

# Observation

Booklet 4b

Interpreting your observations (evaluation) –  
theorists and expert opinion



This is Booklet 4b in a series of seven booklets.

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## Introduction – Booklet 4b

**In this booklet you will find:**

- sections to read;
- activities to complete.

**As you work through the booklet, you should discuss with your teacher or trainer:**

- your thoughts about the activities;
- new words and terms for your glossary;
- your self-assessment in the **How did I do?** section.

**By completing this booklet, you will learn:**

- about the range of theories and theorists in relation to child development;
- how to compare development with theories and expert opinion.

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## Four steps in using the information from your observations

**Step 1. Interpretation (evaluation)** or identifying the child's significant learning and achievements.

**Step 2. Assessment (comparison with the milestones).**

This involves:

- comparison with the milestones;
- comparison using theories and expert opinion.

**Steps 3 (Conclusions and personal learning) and 4 (Making recommendations)** will be covered in Booklet 5.

## Approaches to play and learning

### The pioneers

It can be very interesting and helpful to reflect on the work of the pioneers in early years education and find links between their approach and the observations and comparisons you have made.

### What is the difference between a theory and an approach?

A theory is an idea or set of ideas that can explain development and behaviour. An approach is the way we decide to put into practice our vision of how children should develop and learn. Although the pioneers agree that play is the most effective approach, they each have their own view on how best to organise and resource play. They also have their own views on how the child's day should be structured to promote all round development. Your textbooks will explain the differences between the approaches.

You will find it useful to consider how they borrow from each other, and build on each other's particular approach. The really fascinating thing to do, though, is to relate the approaches of the pioneers to the approach taken in your setting and think about the impact that has on the child or children you have observed.

### Can you see how theories and approaches are linked together?

Look at the two tables on the following pages concerning theorists and the pioneers.

### Think about the following:

- Piaget's active learning and the pioneers' approach.
- Bruner's scaffolding and Montessori's simple-to-complex stages.
- Vygotsky's social context of learning and Froebel's community.

## Theorists

The table below guides you to look at the work of a theorist relevant to the aim of your observation. Remember – this is only a guide. The content of your observation record will highlight theoretical issues that you might wish to follow up.

Theorist	Aim of the observation
Jean Piaget	Play with 0–8-year-olds Early years curriculum National curriculum Cognitive development
Lev Vygotsky	Play Cognitive development Early years curriculum National Curriculum Social development Language development
Jerome Bruner	Play Early years development National curriculum Cognitive development
B.F. Skinner	Social development Behaviour management
Albert Bandura	Social development Behaviour management

John Bowlby	Emotional/social development Transition (parting and reunion with carer/new setting) Attachment (primary carer, key worker)
Sigmund Freud	Emotional development
Erik Erikson	Emotional/social development
Noam Chomsky	Language development

## Pioneers

Pioneer	Approach
Friedrich Froebel 1782–1852	Childhood is an important stage in its own right; it is not just a preparation for adulthood. Parents are children's most important educators. Children and adults learn from each other and the setting is a community. It is important to develop the whole child through the senses and first-hand experiences. Froebel introduced gifts (block play), occupations (art and craft activities) and songs (nursery/finger rhymes, music activities). Play is the means by which children draw together and unify their feelings about, and their knowledge and understanding of, the world. He founded the kindergarten movement.
Maria Montessori 1869–1952	Childhood is a very special period in a person's life. Children will flourish in a specially prepared environment, using specially designed resources. Children are encouraged to become independent learners through structured play, guided by adults. Each sense is developed separately, in simple-to-complex steps.

Rudolf Steiner 1861–1925	Imaginary play is not a valid experience – it is a deception and takes children away from real learning. Childhood has three phases – the 'will', the 'heart' and the 'head'. The 'will' governs the first seven years and children need protection in a carefully prepared environment. The environment should be filled with natural materials which provide stimulation to the senses and are aesthetically pleasing. There is an emphasis on imaginary play and role-play. Stories and songs are important; stories are told, not read, so books have no place in the setting.
Margaret Macmillan 1860–1931	Margaret Macmillan was influenced by Froebel. In order to learn, children need healthy bodies. She set up 'open-air nurseries' where children spent as much time as possible out of doors. First-hand experience and active learning through free play are important in developing the whole child. She introduced free meals and medical care. She worked closely in partnership with parents.

## Comparison using theories and expert opinion

Here you are expected to link the work of theorists, pioneers and experts to your observation. Theories and expert opinions are based on generalisations of what children can be expected to do at a particular age. Your observations are designed to provide information about an individual child or particular children. What you observe could challenge an aspect of a theory or expert opinion.

### Example of an observation that confirmed a theory

Kim, 6 years 4 months

In this observation Kim thinks that there is more play dough in the sausage shape than the ball because the shape looks longer, although he knows that they had the same amount of play dough at the start. Piaget (1896–1980) did several tests like this one which he called ‘conservation tests’ and he believed that a child under 7 years of age could not conserve. My observation agrees with Piaget’s theory, but other researchers have found that younger children can understand that amounts remain the same even when they change their shape.

### Example of an observation that challenged a theory

Liam, 6 years 7 months

In this observation, Liam thinks that there is the same amount of play dough in the sausage shape as there is in the ball because, although the sausage shape looks longer, he knows and remembers that both shapes were made from the same amount of play dough at the start.

Piaget (1896–1980) did several tests like this one called ‘conservation tests’ which he believed that a child under 7 years of age could not conserve. My observation does not agree with Piaget’s theory.

<p>Susan Isaacs 1885–1948</p>	<p>Susan Isaacs was influenced by Froebel. Her concern was the inner life of children, expressed through their feelings and influenced by their experiences. She encouraged role-play and imaginary-play as a means for children to express their, often strong, emotions. She advocated that nursery education should continue until children reached the age of seven.</p>
<p>High Scope</p>	<p>An American programme used to support children from under-privileged backgrounds. The Plan–Do–Review routine encourages children to take control, make decisions about their learning, solve problems, be independent and take responsibility for themselves and their environment. Equipment and resources are clearly labelled and freely available. The setting is organised into clearly designated areas for different types of play. Children may spend long periods outside if they so choose.</p>
<p>Foundation Stage Profile</p>	<p>Provides guidance to early years’ practitioners working with 3–5-year-olds on the provision of a well balanced and appropriate curriculum. Establishes expectations, known as early learning goals, reached by means of stepping stones, for children to reach by the end of the stage. Practitioners may plan, using the six areas of learning. Play is strongly advocated as the key approach to learning.</p>

## Activity 1

It does however agree with the work of other researchers who have found that younger children can understand that amounts remain the same even when they change their shape.

### REMEMBER

Your observation may not demonstrate what a theory or expert predicts.

**Sulaman**, 3 years 11 months.

**Background:** Sulaman is bi-lingual. The early years practitioner (EYP) has planned activities to develop Sulaman's cognitive skills. The EYP is working with Sulaman to evaluate the success of the activities. The EYP thought that the activities were successful, but decided to repeat them to encourage Sulaman to describe what he was doing. The EYP also planned to ask Sulaman to teach her the names of the objects in the other language that he speaks.

The EYP has noticed that Sulaman likes playing with water and she wants to understand what Sulaman is learning from the activity. Sulaman is using a bucket with holes in the bottom to fill up a bottle. He does not fill it right to the top. When he is asked if this bottle is full, he does not reply, but holds a bucket under the water and pulls it out when it is full. He offers it to the adult. She asks him to show her what empty is. He holds the bottle upside down and empties it. The adult says "So what is half full then?" Sulaman fills the bottle again and tips out some water: he shows the nearly half-empty bottle to the adult and says, "With a little bit of water in it but not a lot of water."

## Activity 2

How could you use the theories of the following people in interpreting the information?

Remember to match and balance each reference quoted with evidence from what you have observed.

a) Vygotsky

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b) Bruner

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**Glossary (words and terms to remember)**

Continue building your own glossary of terms that are new to you or that you have come to understand in a new way.

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Theorists \_\_\_\_\_

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## Activity 3

### Learner evaluation

#### How did I do?

#### Well done! You have now completed Booklet 4b.

Now spend a few minutes thinking about how you did and answer the questions below. Try to give examples when you make a comment. Then discuss your responses with your teacher or trainer.

What have I learnt so far?

What areas do I need to concentrate on?

What help do I need? Where will I get this help?

When will I take action on this?

What skills do I need to practise and develop in the workplace?