduction to the ‘institutions’ category and an explanation with examples of the main theme of ‘workplace variables’. This is followed by featuring some of the participants; and then introducing the ‘individuals’ category and explaining and exemplifying the key theme of ‘personal qualities’. The themes of responsibilities and relationships are then discussed in relation to both the institutional context and the individuals’ experience. The chapter ends by presenting and discussing an illustration (diagram 8.1. below) in which the findings from all three parts of the data analysis are represented holistically.

8.2. The work places

In the spirit of a case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998), this first part of the analysis of experiences during the first year of work and the impact of the workplaces upon the observation tasks begins with a detailed description of each the early years settings in which this study was carried out (derived from my field notes). The purpose of this is to enable the reader to understand and appreciate the

contexts in which the child observation work was undertaken and to relate this to their own experiences of early childhood settings.

Red – Local Authority Nursery and Infant School

This setting is a sought after and oversubscribed school, on the outskirts of an outer London town. The children wear smart red uniforms. The catchment area is of terraced and semi-detached housing, mostly dating from the 1930s, which is predominantly privately owned. The Infant School is large, recently extended using temporary mobile classrooms, with four classes of thirty children in each of three year groups. The classrooms and the school hall are off long corridors which are newly decorated, by a community group, in pastel colours. The school is attractive and appears well resourced with plenty of modern storage units housing a wide range of equipment. The sixty place nursery is in a separate building from the rest of the school. The nursery and reception classes share an outdoor playground. This is an impressive space with a large tarmac area painted with roads, a storage shed for sit and ride vehicles and other equipment, playhouses, a garden with flowers and seats, and a grassed area.

When I first met with Hollie (the newly qualified practitioner in this setting) and Janet (the class teacher and Foundation Stage co-ordinator) in one of the reception classrooms, they were preparing for the children who would start school the following week. Janet was sorting folders whilst Hollie was sponge painting a brick wall to decorate part of the home corner area. Their reception classroom is large and light with large windows along two sides of the room. The room is divided into areas with art equipment near the storage cupboard and sink, a home corner, and floor space for construction play. Tables and chairs occupy the centre of the room and in another corner, near the door is a large mat. There are book racks here and a low comfortable chair. Just outside the classroom is a shared resource area with a large number of storage boxes, all clearly labelled, holding different construction sets, small world toys such as farm, park and garage and themed socio-dramatic play equipment.

On my first visit, Hollie took me out with her to help supervise playtime for the Year One and Year Two pupils, and I enjoyed the stress free beginning of term atmosphere with the teacher on playground duty giving the children a few minutes extra playtime in the September sunshine. On each subsequent visit to red setting, the classroom routines felt very familiar to me, as a former reception class teacher, with days running to a timetable punctuated by pre-set snack times and whole school assemblies, playtimes and lunchtimes. Janet and Hollie worked together, with the thirty children, engaging them in a variety of tasks linked with the Foundation Stage curriculum. The days involved short periods of time spent as a whole class, sitting on the carpet, participating in teacher-led activities (usually at the beginning and end of each morning and afternoon) and longer periods of time engaging in freely chosen play activities and small group work led by staff. The routine changed for special occasions, which included: an African drumming workshop, offered to each year group in turn; a performance by the children in Year 2 of songs for a music festival; and, near the end of the summer term, outdoor rehearsals of country dancing in preparation for the school open day.

Within this context, child observation was a main tool for making baseline assessments of the children, when they entered the class from the nursery unit, and for making judgements for the Foundation Stage Profile reports at the end of the year. This observational assessment took two main forms. The first was undertaken during set tasks and the adult recorded outcomes for each child who participated in the activity. For example, in a phonics matching game, which letters a child could link with corresponding sounds were noted. The second approach was informal noting of evidence of children having met learning goals, jotted on stick-it notes.

Blue – private day nursery, part of a small nursery chain

Blue nursery is in an apparently affluent rural location, surrounded by fields and parks. The nursery has a large car park, to allow parents to park and commute from the nearby station, and it is surrounded by a high, imposing security fence. The nursery itself is housed in a large, purpose built, dark brown barn-like building. Near

the entrance door is a newly planted garden and behind the nursery an outdoor play area with safety surfacing and playground equipment. The small entrance is an uncluttered area, with an easy chair and flowers. A neat parent notice board displays some policies and procedures and information about child health. Another less formal notice board has information about local businesses for children such as entertainers, cake decorating and clothes parties. There is a door to the tidy and well organised main office.

On my first visit, after a short wait in the small first floor staff room, I was given a guided tour. The nursery is large and can accommodate 103 children. It is arranged over three floors and divided into several medium sized rooms with pairs of adjoining rooms each catering for different age groups, from babies to four year olds. Each room has a carpeted area, some large equipment, such as sand or water trays, shelves of storage boxes with smaller toys, tables and chairs and a sink unit. Nappy changing and toilet areas are shared, with access from each of two rooms. The children could easily go from one room to the other through these shared areas but they do not seem to do so. In each room there is a group of about a dozen children with about three members of staff³³. The children spend the day in their rooms apart from a scheduled visit to the garden, taken in turns and at varying times on different days. From most rooms, the children have to be taken down the stairs to access this outdoor provision (the oldest children are based on the top floor). The staff collect children's meals from the central kitchen and take them back to the rooms and, after lunch, beds are set out in the rooms so that the younger children can sleep. The nursery is bright, colourful and well equipped. The staff, who are mostly young women, and the children seem busy and in every room there is a happy and positive atmosphere. Children's art work is on display and on the large wall by the main stairs is a large exhibition of colourful photographs of the children engaged in a variety of nursery activities and experiences. At the bottom of the main stairs there is a notice board with photographs of all the staff with their names, this includes

³³ Ratios were maintained according to statutory requirements, i.e. one adult to three children under two; one adult to four two year olds and one adult to eight three and four year olds. Some staff moved rooms at various times of the day to maintain this cover during breaks.

Charlie, Diane, Emma, Harriet and Stella, the five people who had recently completed their level three qualifications who participated in this study (see Chapter Five, above).

Each of the rooms ran separately, like mini nursery groups, and on each of my visits I based myself in one room for the day and then visited participants in the other rooms. Observations of different kinds were completed including daily record sheets for each of the youngest ones and a checklist style profile, updated from notes or from the practitioners' memory.

Green setting – not for profit day nursery

Green setting shares its premises with a children's discovery centre and the entrance is via an exciting story garden with several large wooden play structures including a dragon slide, an alphabet climbing wall, a car and a pirate ship. There is attractive planting, including a willow tree tunnel. Staff, children, families and visitors enter through this garden, climb some concrete steps³⁴, and are welcomed into a reception area that also serves as a pram store, cloakroom and office. A glass partition separates this foyer from the rest of the nursery. A few children come to look through the glass door to see who has arrived. By the pram store there is a parent notice board with posters and information. There is also information, for parents and visitors, stuck to the glass partition including weekly menus and activity plans.

This nursery occupies the ground floor of a converted Victorian warehouse building. It is a large open plan space with brightly painted yellow walls and large notice boards displaying children's work. In the main room children up to twenty four children, aged two to four, play. There are activities on tables, including play-dough and building bricks; there is a train track on a mat on the floor; and there are also sand and water trays, painting easels and a play house area. At lunch time and tea time the furniture is rearranged and all the children eat their meals here, off this room there is a small kitchen where snacks are prepared and meals (supplied by an

³⁴ There is also a slope for pram / wheelchair access

outside catering company) are reheated. There is also a utility room with laundry facilities. In the centre of the nursery is an oval shaped quiet room with red and orange walls and portholes for windows. To one side of this is a nappy changing room and a bathroom area with toilets, sinks and another nappy changing table. Either side of the quiet room are painted wooden gates which lead into a large carpeted area, with comfortable settees and a row of cots, referred to as the baby room, where up to twelve children under two are cared for. After lunch this space is also used as a sleep and rest area for all the younger children.

In contrast with the larger blue nursery, there is communication between the two rooms, shared mealtimes and movement of staff and children between the two main areas. At tea times birthdays of children and staff members are celebrated, with songs and cake and at Christmas everybody joined together for a party and, in the summer, a picnic. As in blue nursery, daily report sheets are completed and, like red setting, during play activities evidence is noted on stick-it notes or labels to record achievements in relation to progress in different areas of learning. There is a built in book shelf in the main room where folders containing profiles of every child are kept. These include checklists (development charts for younger children and Foundation Stage records for those over three years), the brief observations on sticky labels as supporting evidence, and examples of work (e.g. digital photographs, and the child's drawings).

8.3. The institutions - workplace variables

The categories described in this chapter are, in some ways, explanatory. They provide a background to the formal and informal ways of understanding and using observations (identified and discussed above in Chapters Six and Seven) and provide some insights as to why the different approaches are employed. The interplay between individuals, their work environment, and the tasks that they are required to complete is complex and dynamic. Expressed simply, however, it appears that external and internal requirements, within the workplace promote formal methods of

observing whilst informal approaches arise from practitioners' attitudes and responses to individual children.

From the three different settings, some common themes emerged when talking about the challenges of work. In interviews time, and particularly the lack of it, was a recurring theme, as were overall workload and the challenge of paperwork. These themes were also evident in content analysis of field notes. As they are very closely linked, three themes from the initial NVivo coding (time, paperwork, and scrutiny – referring primarily to concerns about Ofsted) are combined here under the single heading 'workplace variables'. Added to these is the related theme of workload, which was identified from the analysis of fieldnotes.

My participant observations, in all three of the settings, were that there was very limited time available for formal observation work. Hollie, in red setting, had to complete observational assessments while she led activities (usually creative tasks, handwriting, and work with literacy and numeracy groups). She was given time, while the children were engaged in free play, to compile evidence for Foundation Stage Profiles. Janet, her mentor, praises her ability to be flexible in looking for evidence of different outcomes and recording them efficiently:

“She can be looking for personal and social development but if there's something else going on, for example creative, when she was observing play with planks and boxes in the sand, she will adapt what she's looking for.”

(Janet, red, interview 3)

The younger children in the nursery settings were less able to play independently for sustained periods of time so, although adult to child ratios were more generous, the task of completing written observations without interruption was more challenging. As Mij (*blue, interview 2*) says: *“it is hard to write anything down, even quickly, because you're around with all the children”* Saira (*blue, interview 1*) further regretted the lack of opportunity to take time to observe:

“In some ways I’m kind of disappointed that the observations are not that long anyway, I find they should have been quite a bit longer. Maybe if we were given like an hour or something to do it in because if you observe a child for a few minutes you can’t really tell what’s happening you need quite a while focusing on that child, right now we need to do them for longer.”

In addition to the challenge of finding time to make observation notes, in the day nursery settings, time also has to be found to update children’s records. In green nursery, a limited amount of time each week is allocated to each member of staff:

“We have an hour a week for writing up so that’s a help because throughout the week I’m just putting observations into my wallet and at the end of it I check it for each child’s name and then put it in order, get it out and sort it all out, it’s very good we’ve got the hour otherwise I don’t think I’d be able to keep them in order. You want to see all the progress being made.”

(Saira, interview 1)

I observed, however, that this time was not protected if there were other pressures on staff numbers (such as another member of staff attending a training course or having to attend a meeting)³⁵. Kel admitted to taking her paperwork home in the evenings and at weekends, in order to find the time and space to complete it:

“I find it easier like that, because when I’m at home there’s a quiet atmosphere. Here you can’t really concentrate and you end up writing but you know you’ve missed out half the things”

(Green, interview 2)

The situation is similar in blue nursery, Emma (*interview 1*) comments: *“in general every three months we do development charts but you don’t get much of a chance to do it, you only get about two minutes.”* In this setting, those undertaking NVQ Level Three training whilst working were allocated some study time during the nursery week. Once qualified, however, they took on more responsibility; Harriet, for example was promoted to be the room leader for the ‘Seahorses’ (two year olds), but no longer had any non-contact time. She bemoaned the paperwork associated with her job: *“Practical stuff I love but I hate written work. Like, I have got patience*

³⁵ From field notes, green, Nov.

with children but I hate it when I've got written stuff, even the happy charts.” (Blue, interview 1). Overall, in both nurseries there were times, especially when new children were settling in and needed constant attention, when schedules were “very busy” and “hectic”³⁶ leaving very little time to document any observations.

Generally, the school setting was observed to be well resourced and generously staffed and the length of the day was relatively short, with children leaving at 3.15 p.m. and Hollie able to go home soon afterwards. The need to fully fund high operating costs in both nurseries and, in the case of blue setting to also make a profit, whilst meeting all national requirements for children’s daycare and education led to intense demands on staff. As recorded when describing the ‘Reporting’ theme, in Chapter Seven, section two (above), accountability, via Ofsted, was an added source of pressure.

8.4. Personal qualities

Whilst examining evidence for the challenge and support experienced in the workplace, the personal qualities of the practitioners, as they gained confidence and developed a professional identity, were also noted. Here these are discussed, in relation to pen-portraits of three of the practitioners. Whereas the portrayals of the settings (above) were based upon my notes, here the practitioners have responded to an invitation to describe themselves. Mij, Kel and Hollie were the three people, amongst the ten practitioners contributing to the collective case, who responded to a request (following the second semi-structured interview) to write a short description of themselves, and this is the reason for selection. I have commented on each of these self-descriptions and then highlighted some common qualities.

Mij:

My name is Mij. I’m 19, female and Asian. I did the CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education at college and got three A grades. Straight after finishing college I started working. I currently work in a daycare nursery, which has two rooms, one

³⁶ Words repeated by several participants across all interviews – and observed when visiting settings.

for four months to two years and the other room is for two to four years. I work with the four months to two years but I do also help with the over twos. I have four key children that I have to do observations on, to keep a record of their development and set targets. I decided to work at the nursery because as a student I had done my work placement there, so I knew the staff that were already working there and I also knew the routine of the nursery. I decided to start a career in an education environment because when I was in Year 10 at secondary school I had to do two weeks of placement. I was told that the only place available that I could work in was a nursery, so I had to work in the nursery. The two weeks I spent at the nursery was really good. I enjoyed working with little children and I could see myself working with children in the future, so when I had to choose a course I wanted to do in college I chose the CACHE Diploma.

Academically, Mij is a high achiever. Her ‘A grades’ in the CACHE DCE are equivalent to high A’ level passes and are difficult to gain³⁷. Her secondary school seems responsible for guiding her career choice and she expresses enjoyment of her work with children. When she works with the children she is gentle and engaged (see, for example, her play with Jesse and Jean-Paul, cited in Chapter Nine, section two, below, and further analysis in Luff, 2008b). It is unsurprising that Green setting, where she did her final work placement, was keen to employ her. Whilst Mij seems comfortable working as a nursery assistant, in familiar surroundings, the ways in which she reflects upon what she sees and retains an interest in child development theory (see, for example, her response in the ‘named theorists’ theme in Chapter 6, section 3, above) indicate potential for further study.

Kel

I am a 20 year old who works in a nursery in ... (East London). I was 19 when I started my job as an officer in the nursery. In the nursery I work in the baby room, with nine babies, and have two assistants who work alongside with me. I enjoy my

³⁷ In my experience, only about 5% of a cohort achieves these top grades – which reflect top marks in all course work assignments and an examination plus a successful track record of work experience.

job, however, I will also like to study further e.g. go on to management training or do a degree in Early Childhood Studies, I have lots of fun with the children I work with and also enjoy doing the paperwork (observations and planning) when I have the time. To become a nursery officer I had to do a course called CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education, Level Three, I also did CACHE Level Two in Childcare and Education before. This was a certificate course which lasted one year before my diploma course. My diploma was a two year course, which I enjoyed studying very much.

Kel, who works alongside Mij, but on a higher pay grade and with overall responsibility for the running of the baby room, also conveys enjoyment of her work with children. This is highly evident in her daily playful interactions with the babies and young children with whom she works (*see, for examples, Chapter Seven, section three, above and also analysis in Luff 2008b*). Lily (*green, interview 3*) praises Kel and Mij as being: “*very calm with the babies, babies need that calmness. Both Kel and Mij are good and the babies are very aware if they’re not here, it’s very noticeable*”. Kel appears more ambitious than Mij, having already progressed from a Level Two to a Level Three course at college, and has a sense of the possibilities for further progression that are open to her.

Hollie

I’m 19 and work in a mainstream school. I did the CACHE Diploma in childcare at the age of 16. My current job was a placement that I had whilst at college. At the moment I’m very happy in my chosen career and I’m uncertain whether to go on to do a degree or go into the special needs side. I always wanted to work with children even from a young age! My experience at college was excellent. I was fresh out of school and didn’t know anybody at my college which worked out very well for me as my confidence increased no end. I believe my strength with working with children is I can give them a lot of attention but still remain professional. I believe the children can come and talk to me whenever they need to or if they need help and support, I believe they find me very approachable.

Like Mij, Hollie was employed in a setting in which she had completed a successful work placement. This presented some challenges for her, in making the transition between being a student and following instructions and working more autonomously as a teaching assistant³⁸. Like Kel, Hollie is aware of some possibilities for professional development. She articulates her strength as having found a balance between showing affection to the children and maintaining boundaries. This is a quality praised by her mentor: *“The children love her. She’s got the professional side there. You don’t want to make yourself remote but you have to draw the line.”* (Janet, red, interview 3)

Finding pleasure in work with young children is characteristic of all the participants³⁹ and, for many, this has been a longstanding career plan. Students who took the CACHE Diploma also expressed enjoyment of their college courses, although this was not the case for the people who took NVQ qualifications. Based on evidence from interviews and from participant observations, I would characterise all the participants as kind, keen and committed to their work. This is further explored in the themes of responsibility and relationships, below, each of which will be related to both the institution (early years setting) and individuals (newly qualified practitioners). These categories and related themes are summarised here, in table 8.1:

Table 8.1. Workplace experience - two main categories and associated themes	
Institutions	Individuals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural variables • Responsibility • Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal qualities • Responsibility • Relationships

³⁸ This is reflected in interviews 1 and 2 with both Hollie and her mentor, Janet.

³⁹ Evidence from first interviews with participants in all settings

8.5 Responsibility

As a theme relating to institutions, the settings in which the participants worked, ‘responsibility’ describes the tasks and duties assigned to the practitioners and their accountability. For Hollie, as a teaching assistant in a school reception class, the class teacher gradually builds up her expectations throughout the first year. When collecting data for a baseline profile of each child, as they enter the class, Janet asks Hollie to do the mathematics assessments, as the judgements are more objective, and decides that Hollie will tackle the language assessments the following year, having seen Janet complete them. Similarly, Janet praises Hollie for gradually taking more initiative, throughout the year, in planning creative activities for the children. Hollie attended a training course, to support her participation with the Foundation Stage Profile assessments, and reported that realising she was given more responsibility than teaching assistants in other schools made her *“feel quite proud to work here”*⁴⁰.

Similarly, in blue nursery, responsibilities were gradually increased as staff gained experience. The policy was to recruit young, and sometimes unqualified, staff and to support their part time training as they worked. With increasing qualifications came promotion to supervisory roles⁴¹. As Stella (blue, interview 1) says: *“You get more responsibility as they know you, obviously, and I’ve been taught how to do the planning and observations and that.”* Stella also participated in High Scope training at another nursery in the chain, but I was not aware of the other participants attending any professional development courses.

In green nursery, by contrast, Kel is appointed as a room leader and takes responsibility for the under two year olds from her first day of work, supported by Denise and Mij, who are also newly qualified. The fourth member of the baby room staff, however, who has an NVQ Level Two qualification, is an experienced practitioner. There is no formal mentoring and Kel and Mij are themselves given the responsibility of mentoring CACHE Diploma students, on placement from a local

⁴⁰ Red, interview 3

⁴¹ In the case of four of the five participants in this study, as room leaders

college. They do have the opportunity to attend local authority training courses, notably on the Birth to Three Matters framework (DfES, 2002) for which they are expected to lead the implementation of new methods of record keeping (*see, for example, the 'tracking' theme in Chapter Seven, Section Two, above*).

As a theme relating to individuals, from the participants' own perspectives, 'responsibility' describes their sense of obligation to children and families and their conscientious approach to their observation work. All participants, apart from Hollie in the school setting, are allocated key children. They have to maintain records for these children and are also highly aware of their wellbeing and progress (*see, for example, the 'next steps' theme in Chapter Six, Section Two, above*). This level of responsibility is a major change from being a student, which all participants express, for example:

"I think when you're a student you haven't got the responsibilities as well because now you're in charge of the children and recording the children's development so I find that important." (Saira, green, interview 2)

For child care students, observation does not carry any significance beyond completing their course portfolio, one of the focus group participants in the initial exploratory study regretted this saying: *"I wish the class teacher had looked at my observations."* Students never work unsupervised and so they are not accountable for the children's safety, Mij, (green, interview 2) comments on this:

"... because we've got the responsibility now we have to be [observant]. Before there were staff there and we didn't have to but now we're the staff we have to look out and with children you always have to be aware."

8.6. Relationships

The theme of relationships mirrors and mediates that of responsibility. In both the nursery settings the practitioners are given considerable freedom to develop their own practice with little evident mentoring or supervision. In green setting, where the staff work closely together throughout each day, Joan and Lily are very aware of the

newly qualified practitioners' strengths.⁴² In blue setting the oversight of the staff team is less apparent but the manager feels confident to make decisions about allocating promotions to room management.⁴³ Within red setting, Janet's expectations of Hollie are more carefully matched by modelling of processes (for example, completing assessments fairly, for all children within the class, with regard to Foundation Stage Profile benchmarks). Hollie is praised for her skills and responds with increasing confidence in her abilities and pride in the children's achievements: *"I do all the handwriting and they can write their names, joined up, and it's something I've taught them"* (red, interview 3). Janet sums up Hollie's successful first year, thus: *"what it mostly comes down to is the relationships with the staff and the children"* (red, interview 3) and Hollie agrees: *"it's team spirited in this school"* (red, interview 3).

In addition to the formal mentoring relationship with Janet, Hollie also forms strong personal friendships with the other teaching assistants and benefits from their experience and expertise, as illustrated in the quotation chosen to head this chapter. When Hollie first starts work she is lent resources and given advice and, as she gains confidence, reciprocates with ideas for activities.⁴⁴ These close, informal, relationships also feature among the staff teams at the nurseries. These result in mutual support within the workplace and beyond. Some of the young staff at blue nursery share lively social lives, as well as supporting one another in the nursery. In green nursery, the staff team also go out for meals to celebrate special occasions and there are close friendships amongst the practitioners. These are not exclusive, however, and the students who join green setting are welcomed as part of the team.

8.7. A summary of the findings

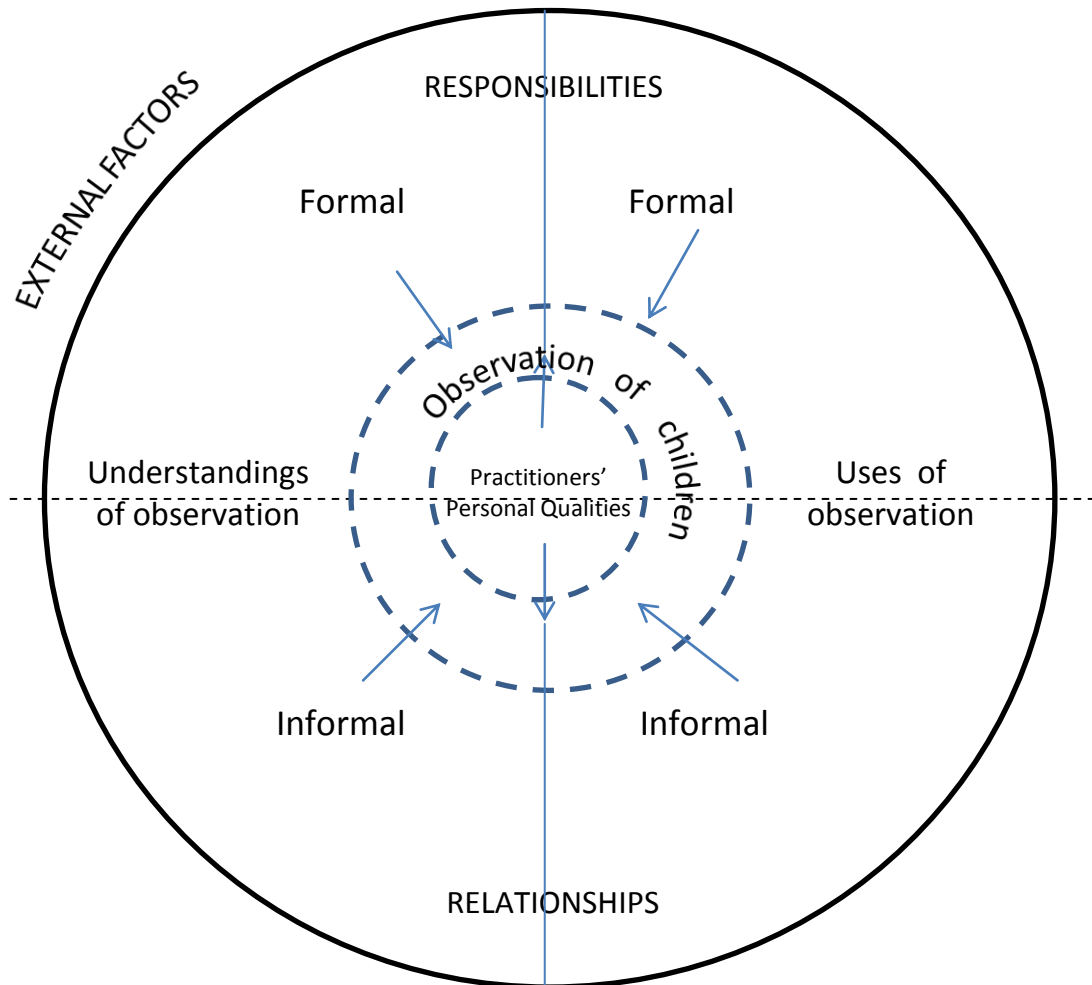
Diagram 8.1. (below) represents the research findings diagrammatically and holistically. The inter-related formal and informal ways of seeing and knowing

⁴² Evidence from interviews and comments during participant observations.

⁴³ Evidence from informal conversation with Tessa, fieldnotes, October

⁴⁴ Evidence from all interviews with Hollie and field notes (participant observation in the staff room)

children are placed within the context of the settings, in which the practitioners work.



8.1. Diagram representing understandings and uses of observation in context

Formal and informal ways of understanding and using child observation are located within the workplace, and also subject to external factors beyond. Conditions within the workplace, particularly workload and the time available to complete observations and the associated paperwork, may affect the nature and quality of child observation. At the centre are the individual practitioners' personal qualities

and characteristics. These, too, are central to the children's experiences and the ways in which they are seen and known. Individual practitioners' attributes may be promoted, through assigning appropriate responsibilities, and fostered, via supportive relationships, within the workplace environment. The extent to which this is achieved may influence the ways in which children are observed, understood, cared for and supported to learn. This is explored in the discussions of the findings which follow, as the next part of the thesis.

Part Five – Discussion of Findings

“Data ... and ideas ... form the two indispensable and correlative factors of all reflective activity.”
(Dewey, 1933/1998: 104)

Having presented and explained the findings from the empirical study, in the next part of this inquiry, these are discussed in the light of the literature reviewed in the second part of this thesis (in Chapters Two, Three and Four above). Whilst the literature review aimed to provide thorough thematic coverage of extant knowledge, in relation to the three elements of the research question, the discussion chapters do introduce some additional texts. These are drawn upon to illuminate findings from the research which, in accordance with the inductive process of conducting qualitative research (Hughes, 2001), were not anticipated at the outset of the study.

In Chapter Nine, next, the understandings underpinning and informing child observation are discussed and practitioners’ thinking about child observation, characterised in terms of their formal and informal ways of knowing and understanding children, is explored. Chapter Ten considers the uses of observation, again using the constructs of formality and informality. The uses of observation seen in practice, within the case study settings, are examined with reference to established pedagogical uses of observation, as reviewed in Chapter Three. Then, in Chapter Eleven, observation is analysed and discussed as an element of early years work, in the context of practitioners’ experience during their first year of employment, and its potential relevance as a tool for professional development is highlighted.

The overall aim of the discussions in the chapters which follow is to explore the significance of the findings from the research, and to develop fuller and deeper insights, in order to answer the research question and offer a contribution to knowledge in the field of early childhood education and care; in Dewey’s terms (*in the quotation above*) to develop new ways of knowing through the combining of data and ideas.

Chapter 9 – Considering understandings of child observation

“The choice is always between one theory and another, even if the theories involved are never clearly spelled out.”

(Mercer, 1995:65)

9.1. Introduction

As Mercer (1995) suggests, in the opening quotation above, educational work is guided by our understandings of who children are and how they learn. In this chapter participants’ ideas about child observation, as expressed in interview and enacted in practice (see Chapter Six), are compared with the dominant understandings from the theoretical perspectives which were reviewed in Chapter Two. Theories which were defined as providing objective accounts of observation are considered in relation to practitioners’ formal understandings, expressed in terms of identifying and promoting children’s development. Informal understandings are initially considered in the light of those theories which were identified with more subjective understandings of child observation. In order to develop a fuller theorisation of these informal understandings, ideas of maternal thinking (Ruddick, 1989), of caring within educational processes (Noddings, 2003, 2005) and caring presence in early childhood care and education (Goodfellow, 2001, 2008), are drawn upon to describe practitioners’ thought.

9.2. Formal understandings of child observation

In Chapter Two, I proposed that approaches to child observation in training and in practice in early years settings are dominated by understandings based upon perspectives from different branches of developmental psychology (David et al, 2003; Raban et al, 2003). Analysis of research data, from interviews with practitioners and their mentors and participant observation of their practice, indicates that a view of the child as developing according to pre-set norms at typical ages and stages is dominant (see Chapter Six above and table 9.1 below). Here the significance of this framing of observation according to developmental norms is discussed, together with practitioners’ understanding of their role in promoting

children's growth and an overall assessment of practitioners' uses of objective theories for informing care and education.

Table 9.1. Summary of practitioners' understandings of child observation in relation to the characteristic features of three objective theoretical approaches:			
Theoretical perspective:	Maturationist biological growth	Constructivist genetic epistemology	Behaviourist learned responses
Major theorists:	Stanley Hall; Gesell	Piaget; Athey	Watson; Skinner
View of the child:	Predisposed to grow, develop and learn	Active with innate desire / capacity to make sense of the world	Responsive to modelling and conditioning
Role of the adult:	Watchful care, ensuring safe / positive conditions for growth. Trusting child to progress	Adapting the environment in order to promote and stimulate intellectual development	Modelling and teaching to shape children's behaviour in desired ways
Purpose of observation:	To understand and to monitor child development	To identify mental processes / schemas – to plan learning opportunities	To monitor a child's behavioural responses to the environment
Observer stance:	Passive, objective, unbiased	Objective, inquiring, constructing knowledge	Objective, recording sensory information, noting responses
Methods of observing children:	Biographical accounts of child's development <i>or</i> Developmental checklists	Identify and record children's dominant schemas – via narrative observation and clinical interview	Checklists record step by step progress towards defined learning targets
Implications for early years care and education:	Routines planned and adapted with sensitivity to the age and stage of development of the children	Focus on children's current interests and how provision can be made to further these	Design / evaluate systematic programmes for the repetition / practice of desirable skills
Other insights:	Use of parents' knowledge of their child's development	Children's behaviours can be intriguing and informative	Observational data highly significant
<i>Lilac shading = judgement based on ideas expressed in interview and seen in practice</i>			
<i>Yellow shading = not articulated in interview but judgement based upon evidence from practice</i>			

Norms

Kwon (2002) notes that the principle of ‘sequential developmentalism’, the idea that children pass through biologically ordered stages of development, is extremely influential in English early years education. This is evident in the chronological ordering of developmental outcomes in the six areas of learning in the Foundation Stage curriculum (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009a) and an emphasis upon “identifying the stages children are at and showing the progress they make over time” (National Strategies, 2009c: 10). As newly qualified practitioners are also schooled in the knowledge of typically occurring child development during training (Beaver et al, 2001; Tassoni et al, 2002; CACHE, 2003, 2009; Bruce and Meggitt, 2006), it is unsurprising that this understanding dominates their observations (see ‘norms’ theme in Chapter Six above). This is an expected area of competence as early years practitioners are required to possess “knowledge of child development, observation and assessment for learning” (National Strategies, 2009e, no page).

In government policy and in practice, this knowledge of child development is seen, very positively, as a tool to support and promote young children’s learning. Whilst demonstrating ability in analysis and evaluation is a criterion for achieving the highest grades in assignments for the CACHE Diploma (CACHE, 2003, 2009), the concept of normative development and its central place in the curriculum is not likely to be critiqued. Unless they engage in further study, practitioners are unlikely to be aware of the academic debate about, and disparagement of, universal understandings of child development as a basis for pedagogy (Burman, 1994, 2001; Morss, 1996, 2003; Dahlberg et al, 1999; Penn, 2008). Lenz Taguchi (2010: 8), for example, argues that basing early childhood education and care upon understandings of stages of development neglects the complexity and diversity of children’s learning and results in strategies designed to: “reduce differences and complexities among children, to bring them to a mastery of basic skills and to allow them to assimilate well into the school system.”

Despite criticism of developmental classifications and norm referenced curriculum objectives, there are prominent experts who are reluctant to dismiss the significance of child development as a basis for work with young children. Katz (1996, 1997) argues for a balanced view in which developmental criteria and behaviourist, constructivist and psychodynamic theories are considered in relation to the wider culture and the aims of a particular early childhood program. In her view, practitioners should neither accept developmental theories unquestioningly nor dismiss this knowledge:

“it is a good idea for practitioners to strive for an optimal balance between sufficient scepticism to be able to continue to learn and sufficient conviction to be able to act with confidence” (Katz, 1997, no page).

Aldwinckle (2001), likewise, argues that the developmental knowledge base for early childhood practice should not be accepted uncritically but can be positively recognised as dynamic and evolving in response to newer theoretical insights. She expresses concern that alternatives to developmentally based curricula, which are less clearly defined, may not offer sufficient support to facilitate the progress of children from different social and cultural backgrounds and might not be accessible to all practitioners. This view, that a developmental curriculum can offer universal opportunity, corresponds with the aspirations of the UK government when legislating for the EYFS as part of a broad political strategy to enhance children's well-being and life chances (HMSO, 2006).

Wood (2008: 109) points out that policy initiatives and national strategies can be “interpreted narrowly to promote a culture of conformity to technical practices, outcomes and standards” or be encompassed within a broader view, contributing positively to children's holistic education and care. Dewey (1933/ 1998: 126) highlights the importance of “standardised meanings” and systems as tools of inquiry. The developmental understanding of children and of observation can be seen in this way, as a useful “known point of reference.” Such shared reference points can provide common understandings, bases upon which practitioners might

converse with one another and discuss interpretations of observations in order to develop knowledge of children and make provision for their education and care.

Next steps

The government rationale for early years practitioners, in England, possessing knowledge of child development is to enable them to judge: “where children are in their learning; how children need to progress; the most effective practice to support children in achieving that progress” (National Strategies, 2009e, no page). In this research the practitioners show a strong belief in their role in identifying next steps in children’s learning and assisting them in making progress (see the description and examples in the ‘next steps’ theme in Chapter Six, above). The practitioners speak of “*helping children onto the next stage*”; going beyond the recording of growth to stimulating and promoting development. This is motivated by achievement of new targets, in relation to the stepped learning outcomes identified in the Foundation Stage curriculum; and the theoretical understandings which may underpin it are not articulated, although Kel does mention Bruner’s (1986:74) concept of “scaffolding”.

Since Rousseau (1762) the idea that education should be based on guiding and developing the natural capabilities of the child has been dominant in early childhood education (Dewey and Dewey, 1915; Nutbrown et al, 2008). This does involve a fostering of development but a gentle one which recognises a slow process of holistic growth which allows for breadth and depth of experience and recognises the “child as being” (Papatheodorou, 2008: 8). Social constructivist theories offer the possibility for more active adult engagement, extending children’s learning within a zone of proximal development. Bronfenbrenner (1995: 614) refers to “Leontiev’s Law” contrasting American psychologists’ attempts to explain how the child “came to be what he is”, with the aims of Vygotskian developmental theory: to discover how the child “can become what he not yet is.”

The example of Saira helping Shanara to use scissors (see Chapter Six above) is a strong example of an adult “assisting performance” within a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988; Dalton and Tharp, 2002:181) or, in Bruner’s (1986) terms, of scaffolding learning. For Vygotsky (1978; 1986) the proximal zone, in which a child’s supported achievement is noted, is a more significant measure than actual skill levels exhibited independently.

‘Next steps’, like the ‘norms’ theme (above), appears to be straightforward but raises questions. As indicated in the presentation of the ecological model (see Chapter One, above) there are complex, systemic relationships between prevalent ideas about children and childhood, government policies, institutions providing care and education, curricula and understandings of the role of early years practitioners (Dahlberg et al, 1999; Moss, 2000; Papatheodorou, 2008; Härkönen, 2009). All of these impact upon the activity of observing the child and identifying next steps. The “child as becoming” (Papatheodorou, 2008: 8) is about much more than the child realising her / his potential, as the future prosperity of the nation is also invested in her / his achievement. This instrumental view is linked to a regime within which observation becomes a technical activity of evidencing skills and identifying next steps to ensure improvement (Moss, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). If this approach dominates then the early years practitioner’s task is to implement a given curriculum and there is little space to consider and draw upon different theoretical possibilities.

Named theorists

In Chapter Two, I explored the role of six key theories in providing methods for child observation, a basis for explanations of what is observed and a rationale for future actions or interventions. Some examples were noted by participants (see the ‘named theorists’ theme in Chapter Six, above) but, on the whole, only superficial knowledge of major theories was articulated. One explanation for this might be that the theories are implicit rather than explicit within the curriculum. Davis (1991) showed that only surface features of Piaget’s theory were retained and recalled by practising teachers, and yet Piagetian principles of child development were

incorporated within their more general understandings (as revealed in answers to broad questions about children's learning). This could also be the case in this research study as understandings of theory were evident in practice (notably ways in which concepts of attachment inform the key person approach in day nurseries).

An alternative explanation for the practitioners' vague responses when asked about theory could be the inadequacy of the theories themselves in informing early childhood care and education. Bereiter (2002) argues that education suffers from teachers' over-reliance upon misleading theories about the mind, which reinforce largely unsuccessful teaching strategies. Härkönen (2003, 2007, 2009), similarly, asserts that the dominance of developmental theories in the latter part of the twentieth century has weakened the position of pedagogical theories and, to some extent, undermined the pedagogical heritage of European early childhood traditions. She further contends that it is pedagogical theories which are needed to provide insights into pedagogical processes. It is for this reason that the influential work of pioneers of early childhood education is acknowledged and analysed as the basis for discussing uses of observation (in Chapter Three).

There is, however, an argument for drawing upon developmental theories to inform observations of children. Dewey (1933/1998: 172) argued for the role of science "in helping to eliminate meanings supplied because of habit, prejudice, the strong momentary preoccupation of excitement and anticipation and the vogue of existing theories." As is shown from Athey's (1991) educational project based upon constructivist theory, discussed in Chapter Two, important insights for pedagogy can be gained from in-depth scientific study of babies and young children. Athey's work and, from a different context, that of the pedagogistas of Reggio Emilia who are trained in developmental psychology and use that lens to interpret and advise upon the documentation of children's projects (Filippini, 1998) demonstrates the importance of gaining in-depth knowledge in order to appreciate the complexity of competing theories of human growth and add wisdom to consideration of what is

observed. In Dewey's terms, such ideas can be part of the material used to reflect upon observations, weigh evidence, solve problems and inform actions.

Theoretical explanations do, however, have limitations. Penn (2008) argues that, unlike some professional groups who can rely almost exclusively upon specialist technical knowledge, those working with children and families must also draw on their own internal resources when making judgements. This accords with studies of nursery nurse training (Penn and McQuail, 1997; Alexander, 2001, 2002; Colley, 2004, 2006) which have all found that relational aspects of caring for children, based upon personal experience and learning from other carers, are more salient than formal training when in the early childhood workplace. It is to understandings drawn from personal experience that this discussion now turns.

9.3. Informal understandings

Practitioners' formal understandings of child observation could be detailed and discussed in the light of biological, behaviourist and constructivist theories from developmental psychology (as outlined above), yet their informal understandings (as described in the second part of Chapter Six, above) are more difficult to explain. In the second part this discussion of understandings of observation I, therefore, begin with the theories outlined in Chapter Two and then move beyond these in order to further illuminate practitioners' informal theories relating to child observation.

Following the mapping of theories in Chapter Two, some of the interview responses and much of the observed practice can be aligned with social constructivist understandings of child care and education (see Table 9.2 below). I have argued elsewhere (Luff, 2009) that practitioners' informal ideas and practices correspond with socio-cultural approaches and indicate the potential for child observation to be a highly effective pedagogical tool (Vygotsky, 1978; Cowie and Carr, 2004). This theoretical explanation is not completely accurate, however, as whilst there is evidence of practitioners valuing shared meaning making and creating collaborative communities, these understandings do not appear to extend to the consideration of

the learning environment and fostering of group processes consistent with a socio-cultural perspective. Kwon (2002) points out that Western child-centred early years education is individualistic, with a focus on children's particular needs and interests and the differences between children; and Papatheodorou (2008) highlights the English Foundation Stage curriculum as representative of a worldview in which the autonomy of the child and a focus upon individual achievement predominate. So, although there is some evidence in interviews and in practice which is consistent with a social constructivist view, there is very little evidence that observations of children are considered in relation to other people and the wider context. In Rogoff's (1998) terms, the only plane of analysis under consideration is the individual and the interpersonal and community or institutional planes are not analysed.

It could also be claimed that the informal understandings of observation include the emotional dimension of work with children. The practitioners' attention to other people, awareness of children's feelings and concern for their well-being are consistent with psychodynamic explanations of caring relationships and the role of the practitioner in containment of anxieties (Elfer 2005; 2007; Elfer and Dearnley, 2007). It is difficult, however, to match practitioners' responses and actions with the characteristics of a psychodynamic approach (see Table 9.2. below). Apart from mention of Bowlby, as a theorist, and some practices which are consistent with understandings of attachment theory (notably efforts to minimise the stress of separation during transitions), this theoretical approach is not acknowledged in interviews or apparent in practice. Elfer (2007) addresses the psychodynamic concept of 'primary task', when considering the work of early years settings, and highlights uncertainties which staff may experience when there is personal or institutional conflict between the tasks of caring for and educating young children. The division between the formal and informal understandings of observation could be viewed in this way, with the formal perspectives representing the government imposed task of implementing curriculum (from birth onwards) and the informal views and actions indicative of practitioners' own prioritising of the task of care.

Table 9.2. Summary of practitioners' understandings of child observation in relation to the characteristic features of three subjective theoretical approaches:			
Theoretical perspective	Psycho-dynamic Analysis of unconscious	Socio-cultural Social psychology	Post-modern Critical theories
Major theorists	Freud Bick	Vygotsky Bruner Rogoff	Various (Foucault, Derrida, Bauman) Burman, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence
View of the child	Complex, vulnerable, rich inner life, unconscious mind	Actively engaged in co-constructing understandings through interactions with experienced others	No single view. Children possess rights and should be considered full, active members of society
Role of the adult	Recognising and analysing emotional responses	To establish shared meanings and promote further development	Support child's development of identity and knowledge
Purpose of observation	To understand and promote healthy emotional development (a key tool in training)	A tool to promote learning and inform educational activity	To stimulate a dialogue about the child / activities. As a means of identifying inequality
Observer stance	Subjective, engaged, seeking understanding of unconscious processes	Subjective, engaged, aiming to capture and understand learning in context	Subjective, critical, reflexive, recognising own viewpoint
Methods of observing children	Detailed close observations, recalled and written after the event.	Participant, recording learning via Learning Stories and portfolios	Variety of approaches and input to document children's lives and progress
Implications for early years care and education	Seeking awareness of psychological and emotional barriers to effective learning	Engaging with others to review and plan learning and teaching strategies	Family / community involvement to consider children's achievements
Other insights	Emotional impact on the observer; observations reviewed in supportive groups	Discussion of observations important for co-construction of knowledge about the child / children	Observer may confront how her own experiences affect and connect with those of a child
<i>Lilac shading = judgement based on ideas expressed in interview and seen in practice</i>			
<i>Yellow shading = not articulated in interview but judgement based upon evidence from practice</i>			

Osgood (2006: 9), writing from a post-structuralist feminist perspective, represents these same tensions slightly differently. She describes a culture of conscientious caring, which characterises the emotional labour of early years practitioners, as “hyper-feminine and therefore unmanageable, unquantifiable and impossible for the state to regulate.” The demands for measurement of professional competence, quality of provision, and outcomes for children, regulate standards and undermine understandings of professionalism based upon emotion, nurturance and care. The lenses of postmodern theory (see Chapter Two and Table 9.2 above) have, thus, been applied to early years practitioners’ work by academics (see also Alexander, 2001, 2002; Colley, 2004, 2006) but early years practitioners themselves do not tend to apply such critical analyses. This theoretical perspective does not appear to inform practitioners’ understandings of child observation, despite offering the possibility of using a range of theories to illuminate understandings of children whilst recognising that these are all open to critique.

Practitioners’ own informal ideas about their work have been described as folk pedagogy (Olsen and Bruner, 1998) or folk models (Carr, 2001) and contrasted with more considered, and fully developed, theoretically based professional knowledge. Attaching this ‘folk’ label to tacit, personal, practice wisdom somewhat undervalues important insights which, in this study, appeared to be highly worthwhile, in terms of acknowledging, caring for and educating young children. Osgood (2006) suggests that an ethic of care and emotional labour shouldn’t be denigrated as less professional than clearly articulated ‘top-down’ curricula, regulations and standards. In seeking to explain the practitioners’ informal understandings of child observation I draw parallels between their observant responsiveness and discussions of relational, connected ways of thinking in other contexts. I, therefore, make reference to feminist moral philosophy (Ruddick, 1989) and educational philosophy (Noddings, 2003, 2005), as well as insights from early childhood research (Goodfellow, 2001, 2008), in order to argue that what is in evidence in practitioners’ informal understandings of observation can be seen as “active attention” (Ruddick, 1989: 50), receptive “engrossment” (Noddings, 2003: 19) or “caring presence”

(Goodfellow, 2008: 18). Whereas in the discussion of formal understandings (above) the three themes drawn from the analysis ('norms', 'next steps' and 'named theories') were used to frame the arguments, here the themes relating to informal understandings ('approaches', 'basis to work from' and 'processes') are considered together, in relation to theories of care.

Practical thinking

Dewey (1929) argues that knowledge and action are related, with thought leading to practical action; and also that meanings are built up through intelligent activity (1933/1998). His argument, that reasoning may derive from action, resonates with the ideas of Ruddick (1989: 9) who poses the question "What is the relation of thinking to life?" Her answer is that thinking emerges from collective, purposeful, human activity and that each human practice, including caring, results in distinctive kinds of perception, conduct and perspectives upon the world (Ruddick, 1989). This view also accords, to some extent, with understandings of knowledge as socially constructed by communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The informal understandings of child observation demonstrated by the participants in this study compare with some elements of 'maternal thinking' described by Ruddick (1989) notably: preservation of the child; fostering the growth of the child (physical, emotional, and intellectual); and the child's social acceptance. Ruddick defines mothering broadly as the work of caring for children, which is not necessarily dependent upon a biological relationship. The practitioners who participated in this research, therefore, do fit Ruddick's (1989: 40) description of "a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life" and so might legitimately be viewed as maternal thinkers who act to fulfil children's needs. Niikko (2004) presents similarities between parents' and kindergarten teachers' views of care and education and identifies common features in their roles. Likewise, here, I shall argue that the informal understandings of child observation expressed by the newly qualified practitioners and enacted in their work display elements of maternal

thinking. In their daily acts of nurturing and watchful alertness to health and safety, they accept and feel responsibility for each child's survival; they understand their role as promoting every child's development; and they implement the routines of the nursery, thus playing an important part in children's socialisation. Key characteristics of early years practitioners' informal understandings of observation of children will be considered in the light of some facets of maternal thinking.

The notion of the preservation of the child is evident in the tasks of safety checking (of the indoor premises and gardens), of cleaning surfaces with disinfectant sprays before and after serving food, and of hygiene and hand-washing procedures; all of which are noticeable throughout each nursery day. In addition there are formal risk assessments prior to outings and any activities considered to be at all hazardous. There are also multiple instances of practitioners seeing children's vulnerability and responding with care. Examples can be found in the descriptions of the 'approaches' and 'basis to work from' themes (in Chapter Six) and also in the 'noticing' theme within the analysis of uses of observation (in Chapter Seven). This protective and attentive understanding is also shown in these small incidents, between Kel and young toddler, Sophie:

"Sophie slips on the slide. She cries a little and rubs her head and arm then goes over to Kel and points to her head. Kel gently rubs Sophie's head and she is immediately reassured and runs back to the slide, laughing. Similarly when Sophie is barefoot, playing with soft foam shapes on the carpet, she comes near to Kel and points to her toes. Kel makes a sympathetic response, rubbing Sophie's toes and saying "Remember you've got no shoes!" to which Sophie nods and says, "Shoes."

(Transcribed from field notes, Green, May)

The observant, protective responses of these early years practitioners reveal appreciation of the importance of the child to the parent and the significance of caring for the child (see, for example: the 'processes' theme within the informal understandings category, in Chapter Six; the 'reporting' and 'participation' themes

in Chapter Seven; and the theme of ‘responsibility’ in Chapter Eight). Hollie’s scanning of the Infant School playground, when she is one of the members of staff on duty outside during the children’s break times displays “a cognitive style which I call scrutinising ... watchful and alert for potential danger” (Ruddick, 1989: 72). The same caring approach is seen within the baby and toddler rooms, where practitioners manage very young children’s play and enable their explorations whilst watching to ensure that they do not injure themselves or one another; teaching strategies for safety and yet, at the same time, giving children freedom.

Even when the participants in this study are tired, feeling unwell or overwhelmed with the demands of the workplace they adopt a positive attitude towards the children. Charlie apologises that she is too tired to respond to my interview questioning: *“I’m normally much more talkative but it’s been very hard work this week!”*⁴⁵ but this exhaustion is not at all evident in the efficient way in which she then readily changes all the children’s nappies and encourages use of potties and the toilet with the group of toddlers she cares for. This is reminiscent of “resilient cheerfulness” (Ruddick, 1989: 75), a virtue linked with preservative attention.

Practitioners’ watchfulness goes beyond physical care with positive attention directed towards fostering children’s growth, the second element of maternal thinking. This is seen in playful, responsive, interactions through which practitioners get to know the children and provide the encouragement necessary for them to flourish and reveal their abilities. This resonates with a notion of ‘caring presence’ (Goodfellow, 2008), which can be defined as:

“A state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical working of the group in the context of their leaning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate next step”

(Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006:205 cited by Goodfellow 2008: 18)

⁴⁵ Blue, interview 1

There are multiple instances of this “ability to respond with a considered and compassionate next step” in the work of early years practitioners. Some examples are included in the ‘basis to work from’ category (see *Chapter Six, above*). This episode, where Mij is playing with two one year old boys, is typical:

“Jesse posts a stickle brick down the front of his vest. Mij joins in and, taking turns, they fill the front of his vest (which is quite loose fitting and tucked into his trousers) with stickle bricks. Mij smiles and Jesse laughs and pulls the bricks out one by one. Jesse then begins to post more bricks into his vest. With Jean-Paul, the game is different. He takes a brick from Mij’s right hand and picks up another brick from the floor in front of him. He presses the two together. Jean Paul then puts the bricks onto his head. Mij holds them, helping the bricks to balance there. Jean-Paul tips his head and Mij says, “Ooo!” when the bricks fall off.”

(Transcribed from field notes, Green, June)

In reciprocal sociable games, such as these, the children are active in constructing opportunities for learning and the adult is, likewise, active in her responses. This corresponds well to Trevarthen’s (2004:2) view of the child as “playmate and companion in meaning” seeking communicative contact, which is then “matched by the motives to share creativity and teach in the adult” (Trevarthen, 2003:239). As with the preservation of the child, the fostering of growth has parallels with maternal care. Within families dance-like interactions in which babies lead and parents follow (Stern, 1985; Murray & Andrews, 2000; Parker Rees, 2007) are seen as important for promoting holistic development. In child care environments outside of the home it may not be so easy to provide opportunities for these attuned interactions (Elfer, 2007; Parker Rees, 2007) but where they do occur they are recognised as a key feature of effective practice (Woodhead, 1996; Pascal & Bertram, 1997; Smith, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford, et al, 2002; Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2006; Payler, 2007). The practitioners in this study demonstrate and articulate a sense of responsibility to nurture children, whilst they are in their care, in order to make their

time at nursery worthwhile; in Kel's terms "*to promote their learning and make them a much better person*" (see Chapter Six, above).

For Noddings (2003, 2005) the ability to be observant and responsive to a child's needs is characteristic of the caring educator. She emphasises caring relations can be the foundation of pedagogical activity and thought. There are parallels between Trevarthen's (2003, 2004) descriptions of adult and child relationships and Noddings's notion of the educator as 'one caring' deriving rewarding feedback and motivation from the responses of the child, as the 'one cared for'. Goodfellow (2008: 21) explains such reciprocal relationships as evidence of practitioners' "presence", exemplified in working with emergent curricula where practice is based upon listening to and interacting with children.

The social development of children has long been a priority of nursery education (McMillan, 1919) and Webb (1974) highlights the tension in the early years between educating autonomous individuals whilst training for social compliance. In a Finnish context, too, socialisation is seen as a key aspect of education within kindergartens and families (Niikko, 2004). Within the current study, four features of an observant promoting of children's social acceptance were observed⁴⁶. Firstly, functional independence, as children's attempts at washing, dressing and feeding themselves were supported, noted and praised. Secondly, group participation, as even for the youngest children there were times when the whole group gathered, such as around the table at set mealtimes and also for singing and story activities. Thirdly, encouragement to play with others, with practitioners sometimes facilitating games between babies and older children; and fourthly, gentle insistence upon conformity to rules and routines. This final element was especially noticeable in the school context, where part of Hollie's scrutiny of the classroom and playground is to manage children's behaviour. These features correspond with a third dimension of maternal thought: "training the child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate" (Ruddick, 1989:104).

⁴⁶ Based upon evidence from field notes in all three settings

Pro-social behaviour is certainly a topic of discussion with parents when children are collected from nursery, with the reporting of observed negative behaviour being an area of difficulty - this is identified as an aspect of the 'processes' theme within the category of informal understandings (discussed in Chapter Six). Practitioners can be seen as part of a three way "caring triangle" (Hohmann, 2007: 43) in which what is seen at nursery is reported and ways of knowing about the child are negotiated. As Cuffaro (1995: 97) says, "Teaching is too hard to do alone." Thus dialogues between adults are essential for understanding children in early childhood settings because their care and education is a shared endeavour, between the practitioners and the children's families.

The three aims, of protection, nurturance and social training, characteristic of maternal thinking are in evidence within the informal understandings of observant child care and education practice articulated and enacted by the participants in this study. Ruddick (1989:25) argues that maternal thinking should be considered "no less thoughtful, no less a discipline than other kinds of thinking." Similar respect should be shown for practitioners' informal thinking. This does not mean that practitioners' thinking and actions could not be critiqued but it raises an argument about who the critics should be, and highlights the importance of an emic perspective. From my own experience of becoming a participant observer, I have developed and appreciated understandings of practitioners' thought (categorised here as informal ways of understanding) through experience alongside them in the field. I have had to acknowledge that their ways of thinking are different from those based upon formal theories which, when coming from the outside, I had expected to form the basis for their ideas about observing children.

Ruddick explains that thinking does not have to be limited to a single discipline and, just as mothers may draw upon ways of thinking from other disciplines with which they are engaged, reflections about care and education could, and arguably should, also be informed by other ways of thinking. "Non personal authority", in Stimpson's (1978: 13) terms, in the form of insights from developmental psychology and

pedagogical theory, can usefully illuminate practice. According to Ruddick, (1989: 27) “interpractice criticism” can offer important insights and influence positive change and, similarly, in early years care and education different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives may inform and enrich ‘wise practice’ (Goodfellow, 2001).

9.4. Ways of seeing and knowing children

The formal and informal ways of understanding child observation, as discussed above, could usefully be considered in terms of ‘women’s ways of knowing’ (Belenky et al. 1997). Belenky and her three colleagues recognised five gender-related epistemological perspectives, from their research involving analysis of in-depth interviews with 135 women from diverse social and educational backgrounds. They argued that views of truth and knowledge contained a masculine bias, perpetuated by a male dominated further and higher education system, and neglected ways of understanding and educating which were relevant to women’s experiences of life and learning. Five ways in which women learn and know were identified as: silence; subjective knowing; received knowing; procedural knowing (which is divided into separate and connected knowing); and, finally, constructed knowing (Belenky et al, 1997).

The two types of procedural knowing (separate and connected knowing) are particularly interesting here, as they offer a means of understanding the two main categories of understandings which were found in this study with early years practitioners. ‘Separate knowing’ acknowledges expertise encapsulated within extant knowledge and the use of impersonal procedures for establishing truth (Belenky et al, 102). This can be equated with practitioners’ reference to developmental norms for observing and making judgements about children’s progress. ‘Connected knowing’ involves a capacity to empathise and understand the experience of others and to know through caring, as illustrated in the informal understandings and ways of thinking discussed above. Thus practitioners’ understandings can be characterised as ‘ways of knowing’ the children whom they observe.

Lenz Taguchi (2010: 172), drawing on the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), similarly highlights different ways of seeing and interpreting children's activities. On the one hand there are "majoritarian" habits of thought, based upon predetermined and dominant standards. Early years practitioners' formal understandings of children's growth in comparison to developmental norms could be characterised in this way. On the other hand, "becoming minoritarian" involves a complete change of perspective, reliving the event as though one were deeply involved in it (Lenz Taguchi uses examples of becoming the pen that the child draws with or the clay that is moulded) so that the observed event is read differently and the child, and the pedagogical possibilities within the situation, are more fully appreciated. This is an extreme form of 'connected knowing' and one that would require more conscious responses than the intuitive empathy shown in the participants' informal understandings of children.

Understandings of child observation expressed in formal and informal ways can, thus, be described as ways of seeing and knowing children. The challenge is to integrate and balance informal, connected ways of observing and knowing children with a distinctive professional repertoire of information, and positive pedagogical insights, derived from an in-depth knowledge of children's development. Dewey (1938: 45) offers a possible approach, through emphasising education as a process of "mutual adaptation" in which the "powers and purposes" of the child are carefully recognised and the educator uses his, or her, wider knowledge and experience to ensure the provision of a suitable environment and worthwhile, educative, experience. This interplay between cues from learners and responsive actions from thoughtful, knowledgeable and supportive educators corresponds with Goodfellow's (2001) definition of 'wise practice', in early childhood education, as based in expert knowledge combined with sound and sensitive judgement. This 'wise' way of knowing is noted as a key feature of relational pedagogy in the early years (Papatheodorou, 2008, 2009).

9.5. Summary

In this chapter I have sought to answer the first part of the research question: ‘how do newly qualified early years practitioners understand child observation?’ The two main categories of understanding are characterised as formal and informal. Formal understandings derive from knowledge of developmental theory, which provides a basis for practitioners’ professional judgements about what to observe. The noting of children’s progress then informs some decisions about the next steps for their learning. Alongside this are informal understandings based upon seeing and relating to children and forming caring, responsive relationships. This informal way of understanding can be related to ‘maternal thinking’ (Ruddick, 1989). Both formal and informal ways of understanding child observation are potentially valuable. The challenge is to bring these ways of knowing together, “combining personal awareness with theoretical knowledge” (Manning-Morton, 2006: 42) to provide insights for effective care and education. The ways in which formal and informal understandings of observation translate into its uses with young children is the topic for the next chapter.

Chapter 10 – Considering uses of child observation

‘All too easily child observation can become a superficial, meaningless exercise’

(Trowell and Miles 1991: 53)

10.1. Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted newly qualified practitioners’ ways of understanding and knowing children through child observation. These were characterised as ‘formal understandings’, separated ways of knowing about children, based upon knowledge drawn from normative accounts of child development and the learning outcomes of a developmental curriculum; and ‘informal understandings’, connected ways of knowing children, founded in caring and responsive relationships. The focus now moves from these ways of seeing and knowing children, again employing the categories of formality and informality, to consider how practitioners use observation in early years settings.

This chapter explores the significance of findings relating to practitioners’ uses of observation (as reported in Chapter Seven). The aim is to continue with the combining of data from the empirical, study and ideas from the literature which informs the topic, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of possibilities for pedagogical uses of observation. Practitioners’ formal and informal uses of observation are discussed, in turn. The choice of opening quotation, above, highlights the risk of observations not being well utilised in the care and education of young children. Formal observation can be a detached means of implementing a curriculum, which is not meaningful for children and their families; whilst informal uses might ensure well-being but limit learning. I then argue, with examples from different contexts, that the most effective early childhood care and education can be achieved when both formal and informal understandings and uses are brought together as a part of wise, relational practice (Goodfellow, 2001; Papatheodorou, 2008, 2009).

10.2. Formal uses of child observation

Methods

The main method of observation used in all settings was the jotting of brief anecdotal records when behaviour of interest to the key worker, or other member of staff was seen. This had advantages of being efficient, when notebooks or sticky labels were kept to hand, and of capturing evidence of an aspect of a child's knowledge or skill as it occurred, in context. This is the approach to recording observations which is advocated in the Early Years Foundation Stage (National Strategies, 2009a) but some practitioners⁴⁷ regret the brevity of their observations, perhaps recognising the lack of depth in comparison with longer observations undertaken when training.

One aim of the observations is to ascertain the child's abilities and interests but Dewey (1928/1974: 177) doubted whether this could be achieved through brief "cross-sectional observations" of children "engaged in a succession of disconnected activities." He advocated, instead, sustained observation throughout the course of a prepared "worthwhile activity" through which "the teacher can find out immensely more about the real needs, desires, interests, capacities and weaknesses of a pupil." Similarly, Katz and Chard (2000) writing about the engagement of children's and teachers' minds through a project approach⁴⁸, stress that the documenting of learning should occur when children are engaged in activities which are interesting and merit documenting.

Broadhead (2001, 2004, 2006), too, questions the reliability and validity of very short observational notes, which do not always capture meaningful activities. She suggests that longer and more in-depth observations allow practitioners to see the development of children's ideas and to understand the complexity of problem solving, peer interactions and the development and coherence of children's creative

⁴⁷ Kel, Mij and Saira, green, interviews 2

⁴⁸ A book initially inspired by exemplary practice observed in nursery and infant schools in the UK, prior to the introduction of a national curriculum, although latterly linked to work in Reggio Emilia.

ideas and play themes. Speaking specifically about formative observation of social play, Broadhead (2006:193) states:

“Research has shown that extended rather than brief observations are more likely to reveal the development of momentum and reciprocity in children’s play and the progression towards, and engagements in, the cooperative domain—a domain where interacting peers are using and exposed to complex uses of language and a powerful and developing engagement with ideas.”

Whalley (2009) does advocate the use of short observational notes but emphasises that these alone are not sufficient and must be part of a thoughtful, proactive process of ‘pedagogical engagement’ that relies upon the expertise and reflexive practice of professionals and through which every child’s learning is celebrated, supported and extended by all the adults in his or life. This integration of brief observations into an overall pedagogical approach, which is respectful to the child and contributes to his or her well-being and learning is exemplified by the practice at Fortune Park (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005) where profile books capture and co-construct the child’s experience and learning, as well as maintaining a record of their achievements and progress.

Visual images also contribute to developing understandings of children and their learning. Driscoll and Rudge (2005) discuss the benefits of photography as an observation tool, especially the subtlety of being able to capture images of activities as they occur and gain evidence of learning which would not otherwise be recorded, for example during water play. Children enjoy using photographs as cues for remembering, thinking about and discussing their learning (Luff, 2007; Luff et al, forthcoming) and this was especially evident in green setting where practitioners, children and parents were all enthusiastic users of digital photographs as a way of encapsulating experiences. Photographs were not in evidence in the school setting, which is perhaps explained by an argument that they are most valuable when used

with younger children, for whom concrete images provide an effective memory trigger (LeeKeenan and Nimmo, 1994).

Tracking progress

The main formal use to which observations are then put is the recording of children's developmental progress in relation to the areas of learning within the curriculum guidance. This is evident in practitioners' mapping of their observations onto progress checklists. The rationale for this and a critique, based upon possible alternative approaches, are presented here.

There is a strong expectation, seen in this study, that all practitioners should track children's performance against 'stepping stones' (QCA, 2000), now replaced by 'development matters' (DCSF, 2008; National Strategies, 2009d). This is clarified in government guidance (National Strategies, 2009c) which makes explicit the responsibilities of leaders and managers of early years settings to ensure that children are seen to make good progress throughout the Foundation Stage. Like much current guidance, this 'Progress Matters' (National Strategies, 2009c) document contains aspects which accord with established traditions of early childhood education, such as uses of observation to inform curriculum development.

The 'Progress Matters' advice links with the wider principles of the EYFS and offers broad guidance on gathering information about individuals and groups of children and using observations to support learning, as well as identifying stages of development and tracking progress. Whilst the suggestion that a wealth of information should be gathered, about the children and the setting, is welcome, and accords with the philosophies of early childhood education discussed in Chapter Three, there is also a strong requirement to produce summaries which chart the progress of children: "At management level, a leader needs summary information based on this rich tapestry to ensure that children are making appropriate progress and staff are planning effectively to meet the needs of the children" (National Strategies, 2009c: 10). This corresponds with Penn's (2008:10) concern that

educational purposes are compromised by observations which are designed to assess children's performance on the areas of learning in the Foundation Stage, where the main aim becomes "seeking proof that the regime of the nursery is working."

An emphasis upon observation for the assessment of young children's academic progress, in relation to set standards, is feature of current practice in England (Adams et al, 2004; Moss 2006a, 2006b; Penn, 2008; Ellyatt, 2009) and the same trend is identified in France (OECD, 2006) and other places (e.g. Hatch and Grieshaber, 2002). Countries following this "readiness for school tradition", with its emphasis upon specific learning outcomes and the early acquisition of some formal skills, contrasts with "Nordic traditions" (OECD, 2006: 141) where an attitude that "there is a time for childhood that can never be repeated" (OECD, 2006: 140) results in gentler nurturing of children's learning strategies towards broader activities and goals.

Worldviews of the child and of childhood influence curricula, and associated assessment (OECD, 2006; Papatheodorou, 2008; Penn, 2008), and a focus upon achievement where "individualism dominates practice" (Penn, 1997: 124), has not contributed to the happiness and well-being of children (Papatheodorou, 2008; Ellyatt, 2009). Moreover, an emphasis upon tracking each child's current knowledge and skills places the focus of observation and assessment upon the child's actual level of development rather than the potentially more educationally productive "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978; Smith, 1993; Van Oers et al, 2003; Fler and Richardson, 2004; Broadhead, 2006). Siraj-Blatchford (2009) suggests that proactive teaching is an essential part of a process of mutual cognitive construction based upon sustained shared thinking, which results in worthwhile learning. Singh (1999), too, argues that the role of teacher as enabler is essential to children's development and expresses concern that pre-set assessment targets militate against formative assessment as part of a supportive pedagogy.

At the outset of this research study my informal hypothesis was that practitioners struggled to use observation for curriculum planning (as found by Moyles et al, 2002 and Ofsted, 2004) because methods of observation experienced in college were different from those in use in the workplace. Findings, relating to practitioners' formal understandings and uses of observation, indicate that the approaches in training are actually very well matched to those of practice. In both cases the principal task is to identify the child's stage of development in relation to a curriculum based upon typically occurring growth. What is more difficult, and appears to have been missing from training, is how to relate evidence from child observations to the complexities of facilitating the next steps in children's learning through effective curriculum planning. The practitioners in the study are enabling educators (as shown in the examples in Chapters Six, Seven and Nine) and supportive of children's progress but their knowing the children and knowledge of the curriculum are not brought together in their written planning.

In educational approaches where the purposes of observation are clearly oriented towards curriculum development, rather than assessment of progress, the whole focus changes towards understanding children's interests and experiences in order to foster growth. This is consistent with the traditions of early childhood care and education and the practice in exemplary curricula, as previously discussed (in Chapter Three). It is also more in harmony with the beliefs of early childhood practitioners, who are not in favour of the formal assessment of young children (Brown and Rolfe, 2005). In Noddings' (2005: no page) terms, educating "from the care perspective" reduces a need for formal measurements of achievement which are "largely a product of separation and lack of trust".

Reporting

Arguably, it is a lack of trust in early years professionals which also leads to a requirement for written reporting. Practitioners' main motivation for maintaining progress records is to provide evidence that the children who attend the setting are gaining the expected knowledge and skills. This is important for external

accountability, particularly when inspected by Ofsted, and also for reporting to parents. These audiences for reporting are, however, quite different and some tensions which arise from formal reporting in relation to learning outcomes are considered here.

Within the day nursery settings methods of reporting are open (see Chapter Seven) with children's portfolios available to parents on request, and sometimes actively shared with parents. For the youngest children the "day sheets", or "Happy Charts", offer a means of communicating with parents. This practice corresponds with a requirement to exchange information with parents (DfES, 2002; National Strategies, 2009a) but has the potential to be something more. Elfer and his colleagues (2003: 74) suggest that "shared stories" should be exchanged from nursery to home; these might be in the form of a written sheet but could also include photographs and videotapes (Luff et al, forthcoming). The daily report sheets are a chore for staff but could become very meaningful, for example, if they were pre-printed with the menus and basic provision planning so that staff could quickly tick these and then add personalised, informative comments and messages. One parent told me that the key worker just writing "Lots!" in the section about feeding was very useful as she wouldn't worry if her baby was not hungry again at home⁴⁹. Overall, this type of observational record could be more than a simple report and aim to capture "lives lived rather than knowledge gained or care received" (Clark, 2005: 31).

Relationships with parents were positive in the day nursery settings but seemed more distant in the Reception class. This concurs with Shields' (2009) discovery that parents found it more difficult to achieve reciprocal relationships with their child's Reception Class teachers than with key workers in nursery settings. This also highlights potential problems with involving parents as partners in observational assessment. This is an aspiration within the EYFS, but one which it has not yet been possible to realise (QCDA, 2009c). Part of the reason for this could be that the curriculum, and specifically the learning outcomes against which children are

⁴⁹ Fieldnotes, green, November

assessed are not negotiable. Educators are reluctant to trust parents' judgements about their child's abilities (QCDA, 2000c) and parents may feel disempowered by teachers' judgements of their child's abilities (Smith, 2000). In approaches which do not have formal assessment to rank children according to attainment, but instead value children as active creators of culture, parental involvement in fostering learning is more evident (Cowie and Carr, 2004, 2009; Rinaldi, 2005; OECD, 2006).

One parent's experience of receiving a report about her child's progress at nursery, in England, has prompted her to apply for her child to be exempted from the compulsory learning and development requirements of the EYFS (Laing, 2009c); as a journalist, she records her arguments and experiences in a blog (Laing 2009b). She has also launched a Parliamentary Petition (Laing, 2009a) to change the status of the sixty-nine compulsory Early Years Foundation Stage learning and development requirements to recommendations and guidelines only. Whilst the ideas of one campaigning parent are, admittedly, biased they do resonate with what was observed in this research study. The photograph of her daughter's Foundation Stage records which Laing (2009b) presents (see Figure 10.1, below) is similar to those seen in the case study settings⁵⁰ and follows the model of mapping anecdotal observations, on stick it notes, onto checklists of Foundation Stage outcomes.

Laing (2009b, no page) strongly criticises this form of assessment:

"... a setting can only sometimes 'see' what they are looking for. And with a greater understanding of government policy comes the realisation that what staff and settings are being encouraged to look for are the learning goals, a very narrow framework of targets that I believe are anything but a focus on the 'unique' child."

This critique echoes that of Dewey (1916) and contemporary educationalists (e.g. Nutbrown, 1998; Drummond, 2003; Broadhead, 2006; Wood, 2008) who all argue that an emphasis upon external learning goals may limit possibilities for children's

⁵⁰ Although negative comments in a child's records such as "doesn't volunteer information" and "reluctant to talk" were *not* seen in the research study.

learning (see Chapter Three). There is also risk that reports which “inform parents of who their child is as a developmental being” (Smith, 2000: 18) serve the interests of external quality assurance systems rather involving and supporting children and their families.

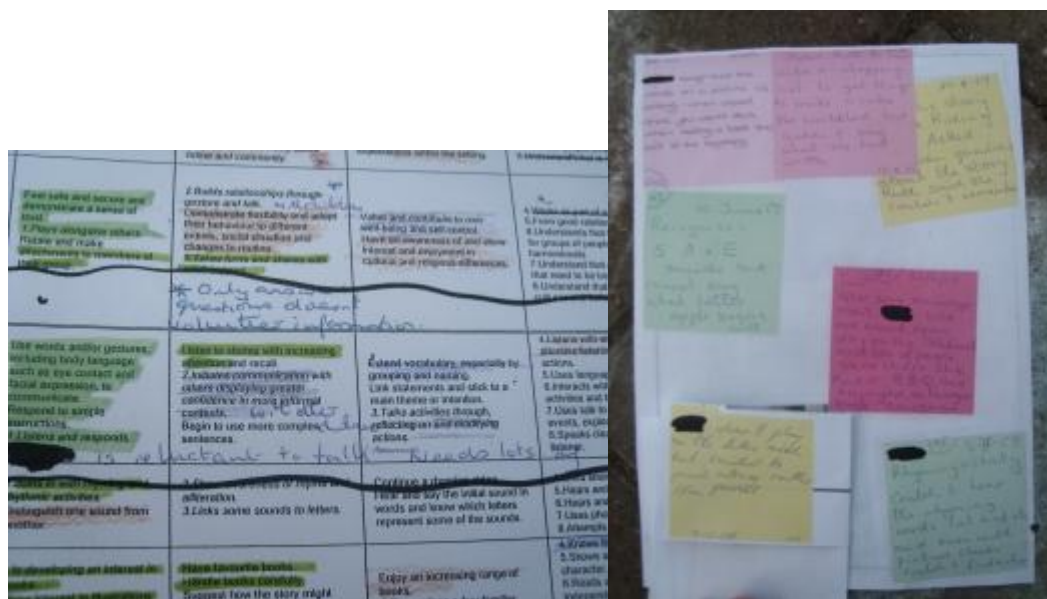


Figure 10.1 Examples of Foundation Stage records

(Information Request Result under the Freedom of Information Act. Frances Laing, August 2009) (taken from Laing, 2009b)

In summary, practitioners’ formal uses of observation show conscientious adherence to the practices advocated within the Foundation Stage curriculum document and they place emphasis upon using observation in order to identify and record children’s progress, in relation to this guidance. As is shown in Diagram 10.1., below, observation of the child occurs and is interpreted through the lens of the developmental learning outcomes of the set curriculum and the resulting actions are primarily concerned with mapping this learning. The next steps for learning are guided by expected progression in each area of development, as identified in the curriculum document. This has the advantage of ensuring that provision is made for all children to gain a range of knowledge and skills with support for each individual’s achievement of learning goals. The disadvantage is that this framework

may limit what is seen and provided and that observation and learning become compartmentalised rather than holistic. A further serious concern is that summative assessment at this early stage of education may lead to negative labelling and low expectations of children whose attainment is perceived to be below average. Gipps (2002: 81) highlights the relationship between assessment and learner identity and suggests that comparative assessments may result in “negative affect directed toward the self” in children who compare unfavourably to their peers.

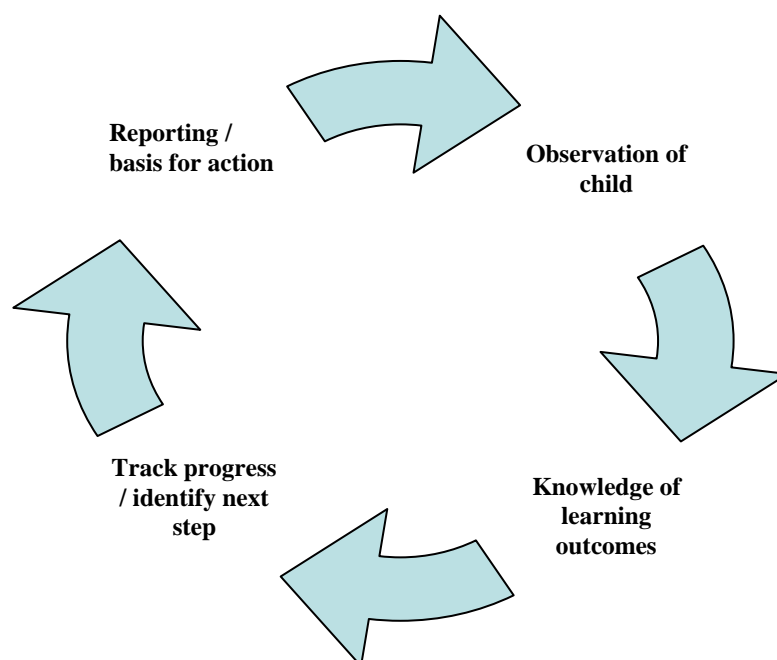


Diagram 10.1 Formal understandings and uses of child observation

Adapted from Diagram 1.1 (above) Illustration of a process of experiential learning
(based upon Dewey 1933 / 1938)

This diagram (10.1) illustrates how formal understandings and uses of observation are predominantly concerned with knowing about the child in relation to his or her developmental progress through the Foundation Stage curriculum. As reported in Chapters Six and Nine it is informal practices which result in the practitioner seeing,

knowing and relating to the child more closely and so it is discussion of the practitioners' informal uses of observation which now follows.

10.3. Informal uses of child observation

Noticing

This first theme within the 'informal uses' category links very closely with the category of informal understandings and the theories of care, and ideas about maternal thinking, as discussed in Chapter Nine. The early years practitioners in this study appear to display 'natural caring' (Noddings 2003, Niikko, 2004), the positive responses of one human being to another through an unconscious obligation to care.

The significance of 'noticing' raises questions about whether being fully attentive, in the ways that Kel and others achieve in their responses to children (as in the examples given in Chapter Seven), is more important than written observation, especially in work with very young children. Gerber (2002; 63) exhorts those who care for babies to "Observe more, do less." She contrasts the actions of a "caregiver", an adult who takes the initiative, with those of an "educarer" (Gerber, 2005: 49) who is responsive to cues from the child. Money (2005) advocates a 'Resources for Infant Educators' (RIE) approach to young children's care⁵¹ and stresses the importance of "sensitive observation" for building "respectful relationships" and fostering the "authenticity of a child." Memel and Fernandez (2005), writing from the same perspective, also highlight the importance of careful observation for understanding children, emphasising that being understood promotes the child's confidence and trust whereas being misunderstood can lead to insecurity and self doubt. The babies and young children seen being cared for in this study were consistently noticed and understood.

The EYFS guidance advocates this observant caring, within the "Supporting Learning" aspect of the "Positive Relationships" theme of the framework (National

⁵¹ Promoted in the United States by Magda Gerber, since the 1960s, and inspired by the pioneering work of her Hungarian colleague, Emmi Pikler.

Strategies, 2009a: no page). Practitioners are expected to “observe children sensitively and respond appropriately to encourage and extend curiosity and learning”, to discover children’s preferences and feelings and to “tune in to, rather than talk at, children.” The challenge is in balancing this advice with a pressure to focus upon children’s learning and achievement. Morton (2009: 39) recognises that “The more synchronised the interactions between the carer and the baby, the more a positive relationship is formed”; and she also warns that when focussing on children’s skills and abilities carers can miss really seeing the child and appreciating him or her. This reflects Gerber’s (2002: 56) concern that in watching for each developmental milestone parents and professional carers “sadly miss the miraculous little changes which are occurring all the time.”

Practitioners’ ‘noticing’ indicates that they are aware of the nuances of children’s growth, even though it is the achievement of each milestone which is formally recorded. Selleck (2001: 86) suggests that observation “opens up possibilities for empathy” and a positive emotional connection with children typifies this informal, observant approach, as exemplified in examples of evidence of practitioners’ ‘noticing’ (in Chapter Seven). The practitioners’ abilities to ‘be with’ babies, toddlers and children and establish warm and trusting relationships are characteristic of the responsiveness, receptivity and availability which, for Noddings (2003), are key features of caring. The capacity to be aware of, notice and make connections with each child’s experience can also be described as ‘presence’ (Goodfellow, 2008).

It would be inspiring to believe that all practitioners are as naturally caring and responsive to children as those who participated in this study. Alarming examples of lack of care within early years institutions (e.g. BBC One, 2004; Gaunt, 2008; Marcus, 2008; Morris and Gabbatt, 2009) indicate that this is not always the case. Nevertheless, whilst practitioners who volunteer to participate in research studies, such as this one, do not necessarily represent their entire profession, the impulse to care and an ethic of care is evident within wider research (e.g. Niikko, 2004; Colley,

2006; Osgood, 2006; Goodfellow, 2008) and, where this is fostered and supported within a positive organisational culture (Elfer et al, 2003) children are likely to benefit from being noticed and affirmed (Dowling, 2010; Honig, 2010).

Support for learning

Practitioners' support for children's learning reflects a caring commitment to their growth, as explored in the discussion of 'informal understandings' of observation in the previous chapter. It is mainly demonstrated in "scaffolding" techniques (Wood et al, 1976; Bruner, 1985), offering appropriate levels of support to enable children to fulfil tasks and develop skills. This is clearly illustrated by Saira's well judged support for Shenara using scissors (in Chapter Six) and for Saffron on the climbing wall (in Chapter Seven), as well as by Hollie's skill in tailoring her support to match children's levels of confidence and ability on a range of classroom tasks (including craft work and literacy and numeracy activities). Tharp and Gallimore (1988/1991) describe this responsive support as facilitating a transition from assisted to unassisted performance, where the child is aided most effectively by sensitive and accurate assistance adjusted to the child's level. For Smith (1993:54) this "intersubjectivity", where a child and adult achieve mutual recognition of each others' viewpoints and a shared conception of a task, is where the distinction between education and care breaks down and can be redefined as "educare".

An awareness of and response to children's day-to-day learning matches with practitioners' belief in the importance of fostering the 'next steps' in children's development; but the challenge of integrating this with curriculum planning remains. Although adults acting in informal, intuitive ways may assist performance effectively, for Tharp and Gallimore (1988/1991: 50) "profound knowledge of subject matter is required of teachers who assist performance" so that they can understand the potential learning goal, the child's perception of the task and plan strategies for transfer of responsibility for the task to the learner. It is this type of in-depth knowledge of curriculum content, learning theory and the child which is achieved by teachers implementing the Basic Development curriculum (Janssen-

Vos, 2003). In order to assist the children's performance, the teacher and children participate in joint activities which will offer the possibilities for developing new knowledge and skills, mediated by the teacher. The teacher draws upon a range of "didactic impulses" (Janssen-Vos, 2003: 102) through which she consciously orientates the children towards a joint activity; adjusts, deepens and broadens the activity, in response to the children's reactions; finds teaching opportunities within the activity; and encourages children to reflect on their experiences.

Within the Foundation Stage curriculum the learning and teaching strategies are more broadly defined (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009e) whilst the learning outcomes are very precise. Even experienced practitioners in positions of responsibility, who have undertaken further study and are committed to reflecting upon their practice, do not find it easy to find meaningful ways of combining child observations with planning for playful learning, based upon children's interests and levels of learning (Luff et al, forthcoming). In this study, planning tended to be for provision and activities, based upon the areas of learning within the curriculum, informed by a broad knowledge of what the children might enjoy and respond to. The long term curriculum plans mapped out coverage of themes within the six areas of learning, with suggested topics of interest, and this then formed the basis for weekly plans. Once each weekly curriculum plan was drawn up, key workers personalised this for their key children. This approach contrasts strongly with the approach in emergent curricula where planning arises directly from the children's interests. In New Zealand, children's Learning Stories capture their active participation and have the potential to lead learning and promote positive learner identities (Carr, 2001; Podmore, 2006). The Learning Journey template for the EYFS (National Strategies, 2009b) also reflects a child's achievements but the directions in which the journey continues are pre-determined and so more limited.

In this research, some of the most interesting learning stories were told on the wall displays, which provided insights into the life of the settings. Fawcett (2009: 142) contrasts traditional, static displays, which record events, with documentation that

plays a part in knowledge creation and “explicitly invites enquiry”. The distinction between the two was less clear, here, as the children’s captioned pictures and photographs were often the source of discussion. A strong example was the display in green nursery following the visit to a mosque (see Chapter Six). Non-Muslim staffs, parents and visitors (including myself) were able to ask genuine questions and engage in shared thinking, co-constructing understandings of the experience with the children, as well as gaining some understanding of the faith of staff members and some of the children. This type of dialogue about learning, stimulated by displays, also provides an example of the potential of display and documentation to foster participation, evidence of “provision for supportive, enquiring and respectful ethos within their settings” (Moyles et al, 2002: 110).

Participation

Heshusius (1995: 121) writes of “a participatory mode of consciousness” when a listener attends and engages fully with another person, putting aside their own concerns. This has similarities with the ways in which Rinaldi (2005: 139) discusses the importance of observation and documentation as a means of allowing “the subjectivity of each child” to be appreciated in relation to the teacher and others. In the caring informal understandings of observation demonstrated by the practitioners (see Chapters Six and Nine) and here, in their informal uses, this inter-subjective, participatory approach is often achieved. To the observer, the relationships in the nursery settings are more participatory. In school there is a stronger sense of pupils and parents as separate from, and judged by, the teacher. In this study, for example, teacher Janet⁵² talks about “Our poor little Emily” when referring to a child who is one of the youngest in the class and whose attainment is low, in terms of the literacy and numeracy standards expected by the end of the Foundation Stage. Within the school context, however, Hollie has a different, and more symmetrical and caring, relationship with the children than the teacher. One of the boys in the class remarked

⁵² Field notes, red, February

to me, when being given instructions to tidy up, “Mrs B. is the boss and God and Jesus!”⁵³

Observations can form the basis for the trusting relationships which are central to early years care and education (Perry, 2004); and in this study informal observations were an important aspect of the forming and sustaining of relationships between adults and children and also between adults, both staff and parents and staff teams. In Chapter Three uses of observation for respectful recognition of children’s viewpoints and for the fostering of collaboration and community were considered. Scope to develop these aspects of observation is evident from practitioners’ informal participatory practice although, as noted above, the nature of the learning goals may inhibit this within the EYFS.

Children’s capacities for participation and ability to contribute to discussions about their learning are illustrated by examples such as Shannon’s involvement with her portfolio (see Chapter Seven). There is also a second example, involving the same child with her friend Troy, where I observe them playing a game, sitting at a table with paper and pencils, and they tell me that they are ‘having a staff meeting and talking about whether the children like the garden’⁵⁴. This shows the children’s awareness of being observed and discussed by staff and indicates their capacity to become involved in recording their learning. Gipps (2002) stresses the importance of involving learner’s perspectives and engaging in discourses relating to learning activities and assessment, in order to enable knowledge construction and positive learner identities. This is achieved within Te Whāriki when children collaborate in the creation of their Learning Stories; and in Reggio Emilia where children’s voices and opinions are documented and contribute to the development of *progettazione*.

⁵³ Field notes, red, March. NB Space here, and the topic under study, does not permit a fuller discussion of the relationship between the children and this very experienced teacher. I have presented a somewhat negative characterisation here but the humour with which the child recognises the teacher’s power and other instances in which she listens carefully to stories from their lives (in Circle Time) indicate warmth in the relationship.

⁵⁴ Field notes, green, June

Sharing with parents is another dimension of participation which is realised informally, particularly in the nursery settings, but is not a part of the formal practice. Discussions are central to the creation of trusting relationships between parents and practitioners (Hohmann, 2007) and open dialogues occur regularly at the beginning and end of the day in which information about the children is exchanged. Cowie and Carr (2004) suggest that this process is formalised or reified (Wenger, 1998) in a learning story approach to documenting learning. Although the importance of parental partnership is recognised in national guidance and there is aspiration for parents and children to be involved in processes of observation and assessment, including the Foundation Stage Profile (Hutchin, 2003) this is not yet achieved (QDCA, 2009c). In this study, the more guarded attitude of the Reception class teacher towards showing parents the children's records indicates that participation with parents may be more difficult to achieve once children enter formal schooling (Shields, 2009).

The third area of participation is with colleagues. Moss (2005, 2008) highlights the importance of discussion and dialogue as an aspect of democratic practice, using as an exemplar the practice in Reggio Emilia. He argues that in sharing ideas and insights practitioners are less likely to look only at evidence which corroborates their own beliefs and may thus make more valid judgements. Within this study, examples of communication and collaboration, which characterise the practitioners working relationships with one another, and also with students on work placement (see Chapter Seven), indicate the benefits of shared reflections and scope for the development of this practice.

In summary, as discussed above and illustrated below in diagram 10.2, informal uses of observation involve noticing and forming relationships with children and then responding in caring and supportive ways. Informal uses of observation are also more participatory, and open-ended, involving adults and children in processes of care and learning. In the next part of the chapter the advantages and disadvantages of

both the formal and informal aspects of observation are considered and ways of uniting both are proposed.

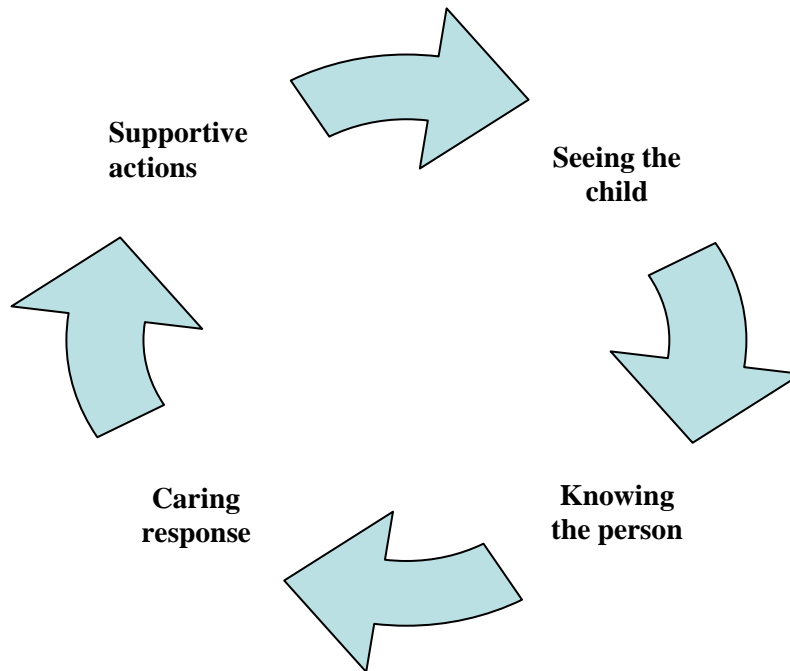


Diagram 10.2 Informal understandings and uses of child observation

Adapted from Diagram 1.1 (above) Illustration of a process of experiential learning
(based upon Dewey 1933 / 1938)

10.4. Ways of seeing, knowing and working with children

When considering practitioners formal and informal uses of observation, in relation to the uses of observation explored in Chapter Three, it is apparent that the formal uses are mainly focused upon the tracking of progress; whilst the informal uses encompass a range of other pedagogical functions of observation, such as listening respectfully to children, ensuring their wellbeing, constructing curriculum and creating community collaboration. Whilst the formal uses are focussed upon cognitive outcomes and competences, informal uses are affective and expressive but they do also have the potential to support learning. Caldwell (1991; 2002) writes of the importance of services provided for young children offering both educational

and protective, caring components. Smith (1993), following Caldwell, similarly calls for child care to become ‘educare’, guidance that combines care with nurturing children’s development and fostering intellectual potential. This definition of ‘educare’ goes beyond that proposed by Gerber (2005) as, although careful following of the child’s lead is important, the adult also takes responsibility for extending learning through sensitive scaffolding of the child’s emergent understandings and abilities.

The important role of the adult caregiver and educator is highlighted in research, which indicates that the quality of young children’s educational experiences and the benefits of early years provision depend upon practitioners’ knowledge and experience (e.g. Bennett et al, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Anning and Edwards, 2006; Broadhead, 2006). Whilst the ‘informal’ uses of observation, described above, may provide children with important nurture; more might be achieved, in terms of offering a “curriculum for thinking” (Nutbrown, 2006:113) within an inspiring environment if practitioners were encouraged and enabled to reflect upon their practice, and children’s experiences, in the ways modelled in emergent curricula (see Chapter Three). Malaguzzi (1998: 68) offers a reminder that caring has cognitive as well as affective and expressive aspects and thus should be “understood not merely as a warm, protecting envelope, but rather as a dynamic conjunction of forces and elements interacting towards a common purpose.”

Equally, it is important that the balance does not shift away from care. Rinaldi (2005: 65), writing about documentation and assessment, reminds us that “listening is emotion”; whilst Kroeger and Cardy (2006), discussing the challenges of implementing ‘Reggio-inspired’ practices in American contexts, also emphasise that interpreting pedagogical documentation is not just an intellectual exercise but also has a strong affective dimension. Thus it is important that ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ ways of using child observation are combined, in ‘wise practice’ (Goodfellow, 2001; and Chapter Nine) as is achieved in relational pedagogical approaches in Italy, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries (as discussed above) and also in other places and circumstances (including the historical examples in Chapter Three). Here

I have selected just two examples, which illustrate how observation of children can be a key part of a relational pedagogy.

Waller (2007) contrasts the outcomes driven Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000; DCSF, 2008) with its emphasis upon what is achieved, with the process led Foundation Phase (WAG, 2008), which places emphasis upon well-being, play and children's participation. Within the context of both these curricula, he describes the pedagogy developed through outdoor learning projects (one in South Wales and one in the Midlands of England) based upon three to seven year old children's play themes, created in wild, natural environments. Broadening the concept of sustained shared thinking (Siraj Blachford et al, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), where an adult educator extends a child's thinking through open dialogue, work done in this project offers a model of pedagogy which uses documentation to support shared construction of knowledge, based upon the children's play narratives. The variety of child observation strategies used in this project included adults' note making and reporting and also a range of participatory approaches, inspired by the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005).

The two stages of the pedagogical model proposed from Waller's study, again, reveal the possibility of bringing together 'informal', connected, and 'formal', separate ways of understanding through using observation as part of a dynamic, relational approach to learning. Firstly, the children's experiences are observed and appreciated by the adults and recorded in the form of learning stories, in which images created by the children are discussed and published alongside a practitioner's record of the discussion. Secondly, this information becomes a basis for review and reflection to understand the learning and plan further opportunities. For example, a deep narrow pool surrounded by mud is designated the home of the "Swamp Monster with 18 heads" (Waller, 2007: 401) and the story of this monster inspires the creation and development of imaginative play areas in the indoor and outdoor environments with associated extensions of the narrative, recorded and supported by further pedagogical documentation. Children's priorities are attended to and

contribute to the co-construction of curriculum which, although this is not made explicit in the study, is likely to meet and exceed the requirements of the Foundation Phase and Foundation Stage.

The themes of uninterrupted time given to the development of children's ideas and of responsive, high quality communication with adults on the children's own terms, highlighted in Waller's (2007) work, are also features of the pedagogy to support children's social and emotional development evident in a local study, in Essex (Luff et al, 2009). Practitioners were 'tuned in' to the children in connected ways, allowing them to participate and learn on their own terms in the rich learning environments offered by a nursery school. 'Will', for example, was initially happiest playing energetically in the garden where staff listened to his ideas, questions and views but did not put him under pressure to become involved with adult led activities. Gradually he developed a strong peer group, and became its leader, and he also formed positive relationships with the adults. Later Will began to engage enthusiastically with more structured indoor activities, whilst still confidently enjoying outdoor learning. This supportive pedagogy is represented as a multi-dimensional ecological model, with the child's recognised and accepted "self" at the centre, surrounded by dimensions of play choice, communication, help and time (Luff et al, 2009⁵⁵).

In the nursery school where the study was based, observations are systematically documented as part of a "needs driven, child-centred curriculum" (Lloyd, 2007: no page) and collected over time as a means of getting to know each child and creating an account of his or her experiences and learning. The observations also form the basis of team discussions about children, focussed upon ways of understanding each child's interests and developing linked learning activities. In addition to observations of individual children, the practitioners video-record group play and analyse the footage to gain insights into the children's abilities and augment the provision to

⁵⁵ The model presented in this paper was conceptualised by Sarah Hudson, who left the research group before the presentation at the EECERA conference.

enable extension of the children's activities and consequent enrichment of the learning (Luff, 2007). This offers another example of how formal and informal understandings and uses of child observation are combined, by committed and experienced early years practitioners, so that fulfilling the demands of a prescribed curriculum becomes much more than the separated activity of "trying to tick off, often skills based, learning targets" (Lloyd, 2007: no page).

These two examples demonstrate how "thoughtful" observation Dewey (1933:170) can be a means to foster growth and appreciate children's capacities to learn, and their desire for intellectual challenge; and, at the same time, provide a way to give children sensitive attention and foster interpersonal relationships and social connection.

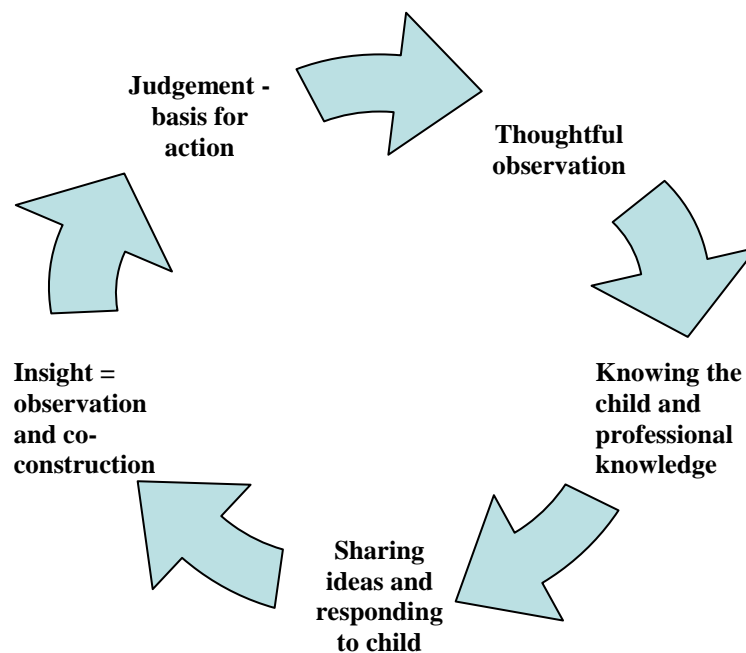


Diagram 10.3 Relational understandings and uses of child observation

Adapted from Diagram 1.1 (above) Illustration of a process of experiential learning
(based upon Dewey 1933 / 1938)

In Chapter One an experiential, reflective learning process was illustrated, based upon the ideas of Dewey (1938/1997). This has been extended (in Diagram 10.3, above) to illustrate how observation can be a key part of an educative process which combines both the formal and informal understandings and uses, which have been identified and discussed, above. The child or the activity is observed, attentively and responsively and what is seen is then the basis for consideration. The practitioner may draw upon knowing and caring for the child as a person and also ideas from a repertoire of professional knowledge, including theories of child development, curriculum and pedagogy, to make sense of her initial observation. This is not a lone intellectual task as discussions with the child, with parents, and collaboration with colleagues will also inform the insights gained. Shared meanings gained from this enquiry will then form the basis for judgement and the development of purposeful plans of action. This process of active co-construction of meaning is then ongoing, with new observations and fresh interpretations of observations being made in the light of additional information and leading to different or additional responses to promote growth and support learning and well-being.

Although Dewey's (1933/1998; 1938/1997) account of reflective thinking focuses upon the individual, this new model incorporating the sharing of ideas is not inconsistent with his theories. Biesta (2009: 70) suggests that an accurate summary of Dewey's view of education would be "learning through participation" or "learning by doing things with others". Dewey's political philosophy, too, emphasises the importance of communication for the development of communities with shared values and activities, for example:

"Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realisation of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community."

(Dewey, 1927/1998: 295)

Although Dewey is referring to a broad ideal of community, the description could be one which applies, for example, to the preschools of Reggio Emilia and to

Children's Centres, such as Pen Green (Whalley, 1993, 2009) or Fortune Park (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005) and other successful early years settings, in this country.

10. 5. Summary

Here some answers have been provided for the second part of the research question: 'how do newly qualified practitioners use child observations?' Following the pattern used for identifying understandings, in the previous chapter, the categories of formal and informal uses have been discussed. Formal uses are limited to recording brief observations in order to track progress, largely as a means of reporting to external agencies. Practitioners are seen to accomplish these tasks efficiently. There is, however, cause for concern that these uses of observation might be a limited and limiting way of seeing a child. The use of the Foundation Stage Profile to judge and label a child as they begin their school career is questioned as potentially detrimental for future learning. Informal ways of using observation offer a more affirmative way of seeing the child and building positive relationships. Once again, the caring dispositions of the newly qualified practitioners are revealed. These informal uses, of noticing children, offering support for their learning and participation in collaborative and processes, however, have the potential to be more beneficial if explored and exploited more consciously, as in the pedagogical examples considered in Chapter Three (above).

This chapter, therefore, culminated in the presentation of two instances of practice in which formal and informal understandings and formal and informal uses of child observation are brought together and contribute to exemplary relational approaches to caring for and educating young children. This was also illustrated in a model of relational understandings and uses of observation (Diagram 10.3). Practitioners' experiences during their first year in the workplace, and ways in which factors in the surrounding ecological system may constrain their pedagogy, are considered in the next chapter.

Chapter 11 – Child observation within the early years workplace

“It seems impossible to work effectively with very young children without the deep and sound commitment signified by the use of words like ‘passionate’. Yet this very symbolisation gives a particular emotional slant to the work of early childhood practitioners which can work ... against them in their everyday roles and practices, bringing into question what constitutes professionalism.”

(Moyles, 2001:81)

11.1. Introduction

This chapter forms the third part of the discussion of findings and considers child observation as a task within the workplace. It brings together knowledge of early years practitioners’ observation work from extant literature (in Chapter Four) and insights from the analysis of data from this study (in Chapter Eight). Themes from the two preceding discussion chapters (Chapters Nine and Ten) are placed into context here with the formal, separate ways of understanding and using observation explained in the light of institutional factors, within and beyond the workplace; whilst connected ways of knowing and using observation are related to the personal qualities possessed and expressed by early years practitioners.

It is argued here that external factors, impacting upon the settings in which early years practitioners work, may undermine the caring and ‘connected’ ways in which children are seen and known. Pressures of implementing the Foundation Stage curriculum, with the associated Ofsted quality assurance system, lead conscientious practitioners to comply with the regime through formal, ‘separate’ ways of seeing and knowing children. These separate and connected ways of seeing and knowing, observed throughout this study, are also seen as symptomatic of a divide between the educational and the caring aspects of early years provision. Clues are sought for finding a satisfying ‘middle way’ of understanding and using observations of children, as a relational pedagogical tool to enhance their care and education.

11.2. Institutional factors

Studies in various contexts (for example, Grieshaber et al, 2000; Hatch and Grieshaber, 2002; Kwon, 2002; Anning et al, 2004) have found that practitioners' work, and their approaches to observing children, are influenced by the pressure of workplace policies and procedures, largely resulting from centralised government control of early years care and education. Findings here correspond with those from the earlier Australian study (Grieshaber et al, 2000), with assessment of children's development dominating observation practice. Like their Australian counterparts, most of the newly qualified practitioners in this study felt under pressure to complete the required developmental observation records within the limited time available. Dewey (1933: 22) wrote of the importance of taking time to absorb information, in order to develop significant understandings: "some times slowness and depth of response are intimately connected." Although Dewey was referring in this instance to school students' ideas and potential, the risk of superficial judgements being made on the basis of rushed observations also has relevance for early years practitioners.

The participants in this study felt the lack of time acutely because of their conscientious approach to their work. They were all concerned to maintain up to date, observation-based progress records for their key children, and thus conformed to the systems in place in their settings and beyond. This compliance with external regulation was noted, similarly, in Primary School teachers after the introduction of the National Curriculum (following the Education Reform Act, 1988). Clough and Nutbrown (2001: 169) cite Head teachers' responses at that time, including:

"We were always good record keepers and had good records of children's development in different areas. But since the National Curriculum, we've decided that we will record the Attainment targets – that is what they (the powers that be) are interested in. They seem to think that is what's important so that's what we're doing."

Likewise, Woods et al (1997) developed a typology of teachers' reactions to changes in their work, describing: enhanced teachers; compliant teachers; non-compliant

teachers; and diminished teachers. The largest category (29 of the sample of 64 teachers) was found to be that of 'compliant teacher'. Jeffrey (1999) explored the impact of external audit and accountability on teachers' professionalism at this time and observed that teachers experienced tensions in reconciling the technical demands of the curriculum with their own child-centred theories and practices. He also argued that erosion of trust in teachers and schools led to a particular focus by Ofsted inspectors upon teachers' plans, records and assessments, as these are easy to quantify in order to make comparisons across the country. A national curriculum, with its associated centralised inspection system, has now been extended to include early years care and education a decade later than in schools (see Chapter One) and with similar effects. It can be seen from the findings from this study, of newly qualified practitioners, that they are compliant with the external care standards and curricula and conform conscientiously with the policies and procedures (see, for example, the 'reporting' aspect of formal uses of observation, discussed in Chapter Seven) This results in formal approaches to observation, which comply with a requirement to demonstrate children's progress in standardised ways (QCA, 2000; DCSF, 2008; QCDA, 2009a).

The tensions which Jeffrey (1999) observed in school settings, between following child-centred practice and meeting the requirements of a standardised curriculum, correspond closely with the findings from this study. In early years care and education, however, the Foundation Stage curriculum is perceived by its developers and proponents to be child-centred and progressive in its approach (QCA, 2000; DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2008) whereas it is seen by its critics to be instrumental in its aims, furthering a government agenda which prioritises the development of skills and preparation for school and work (Soler and Miller, 2003; Moss, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; OECD, 2006; Papatheodorou, 2008; Ellyatt, 2009). Both progressive and instrumental aims can be identified within the curriculum documents (QCA, 2000; DCSF, 2008) and these divisions are symptomatic of inconsistency in the policy agenda and detract from coherence of practice (Luff, 2010). This will be further

discussed in the next part of this chapter, in which the focus moves from the institution to the individual.

11.3. Individuals' personal qualities

Tronto (1993:115) suggests that the more powerful in society, including those in public roles, “take care of” issues; and it is left to the less privileged to “care about” and meet the needs of others, including children. Whist carers see value in their own work, like the practitioners in this study who express their joy and satisfaction in working with children (see Chapter Eight, section four); as discussed in Chapter Four, child care work is not valued and rewarded in society, with all the participants in this study working for low pay⁵⁶. Their sensitive caring is appreciated by their mentors, who praise their personal qualities and abilities, and by the babies and young children who, like Monica (cited by Eide and Winger, 2005, see Chapter Three) recognise when they are really cared for. Leffers (1993: 72) writes of the importance of “continual striving to maintain and expand our awareness of our interconnection with others” and this is seen in the connected ways of seeing and knowing, exemplified in the interplay between the observer and the observed (described in Chapters Six and Seven). This sensitive caring is skilled work: *“It needs very observant and astute people to tune into babies from other people’s families”* (Selleck, 2001: 84). Nevertheless, as the quotation chosen to open this chapter suggests, the emotion invested in caring for children may undermine the status of the work (Tronto, 1993; Moyles, 2001).

Within the field of early childhood itself, ‘childcare’ services are sometimes viewed as a, second best, replacement for parental care (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Moss, 2006c). This critique incorporates a denigration of the practitioners’ warm, quasi maternal qualities. Arguments for moving towards a pedagogical discourse, when discussing early years provision, rather than a childcare discourse (Moss 2006c) are very persuasive when the models given are holistic, Nordic approaches

⁵⁶ Hollie’s school job is ‘term time only’, so she does not get holiday pay; the staff in blue nursery earn just above the minimum wage and work a 40 hour week; in green nursery, the conditions are better, but the staff are on the same pay scales as the college technicians and junior administrators

which combine both high quality care and education. In England, however, the situation is more confused (as indicated in the description of the exo-system in Chapter One). The Labour government labelled a key part of its policy a ‘childcare strategy’ (DfES, 2004a), and passed a Childcare Act (HM Government, 2006) with the aim of supporting parental employment. Since 1998, however, the location of early years provision within the education department (known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families, until May 2010) has led to an emphasis upon the implementation of national curricula and a regime of Ofsted inspections to monitor educational outcomes and regulate standards.

Elfer (2007) indicates that this split between care and education can lead to confusion when identifying the main goals and primary shared tasks of early years settings. He highlights tensions in the role of sustaining close key person relationships with individuals whilst also taking responsibility for the learning of groups. From the findings of this study, I would argue that early years practitioners respond to these twin government agendas through both caring for children (as seen in the informal, ‘connected’ ways of seeing and knowing) and performing an educational role (the formal, ‘separate’ ways of seeing and knowing).

There is, perhaps, a need for early years practitioners to reclaim the caring dimension of their role, which risks becoming less valued in the current climate where, in addition to the disparagement of ‘childcare’, professionalism is increasingly associated with leadership and management opportunities (CWDC 2009b; McGillivray, 2008). Osgood (2006) points out that recent policy reform has resulted in increased workload, an emphasis upon technical competence and a managerialist approach, which is inconsistent with feminine caring values. Robins and Silcock (2001: 25) suggest that the ‘nursery nurses’ were unique in “straddling the divide between education and child-care” but this has been compromised by a change in emphasis towards education and a role of “helping pupils reach measurable performance goals”, as seen throughout this study. Many aspects of the role of a social pedagogue, now commanding international attention and respect

(Boddy et al, 2005; Moss, 2006c; Petrie et al, 2009) are those of nursery nurses, who have now lost a clear professional identity (McGillivray, 2008) having moved away from a defined role (which included caring, health promotion, safeguarding, providing for play and supporting growth and development). Whereas nursery nurses, with NNEB qualifications, used to work alongside early years teachers, in complementary roles, the practitioners in this study are either undertaking similar work to a teacher (planning, implementing and evaluating curriculum and supporting children's learning, in the case of those working in day nursery settings) or are in a subservient teacher assistant role (like Hollie in the school Reception class).

11.4. Relationships and responsibilities

The interactions between the individuals and the institutions in which they work are revealed in the responsibilities which they take on, or are given, and the relational contexts in which these are carried out. In Greeno's (1997, 2006) terms these environmental conditions could be described as affordances, which facilitate or constrain the activity of observing; or, in Eraut's (2007, 2008) view, as contextual factors which promote or limit professional growth.

Like the newly qualified nurses in the LINEA research (Eraut, 2007, Eraut et al, 2008) those practitioners in this study who work in day nursery environments are often over-challenged with responsibilities. On a daily basis, they face the competing demands of attending to children and completing required paperwork. This heavy allocation of work is undertaken with a strong sense of commitment – expressed in their sense of responsibility when entrusted with the safety and well-being of other people's children. There is little recognition or formal support for continuing learning within the workplace, nevertheless, the practitioners gain confidence in their professional abilities as they gain experience, as Hollie's words (chosen to head Chapter Eight) suggest.

In Eraut's (2007) view, relationships with people at work are highly significant for workplace learning and the success of the enterprises with which newly qualified

staff are involved. In this study relationships between staff and with other people, including children and their families, are positive but they are not directed towards supporting the development of practitioners' skills. Taylor et al (2009) offer a model for building understandings of early years practice, through reflection, and identify the role of mentor as crucial in this process. Hollie is the only participant within this research who experiences effective mentoring, from the teacher with whom she works and, informally, from more experienced teaching assistants. Whilst these mentors structure and encourage her professional development, they are not trained in observation. In blue setting staff were well supported in gaining initial qualifications but once these were acquired were given additional responsibilities with no visible support. In green setting, likewise, support is focused upon students on training placements at the settings and the newly qualified practitioners themselves act as mentors.

These experiences contrast with those of social workers who are supported to deal with the emotional challenges of their work (Tanner and le Riche, 2000). This corresponds with Elfer's (2007) view that, whilst current systems of curriculum planning and assessment in early years settings are sophisticated, these are not matched by technologies for considering personal responses in professional contexts. The same critique could be applied to initial training and professional development, in which attention is paid to acquisition of skills, which match core competencies or the government agenda, but managing the feelings involved in becoming an observant carer are outside formal curricula (Colley, 2004, 2006).

11.5. Contexts for developing relational approaches to observation

From what I have found and reported in this study, formal ways of seeing and knowing children are implemented to identify and track their progress and informal ways of seeing and knowing children support and promote their well-being and promote their safety. Both these approaches to observing children can be supportive of children's learning and growth but, as the studies which prompted this inquiry indicated (Moyles et al, 2002; Ofsted, 2004), they are not brought together

effectively in curriculum planning based upon observation of children's interests and experience.

My initial speculation (expressed in Chapter One) was that this difficulty in using accurate observations as the basis of curriculum planning, might be located in a mismatch between the observation skills taught in initial training and the uses of observation in the early years workplace. Findings from the exploratory study with college students (Luff, 2005) and from the responses of the newly qualified practitioners, however, suggest a high level of confidence in abilities to observe children within the workplace. As the formal, separate ways of knowing identified in practice draw upon the skills developed in training of observing and charting normative development and so newly qualified practitioners implement this task very effectively. Broader pedagogical uses of observation, (such as those explored in Chapter Three, above, and further discussed in Chapter Ten) are not emphasised in initial training or evident in the practice that I observed.

Where these pedagogical uses of observation (which bring together formal, separate, and informal, connected, ways of knowing) are communicated effectively is within continuing professional development initiatives and projects (Blenkin et al, 1996; Lockett, 1996, 2000, 2002; Pascal and Bertram, 1997 Elfer, 2005, Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Broadhead, 2006; Manning Morton, 2006; Podmore, 2006; Bancroft et al, 2008). What characterises these schemes are the creation of relationships of trust between the scheme leaders and staff teams and the provision of resources and contexts in which personal awareness and theoretical knowledge are brought together. These process oriented approaches thus provide insights for moving towards training and practice in which formal, separate and informal, connected ways of seeing and knowing are combined effectively.

11.6. Seeing and knowing children

In conclusion, I argue that practitioners employ both formal, 'separate' ways and informal 'connected' ways of seeing and knowing children. In this study,

practitioners were seen to work hard to balance their responsibilities to meet formal requirements to observe and assess children with their informal practice, which centres upon observant care and the building of relationships with children and families. These ways of knowing are influenced by external factors, such as child care legislation and curriculum policy, but enabled and facilitated within early years environments where responsibilities and relationships are balanced. These findings are illustrated in diagram 11.1:

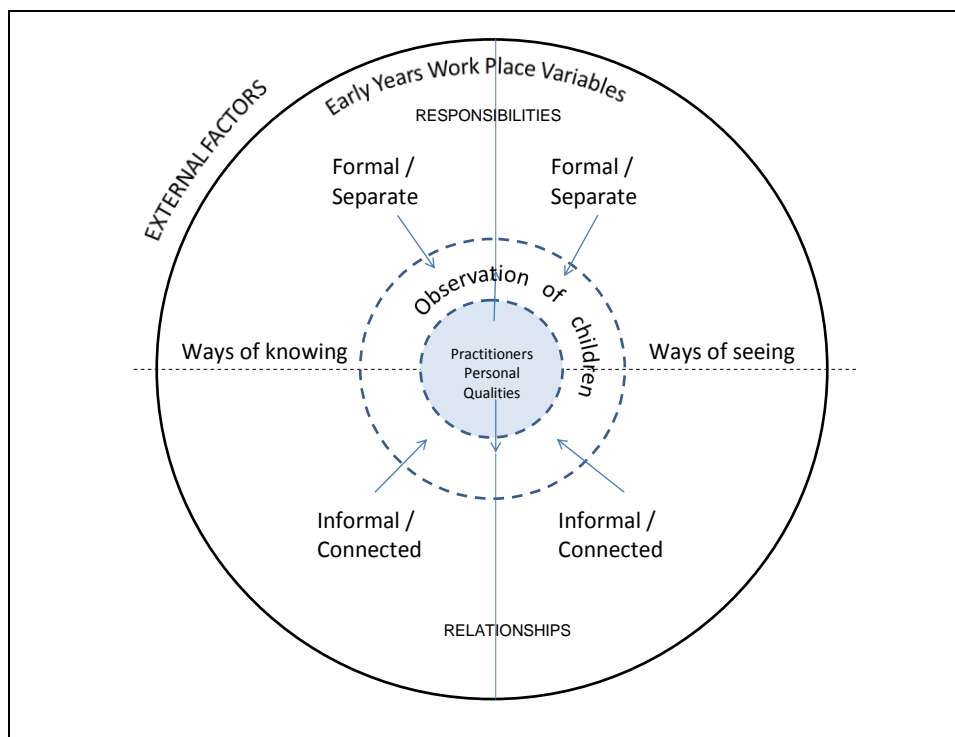


Diagram 11.1.

Ways of seeing and knowing children in the context of the early years workplace

In Chapter Ten, I identified how an individual, experiential account of learning might be understood and extended to portray relational understandings and uses of child observation (see diagram 10.3). In the light of the discussions in this chapter, I now present a framed version of this image (see diagram 11.2) to represent the processes occurring within, and integral to, the context of an early years setting, and influenced by factors beyond the immediate setting. This indicates the necessity for

individuals, who possess the capacities to engage with these processes, to be supported within institutions that offer a context in which these relational approaches to seeing and knowing children can flourish. Positive relational pedagogical approaches to seeing and knowing children can only flourish within enabling contexts which provide educative environments for everybody.

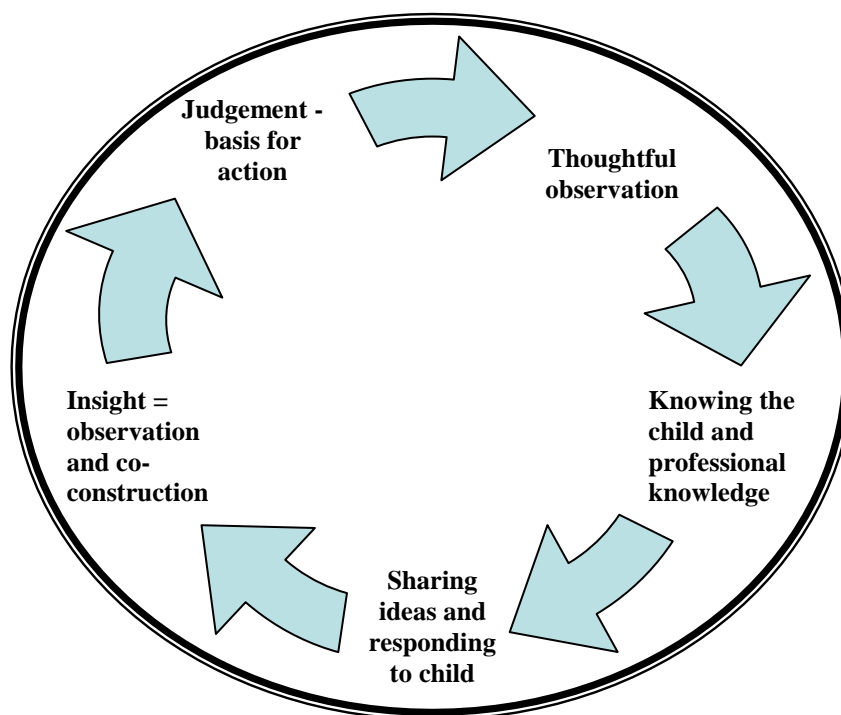


Diagram 11.2. Relational understandings and uses of child observation in context
Adapted from Diagram 1.1 (above) Illustration of a process of experiential learning
 (based upon Dewey 1933 / 1938)

This model, draws upon an expanded account of Dewey's (1897/1974; 1904/1974; 1916/2007; 1924/1983; 1927/1998; 1928/1984; 1933/1998; 1938/1997) educational philosophy, and relates this to the challenge of observing young children in contemporary settings. The focus is upon observation as an activity embedded within processes of thinking, and experiential contexts, which make learning and growth possible. From thoughtful and careful seeing of the child and perception of

his or her actions, the early years practitioner draws upon her prior understandings of the child and upon knowledge (drawn from the curriculum and awareness of developmental theory) to interpret what is seen and heard and formulate a response. The immediate response is likely to be similar in character to the connected ways of seeing and knowing but there is also scope to communicate with the child and with others (for example, colleagues and members of the child's family) in order to develop sophisticated, shared, understandings of the child's experience and so make more informed judgement about educative opportunities which may promote his or her growth. Thus connected and separate ways of seeing and knowing children can be combined in an approach within which the child is observed sympathetically and thoughtfully and a range of perspectives and possibilities drawn upon in order to make decisions about means to direct his or her learning to worthwhile ends.

11.7. Summary

This chapter has focussed upon discussion of the early years workplace, identifying how institutional and individual factors may interact to influence child observation, as an aspect of newly qualified practitioner's work. The complex inter-actions between the practitioners and their work environments were explored with a focus upon institutional factors and the ways in which the macro and exo systems of ideology, legislation and policy may impact upon the meso and micro systems in which observation is practised. Environments are seen to afford opportunities for participation and to support care and learning when levels of responsibility and positive relationships are balanced effectively.

The conceptual conclusions of the study, with separate and connected ways of knowing occurring within early years workplaces, were illustrated in diagram 11.1. A further diagram (11.2.) showed the practical implications of the study, in the form of an expanded notion of experiential learning designed to support relational approaches to child observation which combine the strengths of both separate and connected ways of seeing and knowing. These conclusions are discussed next, in Chapter Twelve, the final part of the thesis.

Part Six - Conclusions

Chapter Twelve – Contributions to knowing: answers to the research question

“In the intellectual domain, our caring represents a quest for understanding.”

(Noddings, 2003: 169)

This final chapter concludes the thesis by summarising answers to the research question, which was posed in the first chapter. The three parts of this question, considered separately, have guided both the literature based and empirical investigations and discussions, presented above. Here the elements of the question are reconciled and some answers brought together. The theoretical and practical implications and conclusions are then, briefly, explored. An evaluation and short critique of the study is offered, together with possibilities for future research. The thesis ends by claiming to have made a contribution to knowing, within the field of early childhood education and care.

12.1. Answers to the research question

This study has been guided throughout by the question: “How do newly qualified child care and education practitioners understand and use child observation during their first year of employment in early years settings?” Findings have shown that, in their daily work, newly qualified child care workers demonstrate two qualitatively different ways of seeing and knowing children through observation.

Formally they follow developmental models in order to understand and track progress and the attainment of particular skills. This can be characterised as a key aspect of professional knowledge and practice, in which they have pride and confidence, and which is respected by others including, and perhaps particularly, external evaluators. It is, however, a ‘separate’ way of seeing and knowing the children and it links well with the required methods of assessing and mapping the outcomes of the Foundation Stage curriculum.

Informally, however, the child comes “before the chart” (Selleck , 2001: 90) there are strong signs of ‘connected’ ways of seeing and knowing children of tuning in to children and making caring, sensitive responses. This, too, is an important and vital aspect of professionalism but one which is personal and valued by those within, and more difficult to measure as a quality indicator by those outside (Osgood, 2006b).

The first part of the research question (considered in Chapters Two, Six and Nine, above) focussed upon newly childhood early childhood practitioners' understandings of child observation. Drawing upon theory from developmental psychology, a framework of different ways of carrying out and interpreting observations was proposed and discussed. Analysis of empirical evidence showed that practitioners value and use knowledge of developmental ages and stages and applied this in order to see and track progress. This is characterised as formal, procedural understanding; a ‘separate’ way of knowing about children. The other key aspect of practitioners' understanding of observation, not embraced by the initial theoretical framework, was an apparently intuitive responsiveness to each child. This is part of an informal, ‘connected’ way of knowing children. This latter understanding is theorised by going beyond the framework of ‘grand theories’ from developmental psychology and, instead, drawing insights from concepts of maternal thinking (Ruddick, 1989) and philosophies of caring (Noddings, 2003; Goodfellow, 2008).

The second element of the research question (addressed in Chapters Three, Seven and Ten) explored early childhood practitioners' uses of child observation. Here the basis for the investigation was the work of pioneer educators, linked with current exemplary practice, and a range of pedagogical uses of child observation were identified and discussed. Again, findings from an analysis of participant observations of practitioners' work showed that they demonstrated formal, ‘separate’, and informal, ‘connected’ approaches. The main formal approach was the use of observation to track and record progress in relation to curriculum learning outcomes. Informally, observation was primarily used for noticing and responding to children. Herein lies an explanation of the difficulties with translating observation

into effective curriculum planning which Moyles et al (2002) and Ofsted (2004) identified (and which triggered this investigation, see Chapter One). Practitioners are diligent in translating the skills of identifying children's developmental stages, well learned in initial training, to those of tracking progress in relation to outcomes required by the curriculum guidance. They are also conscientious carers responding consistently and sensitively to children and their families. Nevertheless, they face a challenge in offering a curriculum (QCA, 2000; National Strategies, 2009a) because this demands a complex bringing together of the two different ways of thinking and acting. On the one hand their planning should be based upon the observed interests and abilities of children and yet, at the same time, activities must result in progress towards pre-determined learning outcomes.

Comparative studies have contrasted progressive curricula, which recognise the complexity and diversity of children's lives, interests and experiences, with the simplification inherent in instrumental, technocratic curricula based upon measurement of developmental outcomes (e.g. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Selleck, 2001; Soler and Miller, 2003; Papatheodorou, 2008; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Whilst progressive principles underpin the English Early Years Foundation Stage, it is also designed to conform to the government agenda of raising academic standards. Successful implementation of the Foundation Stage curriculum therefore requires that these quite different views be reconciled (Luff, 2010).

The third and final aspect of the study (presented in Chapters Four, Eight and Eleven) placed these findings in context, considering observation as an element of newly qualified practitioners' work. Practitioners' personal qualities, particularly a sense of professional identity and their growing professional confidence were seen to intersect with institutional factors, notably quality of relationships and levels of responsibility, whilst structural variables were also seen to influence work place practice. Practitioners' personal commitment to their caring roles and the relationships that they establish with colleagues, children and families are seen as central to the informal work of seeing and knowing children; pressures of time and external

demands means that more formal tasks are completed conscientiously and compliantly but only rarely serve to enrich the care and learning.

In settings which are generously resourced and staffed by well qualified, strongly supported professionals, observation and associated pedagogical documentation can be a tool for bringing together the two ways of seeing and knowing children (e.g. Waller, 2007; Luff et al, 2009). These two cases (outlined in Chapter Ten), are both from research projects and serve as illustrations of relational pedagogy. They can be interpreted as demonstrations of how practitioners' informal, connected ways of knowing, based upon commitment to values of care, can be combined with formal, separate understandings, informed by developmental theory, and transformed into 'practice wisdom' (Goodfellow, 2001), enabling ways of working that allow practitioners to "ensternise a pedagogy that is meaningful to them and to children" (Papatheodorou 2008: 24).

12.2. Conceptual conclusions

The answers to the research question, offered here, are addressed from an ecological contextualist theoretical stance. In locating the study (see Chapter One) I drew upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992, 1995a, 1995b) concept of interacting bioecological systems to understand and describe how practice, research and the experiences and growth of adults and children are located in, influence, and are influenced by culture, time and place. The traditions of early childhood education and care are influenced by the beliefs, values and ideas of both pioneer pedagogues and developmental psychologists and this heritage forms part of the macro system which continues to influence principles and practice in the present day (Webb, 1974; McAuley and Jackson, 1992; McAuley, 1993; Bruce et al, 1995; Drummond, 2000; Nutbrown et al, 2008)

This recognition of the significance of cultural historical context resonates with socio-cultural theories and certainly takes inspiration from Vygotsky, (1978, 1981, 1997) Bruner (1960, 1986, 1990) and Rogoff (1998, 2003). These powerful theories

form the basis for coherent and principled approaches to early childhood education, and associated credit-based observational assessment in other contemporary contexts (e.g. Carr, 2001; Van Oers, 2003; Fler, 2004). Within the present systems of early childhood education in England, however, there is a strong emphasis upon the progress of the individual and arguments for a socio-cultural approach remain in the academy (e.g. Daniels, 2001; Anning et al, 2004, 2009; Edwards, 2004).

From the beginning of the thesis certain tensions and dichotomies were evident (for example between objective and subjective theoretical approaches and convergent and divergent approaches to assessment) and Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of education was identified as third part of the conceptual framework which offered a tool for reconciling opposing positions, acknowledging conflicts and inconsistencies and seeking integration and growth. Early childhood educators have drawn inspiration from Dewey, particularly in the United States of America (Cuffaro, 1995) but also in Europe. In England his ideas are not directly taught but the importance of experiential learning based upon the interests of children is embedded within the early years traditions and the current curriculum. In this thesis, I have used Dewey's (1933, 1938) model of experiential learning to explore and explain how the processes of seeing and knowing children through observation may occur and how practitioners' understandings and children's learning can be seen as parallel processes (see above, particularly Chapters One and Ten; and Luff et al, forthcoming). I have also linked this approach to learning with other aspects of Dewey's philosophy, including ideas of community (Dewey, 1927) and teacher education (Dewey, 1938/1988) in order to utilise his ideas, in new ways, to illuminate contemporary pedagogical understandings and uses of child observation.

The concepts of 'separate' and 'connected' ways of knowing are drawn from the work of Belenky et al (1997), who themselves derived the terms from theories of moral development proposed by Gilligan (1982) and Lyons (1983). They describe two distinct types of procedural knowing: separate knowing is based upon impersonal means of establishing truth; whereas in connected knowing "truth

emerges through care” (Belenky et al, 1997: 102). Belenky and her colleagues identified women as displaying either one of these ways of knowing (or one of the other perspectives recognized from their study). In this research, the same practitioners displayed both ways of seeing and knowing children but, nevertheless, the terminology, and the underpinning explanations, have proved very useful for characterising different understandings and uses of observation.

Dewey’s (1933: 62) critique of teaching theory from textbooks, separated from practice, “cut loose from practical and moral bearing” can be related to the teaching of observation techniques and developmental theory in college classrooms. If, alternatively, acquisition of information becomes an “integral part of the training of thought” (Dewey, 1933: 64) then early years practitioners, from their initial training onwards, may engage in construction of meanings from their own experience (including values, emotions and relationships) whilst also taking into account scientific explanations in order to construct fuller understandings of the children with whom they work. Thus the distinction between ‘separate’ and ‘connected’ ways of seeing and knowing may be overcome.

12.3. Practical implications

This project was motivated by a practical problem, of an apparent mismatch between the understandings and uses of child observation developed during initial training and the ability to use observation as part of a pedagogical process when working with children. Through an exploration of practice, this difficulty has been understood and some insights gained as to how the issue could be resolved. Overall, what is needed are ways of bringing together the child and the chart and here three proposals are offered, in relation to understanding child observation, using participant observation, and conditions of workplace practice.

In Chapter Nine, practitioners’ intuitive knowledge was paralleled with ‘maternal thinking’ (Ruddick, 1989). Whilst the ability to provide nurturing care is “undoubtedly an asset” (Selleck, 2001: 85) and is of central importance to the child’s

experience in an early years setting, skilled practitioners need to find ways of reconciling this with their expert understandings of child development. Webb (1974: 4) identified “knowing what is done” as characteristic of a professional knowledge amongst early years practitioners, focussed upon “premises of child-centredness and all-round development”. This study shows that these understandings remain widely shared and highly valued but are still not fully formulated or systematically stated. As was shown by the successful continuing professional development initiatives, discussed in Chapter Four, observation of children offers potential for practitioners to articulate and develop their practice in directions which are consistent with their professional values. During initial training and when in practice, a capacity for reflection, analysis and creativity can be developed based upon what can be known about children from what is seen (e.g. Lockett, 1996, 2002; Broadhead, 2006; Manning Morton, 2006; Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Bancroft et al, 2008). What the current study highlights is that the formal processes of observing and planning for children tend to be the individual responsibility of the key person, which reduces opportunities for gaining detailed understandings of children through discussions with parents and professional team talk (Selleck, 2001).

The main means by which this study was conducted, through a sustained period of participant observation in early years settings, also offered important insights. In some ways my experience as a researcher was analogous with the experiences of the newly qualified practitioners and there are many parallels between the research process and the work of child observation in an early years setting (Luff, 2008a). This mirroring of the topic of the research and the methodological approach has helped me to recognise the potential of participant observation for relational pedagogy. Recording and reflecting upon participant observations and recognising their subjectivity could offer a more engaging and worthwhile approach to observation in training than performing a range of objective non-participant observations. Rinaldi (2005, 128) suggests that *“We are sometimes frightened by subjectivity because it means assuming responsibility. So our search for objectivity is often driven by the fear of taking on responsibility.”* This is, arguably, the case in

both training and practice as observation which claims objectivity of assessment can be confidently matched with development charts or listed learning outcomes whereas observations which are acknowledged to be more subjective and relational require a capacity to tolerate uncertainty (Lubeck, 1998) and to negotiate knowing of the child. Ideally, the skills needed to observe all the factors involved in children's growth and to use this information to provide effective care and education have to be continuously developed and shared within a community of enquiry and practice.

Most practically, to enable meaningful seeing and knowing of children, changes are needed to some aspects of the Foundation Stage curriculum together with an improvement of working conditions for practitioners in day nurseries. If the status of learning goals within the EYFS were to be changed from statutory to advisory, then the outcomes could serve as indicators, and a supportive framework for learning, rather than as a prescriptive tool for measuring children and focussing on their limitations. Foundation Stage teachers in school settings benefit from weekly preparation, planning and assessment (PPA) time, achieved after hard won workforce reform (DfES / WMAG 2004). Practitioners in day nursery settings are performing a comparable role in delivering the Foundation Stage curriculum, but with low pay and long working hours, and are unlikely to have dedicated time within the working week to work on any administrative tasks relating to observation or to engage in shared planning. Provision of additional resources could contribute to more creative approaches to observation and documentation, which successfully combine the separate and connected ways of seeing and knowing children.

12.4. An evaluation of the study

The study fulfilled its aims in getting close to newly qualified early years practitioners' experiences and gaining an appreciation of the place of child observation within their daily work, through sustained participant observation in the early years settings in which they worked. This accorded with the ecological approach and aided understanding of the contexts in which practitioners were working, both in terms of sharing their day to day joys and challenges and also

realising how national policies impacted upon local settings. This level of engagement with practice enables me to have confidence in the validity of the findings. This view is corroborated by recognition of the outcomes of the study in the responses of other early years practitioners, with whom I have discussed the research.

Transcripts and records of observations were returned to participants for comment, and factual findings were also shared during the study (*see Appendix I*). The in-depth analysis of data, and the development of ideas about practitioners' ways of seeing and knowing children, took place after the completion of the year of empirical research in the early years settings. The concepts of separate and connected ways of seeing and knowing children are, therefore, yet to be explained and explored with the participants to discover whether or not they resonate with their experiences.

The approach to the research enabled me to fulfil my aims of exploring understandings and uses of child observation. This was my personal project, to which the participants generously contributed, but a shared participatory project could have addressed their own concerns, supported their practice and valued their work more explicitly. Whilst this would have potential for a more immediate impact upon practice, it may have been more difficult to recruit participants due to a higher level of commitment and the possible impact on their workload of a fuller involvement with the planning and conduct of data collection and analysis. Research work, like observations of children, may benefit from the inclusion of researchers with different perspectives talking together in order to reach meaningful outcomes.

At the outset of a doctoral study it is difficult to anticipate the full scope of a chosen topic, so what is presented here, in this thesis, leaves related avenues still to be explored or revisited. Some of these, with associated possibilities for further research, are discussed next.

12.5. Possibilities for further research

Many questions are raised by this study, both directly and indirectly, and there is great potential for developing new enquiries. Having identified different ways of seeing and knowing children, and highlighted the significance of observant caring, the challenge is now to discover effective means, in training and continuing professional development, of instilling, recognising and inspiring this practice wisdom. A next step could, therefore, be participatory action research exploring possibilities for uses of observation as the basis for relational pedagogy, in which students of child care and education and early years practitioners use their formal and informal observations as a basis for discussions about children and to develop ideas for learning.

A linked topic for further research could be an examination of roles of external mentors, such as advisory teachers (or perhaps even educational researchers) who, like the pedagogistas in Reggio Emilia (Filippini, 1998, Rinaldi, 2006) may have a depth of specialist knowledge and the ability to support teams of practitioners in working out valuable ways of observing children and of theorising their approaches. In Deweyan terms, these professionals may enable practitioners to unite their experience with extant theory and so develop new insights to inform educative action.

There are also questions of agency in relation to what is observed and recorded and the setting of developmental targets. In the current context, it is the early years practitioner who decides priorities. In formal, ‘separate’ ways of knowing, the focus is the child as object, the priority is assessing his or her development, and any need or ability is perceived to be within the child. The child has greater opportunity for participation in relation to informal, connected, ways of knowing as the adult notices him or her and acts responsively (see, for instance, examples from the data outlined in Chapters Six and Seven, above). The Foundation Stage curriculum (DCSF, 2008; National Strategies, 2009a) proposes that children and parents should play an active role in observation and the associated Foundation Stage Profile assessments,

although acknowledges that this dialogue is not yet occurring (QCDA, 2009c). The time is ripe for action research to explore ways to achieve interactive and collaborative ways of observing which represent a wider range of perspectives.

In seeking explanations of early years practitioners' informal understandings of child observation, I made reference to theories of care (see particularly Chapter Nine). These ideas merit fuller exploration in a developed review of concepts and ethics of caring, and an analysis of these in relation to the work and experience of early years practitioners, particularly from a feminine and feminist perspective. There is also much scope for further empirical work to investigate practitioners' thinking. Can Ruddick's (1989) concept of practice developing into modes of thinking (which she exemplifies in 'Maternal Thinking'), and Goodfellow's (2001) arguments about 'wise practice' be developed to identify the distinctive positive characteristics of early years practitioners' activity and thought? Both of these avenues of investigation could prove fruitful in terms of working out and describing observation based pedagogies of care.

12.6. Contribution to knowing

In summary, the thesis that I have presented here, and the proffered contribution to knowing in the field of early childhood education and care, is an analysis and reconceptualisation of child observation and an identification of its importance within a relational pedagogical approach to early childhood education and care. This has been achieved through exploring the experiences of newly qualified early years practitioners, a group whose work has not previously been a topic for research.

Two ways of using and understanding child observation have been identified and explored. One of these is '*separate seeing and knowing*', completing brief developmental observations in order to comply with curriculum procedures and the statutory requirement to demonstrate children's progress in different areas of learning. The other is '*connected seeing and knowing*', observant and responsive practice aligned with the early years' practitioners' own caring values. This latter,

underestimated, way of understanding and using observation is vital to children's wellbeing within early childhood settings.

In the light of these ways of knowing, and drawing inspiration from Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of education and from notions of wise practice, a new understanding of child observation is proposed. This requires a move away from a static view of child observations, as products, towards dynamic uses of formal and informal observations as part of a process of caring, relational pedagogy. Such an approach offers possibilities for grounding practice in the intuitive wisdom of practitioners' connected ways of seeing and knowing children, whilst actively seeking the insights and possibilities offered by theoretical perspectives on children's development and early childhood pedagogy.

"... effectiveness depends so largely not just on knowing about the learner but knowing the learner; surely these two features of teacher-learner relationships are intertwined; but they are different in ways that are not easy to describe but worth seeking."

(Katz and Katz, 2009:12)

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Appendix A

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9 March 2004

Mrs Paulette Luff
24 Brooklands Road
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Dear Paulette

Project Title: Looking and Learning: the observation and assessment skills of newly qualified childcare and education workers
Principal Investigator: Paulette Luff

Thank you for your recent application for ethics approval. This has now been considered by the Schools of Community Health & Social Studies and Education according to the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) procedures, and we are pleased to inform you that ethics approval has been given to your research for a period of three years from March 2004.

Please note that, if your research has not been completed within three years, you will need to apply to UREC for an extension of ethics approval. Similarly, if your research should change significantly in any respect, or if risk of harm or breach of confidentiality becomes likely, you will be obliged to submit a new application.

We wish you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Greg Mantle
For the University Research Ethics Committee

Dr Gill Robinson

Cc: Isobel Humphrey (Secretary, UREC)
Beverley Pascoe (Graduate School)
Dr Theodora Papatheodorou (DoS)

Appendix B

Focus group interview questions - 24/05/04

How have you found your work for Unit 1?

Do you think that child observation was an important skill to learn on your course?

Look at these reasons for observing children⁵⁷. Choose one and explain why it is important or interesting.

- Observations help me learn more about children's development
- Staff can use observations to evaluate activities
- Child observation forms the basis for curriculum planning
- Observation gives you a greater understanding of a child's individual needs
- Child observations are useful for sharing with children's parents

What type of child observations and assessments do you think you will be doing when you start work?

Do you feel well prepared for observing children in the work place?

Do you have any other comments or questions?

⁵⁷ These statements were printed onto card in large type

<u>Appendix C</u>	
Summary of students' answers to focus group questions (themes and examples):	
1. How have you found your work for Unit 1 (Child Observation)?	
Interest and engagement	It's interesting doing observations in different settings
	It's interesting to observe children with behaviour problems and you can give feedback to parents about how they've been
Level of difficulty	Some observations are easy and some are difficult, quite long
	Stressing but alright
Number of observations	There's a lot to do - 15 observations – five in each placement would be enough
	If you did 15 observations you could cover areas in more detail and still look at development at different ages
Importance of observation	The three observations on one child looking at different areas of development was good, it gives you a better understanding of why observation can help you get an overview of that child's development
	Every child's an individual so each observation should be important
2. Do you think that child observation was an important skill to learn?	
Developmental norms	Yes, before I didn't know about stages and how children are individuals
	Yes, you learn more about children and about what's appropriate at each age and stage so you can do more to help them and meet their individual needs
Practical uses	Children play in different ways and if you observe you learn about play
	It helps you understand what activities are suitable for children
Preparation for the workplace	It's important because you do need to know it for work place practice
	Doing all the different types, like knowing about time samples, event samples and narrative observations is good preparation for work
3. What type of observations do you think you will be doing when you start work?	
Checklists	A checklist of skills for every child
	To see how you can help the child progress onto the next milestone
Brief notes	Observations on little yellow stick-it notes or labels
	You sit by the activity and note down what each child does on a sticky label
Diagnostic assessments	If the child has a difficulty to see if they need help and the type of help they need
	why they did that and what could have been done to control their behaviour
4. Do you feel well prepared for observing children in the work place?	
I feel well prepared, especially by doing the work placements, we've seen how everyone works and what to expect from there	
It's always going to be different doing a proper job than being at college or on work experience	

<u>Appendix D</u>	
Statements about purposes of observation (from Wood, 2004) with summaries of CACHE Level 3 DCE students' choices and examples of their responses	
If you observe you can find out children's interests and build on them	
Comment	Most popular choice – about motivating children to learn new skills
<i>If you can find out what children like and don't like you can help them. You can find a way to get them stimulated so they'll choose an activity and learn.</i>	
<i>You can see if they like games and if they don't like sitting doing maths it's more interesting to do games like maths bingo.</i>	
Observation gives you a greater understanding of a child's individual needs	
Comment	Linked to awareness of children's interests and building relationships
<i>Through observing a child you can really get to know them so you can help them socially and emotionally as well as physically.</i>	
<i>Not just comparing the child to the norm but getting an overview</i>	
Observations help me learn more about children's development	
Comment	Learning about development is a feature of the DCE course
<i>You can see how they're progressing and help them onto the next stage</i>	
<i>You can link up theories with your observations.</i>	
Staff can use observations to evaluate play activities	
Comment	Also seen in terms of promoting development and monitoring progress
<i>You can give them different activities you think they will enjoy and help them develop more skills.</i>	
<i>You can observe whether children are learning what's been planned and meeting the stepping stones or early learning goals that they're working towards.</i>	
Child observation forms the basis for curriculum planning	
Comment	Not chosen by any students but implied in some other responses
<i>You can find out what each child can do, where they're at and plan to meet their needs.</i>	

Appendix E

Interview questions 1

How did you find your work for Unit 1 of the DCE / observations for NVQ3?

Do you think that child observation was an important skill to learn on your course?

Look at these reasons for observing children⁵⁸. Please choose one and explain why it is important or interesting.

- **Observations help me learn more about children's development**
- **Staff can use observations to evaluate activities**
- **Child observation forms the basis for curriculum planning**
- **Children's learning is so complex, rich, fascinating and varied that seeing it take place before your eyes is one of the great rewards of working in the early years.**
- **Observation gives you a greater understanding of a child's individual needs**
- **Child observations are useful for sharing with children's parents**

What type of child observations and assessments do you think you will be doing now you have started work?

Did you notice when you were on placement what the staff did?

Do you feel well prepared for observing children in the work place?

Do you have any other comments or questions?

⁵⁸ Statements printed onto card – as for the focus group questions in the initial study

Appendix F

Interview questions 2

What type of child observations are you doing at the moment?

How are you finding the observation work you have to do in the nursery?

Has what you were taught in college been useful in the workplace?

What ideas / theories about children do you use when you're observing?

How do you use child observation when implementing the Birth to Three Matters and / or Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage?

Do you think you are developing your observation skills?

Do you have any other comments or questions?

Appendix G

Interview questions - 3

What type of child observations and assessments have you been doing since I last spoke with you?

Do you think that your child observation skills are still developing?

Last year I showed you some reasons for observing children. Looking at them again now which one would you choose⁵⁹? Why?

What's been the best / most rewarding thing about your job this year?

Is there anything that you have found difficult or challenging?

What advice would you give to somebody who was finishing their DCE now leaving college and starting a job like yours?

If you were designing a childcare course what's the most important thing you would teach people about child observation?

Do you have any other comments or questions?

⁵⁹ Statements on cards shown again, as for interview 1

Appendix H	
Statements about purposes of observation (from Nutbrown, 2001⁶⁰ and Wood, 2004) with summaries of practitioners' choices and responses	
Observations help me learn more about children's development	
Stella	<i>Observing does help you to know and realise their development and what areas they need to progress on</i>
Kel	<i>you think, "oh yes, so-and-so was sitting down but now look at him, he's crawling!" and that's through observations that you're aware of that.</i>
Mij	<i>If you observe children, different children you can see how they're developing and how they might lack in some skills and make some plans.</i>
Staff can use observations to evaluate activities	
Emma	<i>That's quite good to see what works</i>
Child observation forms the basis for curriculum planning	
Joan (M*)	<i>Because then when you're planning you're planning for the real child You can have a variation of the activities</i>
Children's learning is so complex, rich, fascinating and varied that seeing it take place before your eyes is one of the great rewards of working in the early years.	
Diane	<i>When you sit down and do an observation you actually focus on that childso you notice more</i>
Denise	<i>Applies to babies because you're more likely to see it happening rather than them telling you about it or whatever.</i>
Janet (M)	<i>That's on a personal level what you want from observation On a professional level you've got to have that understanding of what a child can doto bring them to the next stage</i>
Observation gives you a greater understanding of a child's individual needs	
Charlie	<i>It helps me see what they need and gives me a basis to work from</i>
Harriet	<i>Because each child's different It helps you set up the room and see what activities will help the child's development</i>
Hollie	<i>You can see where they struggle, see where they thrive help them more than if you didn't really observe</i>
Saira	<i>When you do actually focus on one child you see them and what they need to do</i>
Child observations are useful for sharing with children's parents	
Lily (M)	<i>when you share them the parents can give feedback like how they play at home and so on and from that you can do observations about play and relate it when you share them the parents can give feedback like how they play at home and so on and from that you can do observations about play and relate it</i>

⁶⁰ Stimulus statements were adapted, with two added from this source, to include areas that students spoke about but that weren't encompassed in the original set of statements taken from Wood (2004)

* M indicates Mentor

Appendix I

Child care and education workers' uses of child observation – a summary of some findings from the first part of a one year study:

Answers to interview questions:

Experiences of observation work for college courses:

- Observations are an interesting part of the course
- Several observations of one child and / or observations of children with particular needs are most rewarding as you can see children making progress
- Evaluating observation work can be difficult, particularly relating what's observed to theories of child development, but it gets easier with experience
- The amount and type of observations that people do for NVQ3 is quite varied
- For some, doing 20 observations for the DCE portfolio was too much and got boring
- Mentors expect newly qualified level 3 staff to have knowledge of child development
- Mentors think that new staff have good observation skills and will continue to develop these skills as they gain experience

Views on the importance of child observation

- Observation is a very important skill to learn as part of a child care course
- With practice observation becomes a natural part of your work with children
- It's important for: getting to know children and recognising their strengths; knowing what to look for when you observe a child; learning about child development; monitoring children's progress; understanding children's individual needs and noticing difficulties; promoting an awareness of how children play and learn; and preparing for observation in the work place, including being able to share insights with children's parents and being able to contribute to evidence for inspections.
- It is useful to be taught a variety of types and styles of observations but not many of these are used in child care settings
- Courses should teach more about the links between observations and planning

Purposes of observation (relating to the statements shown to you)

People found it difficult to choose just one of the statements and did make links between them

Observations help me learn more about children's development

- It's important to learn about the children and help them to develop
- You can get to know the child and the stage that they're at
- You can help them to reach milestones and develop skills that they may lack
- Knowledge about children's development helps you plan appropriate activities

Appendix (I) cont. – Feedback on findings given to participants

Staff can use observations to evaluate activities

- Helps you decide what you'd do again
- You can use evaluations to develop new curriculum plans

Child observation forms the basis for curriculum planning

- Using observations for plans means you're designing activities with children in mind
- Closely linked to understanding an individual child's needs
- If you have an understanding of what a child can do you can use that understanding to bring the child onto the next stage
- This isn't easy as you need many observations to get to know a child and plan accordingly

Children's learning is so complex, rich, fascinating and varied that seeing it take place before your eyes is one of the great rewards of working in the early years.

- This is especially true of working with babies as you notice so much
- Observation can be personally, as well as professionally, satisfying

Observation gives you a greater understanding of a child's individual needs

- Important because every child is different
- You can see where children struggle and where they thrive
- If you understand what children's needs are you can help children more

Child observations are useful for sharing with children's parents

- You can share observations and get feedback from parents so that you can relate what they do at nursery to what they do at home
- Parents don't miss out on the things the children are achieving at nursery

Observation in the work place

- Is more difficult than when you're a student because you have more responsibility
- Brief notes used as evidence for completing checklists are most common
- Evidence is gathered for the foundation stage profiles (school reception class)
- Is used to compile a progress file to show to parents
- Observations are used to inform future planning
- Staff would like to have time to do longer, detailed observations and write them up

Feeling prepared

- Newly qualified staff feel well prepared
- Mentors think that newly qualified level 3 staff are well prepared, especially when they are working in the same setting where they trained (NVQ 3 / work placement)

Appendix (I) cont. – Feedback on findings given to participants

Evidence from my observations

- The skills of being observant / tuned into children are needed and used at all times
- Some practitioners are very sensitive to children's feelings and interests
- Staff aim to spend some time everyday recording their observations
- Sometimes their workload means that observations are not a priority
- "Sticky label" specimen records are the most common type
- All children have well kept records most of which give a real picture of the child
- Observations tend to be positive records of achievements
- There is more focus on ability and comparison of attainment between children once they enter school
- Other paperwork, such as daily record sheets for younger children, involve some observation but when staff are busy these are not always observation based (e.g. recording the same meal or play activities for all children and not exactly what each child ate or played with)
- Observation is used in curriculum planning in the Foundation Stage and with the younger children. It's used in the following ways: observations forming the basis of a child's progress report, which is then used to set learning targets; specimen record observations are used as evidence to complete checklists of achievements; observations of activities are used as the basis for evaluation, of the activity and of each child's learning; observations are used in decision making about extending activities and the planning of follow up activities.
- It is also used to identify children's particular needs (e.g. help with pencil grip)

What I'd like to know more about:

- Is there information about observations that I've missed?
- How do staff spend their time and how do they fit in written observations?
- What's going on in your mind – what do you notice and think about when you're with the children? Which ideas and theories do you connect with what you see when you observe?
- How are observations used in activity planning?
- How are children and parents involved in observation and assessment?

How I'd like to find out more:

More interviews and observations of your work in the setting.

Do you have any ideas? Is there anything that you want to know?

Appendix J – Example of part of a node report

NVivo revision 2.0.161 Licensee: PA Luff
Project: LOOKING AND LEARNING 2

NODE CODING REPORT

Node: basis to work from~
Created: 27/03/2008 - 09:44:47
Modified: 27/03/2008 - 10:26:56
Description: InVivo node created from Charlieblue1

Documents in Set: All Documents
Document 1 of 14 Charlieblue1
Passage 1 of 2 Section 1, Para 19, 145 chars.

19: Also so you can (comprehend) so you can have activities, can plan activities to meet the child, whatever stage they're at, to meet their needs.*

Passage 2 of 2 Section 1, Para 26, 221 chars.

26: like this one: "observation gives you a greater understanding of the child's individual needs". I think that's what it does, well it does for me anyway, it helps me see what they need and gives me a basis to work from.

Document 2 of 14 Harrietblue1
Passage 1 of 1 Section 1, Para 25, 356 chars.

25: child development because that's what I'm doing at the moment looking at development and comparing it to what's in the book and it helps you because you get knowledge about what's expected and it helps you to set up the room and see what activities will help the child's development, and if you want to teach them something how you might do it differently.

Document 3 of 14 Hollieblue1
Passage 1 of 1 Section 1, Para 50, 133 chars.

50: You can use it (observation) to evaluate activities that's quite good to see what works. And it's useful to assess individual needs.

Document 4 of 14 HollyIred
Passage 1 of 1 Section 1.1, Para 50, 215 chars.

50: unless you observe them you don't really know what their needs are because you can actually see where they struggle, see where they thrive and you can help them more than you could if you didn't really observe them.

Document 5 of 14 JanetIred
Passage 1 of 1 Section 3, Para 33, 191 chars.

33: think you've got to have that understanding of what a child can do. It's Ok having that understanding but then you've got to be able to use that understanding to bring them to the next stage.

Document 6 of 14 Joangreen1
Passage 1 of 2 Section 0, Para 13, 269 chars.

13: it will enable them and their other colleagues they're working with to have a clear picture of the children they're working with. So if they observe first and (directly) and precisely there's something to work at and develop with each child or to help their key child.*

Passage 2 of 2 Section 0, Para 25, 301 chars.