CHAPTER 2

WHAT WORKS IN OBSERVATION AND RECORD-KEEPING?

In this chapter you will learn about:

- How observation has a powerful legacy to hand on to current practitioners.
- How we can use the past to inform and develop our current observational techniques.

Lessons from the past

If we look back to the lessons that history can teach us these can prove powerful. The current debates about record-keeping are not new. They have raged in one form or another at least since the middle of the eighteenth century. They have never been resolved, and we cannot expect to resolve them completely today. However, we can try to see with clarity what the main issues have always been, and how people have tackled them. We can identify the principles which occur again and again in the keeping of good records. Having identified these, we can then translate them in terms of the settings we work in today, and thus make good records, feel ownership of them, and have confidence in them. Record-keeping is an integral part of our whole approach to working with young children and those close to them. It cannot be set apart from everything else that we do. Almost half a century ago Almy (1975: 227) stated:

> ... unless it helps teachers to capitalise on children's strength and support their weaknesses, such procedures had better be abandoned ... Records have value only to the extent that the staff puts them to use in guiding and instructing children.

There is probably considerable agreement that keeping records is 'a good thing', but as the song says 'It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it' – and that is what this chapter is about.

Baby biographies in the eighteenth-century

We know that it is the people who love children and who are committed to them who are prepared to go to great lengths for them. It is therefore not surprising that the first examples of quality record-keeping were made by parents. Until the end of the eighteenth century the infant mortality rate was high in the first year of life, but in 1774 Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi wrote *A Father's Diary* about his three-and-a-half year old son, and in 1787 Dietrich Tiedmann wrote about his son's first three years of life. Likewise in 1877 Charles Darwin published the observations of his son Doddy (William Erasmus) based on observations made thirty-seven years before. (See Irwin and Bushnell, 1980; Navarra, 1955.)

What we can learn from the eighteenth-century baby biographies

1. Early baby biographies demonstrate how important it is to look, listen and enjoy being with children. It is only through doing this that we can really get to know a child and understand his or her development and learning.
2. Baby biographies remind us of the importance of being in a natural setting. Irwin and Bushnell (1980: 5) point out that 'each child exhibits his or her own preferred learning style if the adult will just watch for clues.'
3. Our own personal philosophy of life influences what we observe. The observations we make and the records we keep are direct products of our framework of thinking, feeling and relating to children and their families. Sylva and Moore (1984) found that records kept in tightly structured nurseries tended to use checklists, while indirectly and informally structured nurseries kept narrative-type records. In other words, the philosophy of the staff affects the record-keeping style.
4. Knowing what our philosophy is empowers our work. If we are not aware of the philosophy that influences us, our observations will be random, uninformed, and thus incapable of being used to inform our forward-planning and organisation of the curriculum. Irwin and Bushnell say (1980: 3):

   ... once we have trained ourselves to become keen observers, we can turn our attention to becoming shrewd interpreters of what we observe. What we see, and what we think about what we see, will naturally raise questions as to what actions we might take. Identifying, recording, hypothesising, questioning, theorising, changing, these are all part of the cycle of discovery for every observer.

5. Charles Darwin moved through this whole cycle, and his records, including his baby biography of Doddy, contributed to the revolution in thinking about the origin and development of the species. We cannot separate observation from recording. We cannot record unless we observe. In order to keep good records, baby biographies from the eighteenth century teach us that we need to observe so that we can support and extend the development and learning of the child (Bruce, 1987; 1991; 2011a).
6. Parents are central to this process.

The Child Study Movement

Irwin and Bushnell (1980: 23) suggest that three men contributed to the emergence of the child study movement during a period spanning the 1870s to the 1950s. First was Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who as we have seen published his observations of his son, Doddy, in 1877. Then Granville Stanley Hall (1844–1924), who founded the *American Journal of Psychology* and organised conferences hosted at Clark University. His students included Dewey, Gessell and Terman. Irwin and Bushnell (1980: 25) suggest that Darwin's influence and Hall's enthusiasm and promotion gave rise to the burgeoning Child Study Movement. This was further promoted when Lawrence Kelso Frank (1890–1968) administered the grants of the Spelman Rockefeller Memorial in the 1920s, which brought wide dissemination.

The home-based baby biographies written by parents such as Charles Darwin gave way to child studies written by professionals trained in observation – and eager to analyse. Indeed some of the professionals (such as Navarra, 1955) studied their own children.

Published child studies have not been so widespread since the 1960s, but as we shall see below the publications making use of them are greatly valued because they give us such insight as children develop and learn. More than anything else, they show us how to provide children with what they need.

What we can learn from the Child Study Movement

1. **When parents and professional workers join together, they make a powerful and constructive partnership.** Parents have always been deeply involved in the development and learning of their children. They were amongst the first record keepers of their children's progress. The Froebel Nursery Project (1972–1977), directed by Chris Athey, demonstrated that parents are hungry for help in this area, and deeply appreciative of it. Research by Hughes et al. (1990) also echoed the fact that parents want to work closely with professionals and that they are not out to challenge. They wish to become informed together with the educators who work with their children and to share their children's progress

with them in a spirit of partnership. During the twentieth century, parents and grandparents continued to make child studies: for example, Piaget in the 1920s, Navarra in 1955, Bissex, Grübacker and Matthews in the 1980s, and Arnold in 1999 and 2003.

○ Piaget (1920s)

His early work involved observing his three children in natural settings and this is probably when he did his best work. Unfortunately he later switched to comparing test groups of children on adult-set tasks in laboratory settings. This led to a serious under-estimation of what children could achieve, since tests do not allow children to function at their highest levels (Donaldson, 1978).

○ Navarra (1955)

John Navarra and his wife observed and recorded the development of scientific concepts in their six year old son L.B. in a home situation. Two important points are made by Navarra (1955: 26): firstly, that 'all data no matter what the source, must be viewed in context against a complete pattern', however one example may serve as a clue or pointer; and secondly, that spontaneous activity yields the most useful information for record-keeping (1955: 20) – 'The study of play activity becomes the most important device by which insight was gained concerning the conceptual development of the child'. Navarra added (1955: 30) 'on the few occasions when he [L.B.] was put on the spot, superficial replies were obtained'.

The set of observations gathered in this invaluable book show L.B. gradually teasing out the difference between steam and smoke as he develops scientific concepts.

○ Ruth Weir (1970s)

Ruth Weir's study of her two year old son Anthony and his pre-sleep monologues have proved invaluable for those researching language development, as have other studies such as Paul West's *Words for a Deaf Daughter* (1972), or Glenda Bissex looking at her son Paul's early writing and reading from five-and-a-half to eleven years old (1980).

○ John Matthews (1988)

John Matthews has made a longitudinal study of the drawings, paintings and constructions of his three children (Ben, Joel and Hannah) from birth to adolescence. These have been mainly in the home setting since he was present while they were drawing, painting and constructing. His research is explored in depth in his books (2003) and his work observing chimpanzees in a zoo in Singapore has also been published (Matthews, 2011).

2. **Being clear about our philosophy means that we can look at other theories critically and with interest.** It is not the intention of this book to spend time examining in great detail the influence of behaviourist psychology theory on record-keeping from the 1920s. Suffice it to say that overall this has had the damaging impact of over-valuing unnatural settings and adult-led pre-structured tasks and introducing pre-structured record sheets. 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. Christine Hardyman writes (1984: 165) 'Frederick Truby King and John B. Watson both came to the study of children from the study of animals, and their debts to it are all too obvious'.

Chris Athey summed up this approach (1990: 30):

> ... in programmes where the focus is on one way transmission of information, teachers find it difficult to advance their knowledge of child development because so much time is taken up with the content to be transmitted.

The transmission of information approach contrasts with the view taken in this book that sees development as the motor for learning. It emphasises the child as an active learner rather than a passive receiver of knowledge.

3. **We need to tease out the relationship between development and learning.** If we do not do this, we shall not know how we want to work with children and their families, what our records are for, or how to make use of them. We want our records to have purpose and function, to help us provide in educationally worthwhile ways across the curriculum. Otherwise our records will not be worth all the effort of writing, photographing, etc. Development is about the general situations in which children spontaneously function. It is the engine which drives children to learn. For example, Matthew, at two years old, can run and jump, but he can't yet hop or skip. He loves to run across open spaces, and to jump to music. Learning is not spontaneous. It is sparked by another person or by a situation. Learning is provoked, and limited to the particular situation, moment or specific problem to be tackled. Matthew is taken to a gymnasium and invited to run. He is taken to a country field, where running is more of a problem on a less even surface. Having developed the ability to run and jump, Matthew is learning to run in particular situations. He goes to the fair, where he learns how to jump on an inflatable castle, a specific situation with particular problems.

Most of the learning children do happens as they develop. We don't even notice that they are learning. It is one of nature's safety mechanisms. It is actually difficult to stop children learning providing they are with people

who encourage their general development, that is, providing it is known that two year olds love to run and jump because developmentally that is what two year olds need to do. Children would be constrained from learning if they were not allowed to develop normally in this way, and we have seen tragic instances of this in the orphanages of Romania where children, sitting in cots all day, have developed learning difficulties partly through their development being constrained. Where general development is constrained through a disability, we also have to be imaginative in providing learning experiences. For example, blind children rarely crawl because it is frightening for them to set off into the unknown (Chapman, 1978; Nielsson, 1985, 1993).

The more adults know about general development, the more appropriately they will be able to plan and so extend children's learning. Records need to show what adults observe, and how they support and extend, using the relationship between development and learning to do so.

4. **We need to look at the implications of being trained observers and recorders of children's development and learning.** Although baby biographies in the eighteenth century meant those close to the child could savour and share the records later, this did not help adults in planning and organising the next steps in learning. It accentuated past achievements, milestones in development and growing points. Modern-day parents often keep baby albums full of labelled photographs which are treasured for precisely these reasons. These show the first smiles, teeth, sitting, crawling, walking, birthdays ...

By contrast the Child Study Movement emphasised the use, purpose and function of observation and recording. Adults were not only to observe and support children's development, they were also to extend this by helping children to learn.

5. **We need to consider how much we should pre-structure what we shall observe** – if we don't, how will we know what to record? Sinn, quoted by Navarra (1995), who made a child study in 1894, wrote of the importance of observing and recording what a child does in a natural setting, since what the child does is meaningless and trivial until it is illuminated by some other action days or weeks after; bits of the mosaic from far apart have to be fitted together before it is intelligible.

In the 1930s, Susan Isaacs also stressed that it was the child's spontaneous interests, feeling and intellectual life which were significant and worthy of recording. When we begin to pre-structure and manipulate the situation, asking children to perform certain tasks so that we can observe and record them on a prepared form, we shall miss most of the vital information we need in order to help them learn. A book which was widely read, based on the research of Bennett and Kell (1989: 31), stated that there is a

... tendency amongst teachers to limit their assessment to the products of children's work. Rarely did they attempt to ascertain the processes or strategies employed by children in coming to their finished product.

In Sweden, the words 'teaching' and 'learning' are the same. In this book we are not using the word 'teach', which implies adults transmitting, imposing, invading and dominating children's lives. We prefer to say 'helping children to learn'. This means the adult is a facilitator, catalyst and enabler, who knows when and how to support general development, but also recognises the crucial moment when children must have direct help or planned help if they are to learn something specific. Navarra (1955) puts it very well, writing about the child study he and his wife made about their son L.B.'s development in scientific concepts. There was no attempt to 'lead the child by the nose.' It should be clear also that the child was not being 'used'. He was in the best sense of the word aided and given opportunities with the full knowledge that adults were vitally interested in him. In the process, a record was made.

6. **Narrative records seem to be the most useful for early childhood educators.** Lesley Webb (1975) emphasises the dangers of deciding in advance precisely what ought to be recorded; as she says, children often do not behave or function as they ought. What we would like children to know is often different from what they really know. In fact they often know more than we think. Dorothy Butler's study, *Cushla and Her Books* (1987), took place both at home and in school. So did that of Gordon Wells in the 1980s. This study cast light on why Rosie, aged five, appeared to function poorly at school, and how the school could work to create a more enabling environment for her. Like Dorothy Butler's study of Cushla, who is a child with special needs, Gordon Wells focused on what Rosie did and said rather than on what she could not manage to do. Similarly Virginia Axeline's study, *Dibs – In Search of Self* (1964), showed what an autistic child could do rather than could not do. Narrative records keep emphasising strengths, whilst pre-structured record forms can quickly lead to a focus on weakness, failure and 'can't do.'

7. **If you want to get ahead get a theory.** John and Elisabeth Robertson made a series of films in the 1950s using observations they made of children separated from their parents. After watching the film about a child called John and his separation from his mother, few audiences could avoid weeping. The Robertsons were influenced by John Bowlby's theory of separation and loss which has since been modified and developed.

Our observations and records, whether we like it or not, will be using our own pet theories. It is best if we know what they are! This was true in the Froebel Blockplay Research Project directed by Tina Bruce from 1987 to 1990 (Gura (ed.) 1992). This project was influenced partly by the work of Chris Athey and the inter-actionist theories of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, (discussed in Bruce, 1987; 2011a,b,c). It is possible to look at Harriet Johnson's

classic study of children's blockplay at Bank Street College in the 1930s and interpret her records in the light of Piagetian schemas and see patterns in what children do. Similarly, the records made by Susan Isaacs in the 1930s at the Malting House School can also be interpreted in this way.

All of these records have something in common. They are narrative records, using words, diagrams, tape recordings and photography to gather on-the-spot information which can later be used, reflected on, and focused in different ways. This kind of record gives a wealth of information which helps us look backwards or be in the present and to move forwards for each child. These records have a purpose and function. They are useful to us in a variety of ways.

8. **We need to be scientific rather than pseudo-scientific when we keep records.** In a BBC *Horizon* interview (1981) Richard Feynman, the Nobel prize-winning physicist, was clear that it was premature to try and impose on education the kind of measurement and recording techniques used in advanced physics. His reasoning was that it is much more difficult to accumulate and analyse real and useful information about children developing and learning than it is to study the atom (Bruce, 1991: Chapter 7).

In the next section we shall focus on narrative records, because these are the most helpful for early childhood educators.

Narrative records

Irwin and Bushnell (1980) list these types of narrative record: diaries, anecdotes, running records and specimen records:

1. **Diaries** are kept daily and can be a burden especially with large numbers of children.
2. **Anecdotes** are more user-friendly, even though they lack the same continuity as a diary. The advantages of recording dated anecdotes is that they can be discussed after the children go home and can be a source of deep pleasure as the record-keeper recognises which important experiences children may have had through, for example, sand play. This kind of quiet reflection also helps us to ponder some of the difficulties a particular child may be having. It is not intrusive on the children, who will often become ill at ease when they see adults observing them with notepads in hand.
3. **Running records** happen on the spot, noting a particular continuous behaviour sequence of the child. Stick-it labels on a pad are often favoured, which ensure conciseness and observations can be noted without children feeling they are being watched. This gives just enough dated information, so that later on it can be filled out on the child's profile and

any photographs taken at the time can be dated and added. Aspects of particular interest can also be coded using a letter code or different-coloured highlighter pens. This sort of record reaps a wealth of useful information (Clay, 1985).

4. **Specimen records** also note on the spot what a child says and does, but they additionally record the situation or context. This gives us enough detail at the time, but again allows more to be filled in later. We can then look at that child's progress as well as what we are offering. We can assess, evaluate, and link the two – and we can plan ahead. Lesley Webb (1975) was an advocate of this kind of narrative record. (Note that in this book, we use the term 'on-the-spot narrative record' rather than 'specimen record'.)

Figure 2.1 is an example of a specimen record taken from Lesley Webb's *Making a Start on Child Study*.

Date of observation		Child's name + date of birth + actual age
	Short description of situation in which observation is being made.	
Time	What is happening	Vocalisation

Figure 2.1 Specimen narrative record from *Making a Start on Child Study* (Webb, 1975)

> Recording of on-going behaviour has to be done at break-neck speed, and even then no one of us, however proficient, can record everything a child does and says as it is happening. (Webb, 1975: 46)

We need to develop our own personal codes. Lesley Webb, for example, uses:

Q clenched fist L → pincer grip

Ш, spread fingers → R moves to the right

She calls this a 'rapid writing code'. These raw data can then be analysed later.

This is well worth the effort and pays off, especially if particular children are the focus for observation on particular days. In this way a child can be observed in detail regularly. One specimen description can give more information about a child's development and learning than any amount of superficial

sampling. Every member of staff needs to take part so that the knowledge and ideas can then be shared. Use highlighter pens of different colours, or letter/number codes.

Sampling and rating techniques

Irwin and Bushnell (1980) give three sampling strategies, which are of limited use to busy practitioners:

1. **Time sampling** means looking, say every hour, to check what is happening either with a certain child, or with an area such as the home corner, and recording on a prepared pre-structured form using a code. It quickly encourages a superficial approach, and often turns into an elaborate way of demonstrating that no one is using the home corner, or that a child is always playing outside.

2. **Event sampling**, like time sampling, uses a prepared pre-structured form. Helen Dawes (1934) looked at quarrels as they occurred. However, because the prepared form dictates what is recorded, event sampling usually leaves out much of the interesting information that could be obtained.

3. **Checklists** are of little value. Unlike specimen records which reflect after the observation has been made through a specific focus, checklists tend to create a narrow focus so that we are inclined only to look out for what is on the prepared list. Everything else is usually ignored. Using official framework documents legally enshrined in a country, such as the EYFS in England or the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, as checklists could be a way towards creating a very narrow approach to the curriculum, and the kind of pre-structured, adult-dominated environment that constrains learning. Perhaps we could even say that checklists have no place as a record-keeping strategy for any adult who wants to focus on a quality curriculum. They give no detail and tell us nothing of the context or how children learn. Checklists are unlike narrative records in a very important way. When we use a checklist, we decide in advance what to focus on. When we use a narrative record we do not. We decide afterwards how to focus. We use the observation to inform the planning. We could look at the same observation with a mathematical focus, or to see how easily a child is relating to other children, or to look at a child's play.

Checklists narrow and constrain our focus, and miss out more information than they include. They give us more work. Ploughing through lists for every separate thing is a burden, and not much fun. Narrative records help us to be flexible and active in ways which bring deep learning for the child, family, and ourselves. (See the Narrative Records chart on p.15.)

Comparison between Narrative Records and Checklists

NARRATIVE RECORDS

(1) Record:

- date and time;
- what the child does;
- what the child says;
- the situation and context.

Do this on the spot.

You could use stick-it labels. Insert observations in the child's file later in the day.

(2) Fill in the detail later on (i.e. make anecdotal records, remembering extra details after the event).

Make it clear which observations are on-the-spot and which were added later (record dates).

(3) Reflect on the observations with a particular focus e.g. mathematics, language, aggression towards other children.

(4) Each observation contains a wealth of information, and it is an efficient use of your time and energy to use one or two observations in several ways, with a different focus or emphasis on each occasion.

CHECKLISTS

(1) Decide in advance what the focus of the observations will be, e.g. children's questions, science.

Make a list, or a coded list on a prepared form. Observe the child using the code or list and tick what you see.

Ignore everything that cannot be coded or ticked.

(2) A checklist will only give you limited and narrow information, which will be difficult to act on later in a deep and sensitive way.

(3) Checklists do not give the information we most need about children learning.

(4) Checklists appear to be a quick, easy way of record-keeping, but shortcuts affect our ability of offer a quality curriculum. They are not an effective use of our time and energy because they yield little information but demand intense effort which cuts into our interactions with children.

Rating scales

Rating scales tell us nothing about the causes or context and are time-consuming. They give us little information to use for forward planning. Millie Almy (1975) says 'Tests given in the early childhood years are not very good predictors of the child's later status'. The Bullock Report (DES, 1974) reminded us that you do not make children grow by measuring them.

However, practitioners have found it useful to apply rating scales such as ECERS to evaluate what they offer children in terms of, for example, physical environment and the qualifications and experience of staff working with them, infection rates in babies, or partnership with parents.

Records need both to assess the child and evaluate the curriculum we offer in ways that link

We have seen that the first records were made by parents. They focused on the child rather than on what the child was offered or would benefit from. In modern life, we still need records which assess children's progress but we also need records which help us to evaluate the curriculum we provide. It is always best to build on our strengths. Early attempts at evaluating the curriculum tended to make use of prepared charts which adults filled in to see which areas of provision children spontaneously used most frequently, regularly or rarely. This was in the spirit of the bedrock principles of the early childhood traditions (Bruce, 1987) and did not attempt to cut across the child's autonomy in learning. It is the intention of this book to keep a steady course of continuity with progression within these traditions which are summarised at the end of this chapter.

Early childhood workers are finding ways of recording their evaluations of the curriculum offered to the young children they work with in ways which hold true to time-honoured early childhood practice, informed by current theory and research. It is possible to keep faith with the traditional heritage while fulfilling legal requirements, using the heritage as a navigational tool. The remaining chapters in this book show how this is being achieved in a range of settings.

Through re-exploring early childhood work and what it stands for, as well as re-stating what is important in modern terms, we reaffirm our work and move forward.

Record-keeping needs to link assessment and evaluation

Linking our records assessing the child's progress with records evaluating what we offer children is the challenge for record-keeping as we approach the twenty-first century. Student teachers and nursery practitioners on placements have always faced this challenge in the keeping of their placement files. Keeping useful records is probably the most difficult part of working with children, and yet unless we do this we cannot do our best for children and their families. As we saw in Chapter 1, having established why we want to keep records at all, we need to find ways of doing so which do not wear us out. Burn-out is a real issue. Record-keeping should not be a burden: it should be a process which throws light on each child's learning and helps us to look at how particular groups of children are experiencing what is offered. For example, how are the

boys doing? How many children are enjoying what is offered in the garden, or at the art area? What is the experience of children with English as an additional language? How inclusive is the setting for children with special educational needs or disabilities? Do parents have positive experiences?

We need a better cross-linking and getting-together of records about individual children with the notes we keep on organisation, planning and provision. What we offer needs to impinge on and relate to how the children react and initiate, or do not. For Tim, aged seven, in a class doing a project on the Romans, the project had no impact. It passed him by. He stolidly continued his interest, which was then the properties of clay, and how birds fly and eat. He was supposed to make 'Roman' pots at school, but he made meticulous clay models of a blackbird, robin, blue tit and woodpecker. The only link with the Romans was the clay. Just as the Romans passed Tim by, so his strengths passed his teacher by. She saw him as a reluctant and poor reader and writer, with a dislike of drawing and an inability to stay on task. By keeping to a pre-structured project (doing the Romans) she was kept from appreciating his deep knowledge of nature, or his advanced ability to make meticulous and exquisite three-dimensional models. She needed a record-keeping system which linked her plans and the Roman project to her individual notes on Tim.

Summary

- Early records stress assessment. Early parent/baby biographies, and the Child Study Movement, encouraged professionals to write down their observations of children's progress.
- We need a parent/professional partnership in the observation of children's progress in order to keep useful records.
- Narrative records are the most informative and efficient use of our time and energy.
- We need to keep records which assess each child and evaluate what we offer those children in ways which link with each other.
- Looking at how people in the past have approached record-keeping avoids our re-inventing the wheel.
- Our records need to build on the bedrock principles which stem from the early childhood traditions (Bruce, 1987; 2012):

  - Childhood is seen as valid in itself, as part of life and not simply as a preparation for adulthood. Thus education is seen similarly as something of the present and not just as the preparation and training for later on.
  - The whole child is considered to be important. Health, both physical and mental, is emphasised, as well as the importance of feelings, thoughts and spiritual aspects.

- Learning is not compartmentalised because everything links together.
- Intrinsic motivation – resulting in child-initiated, self-directed activity – is valued.
- Self-discipline is emphasised. (This point and the point above relate to children's autonomy.)
- There are specially receptive periods of learning at various stages of development.
- What children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point in their education.
- There is an inner structure in a child which includes the imagination, and which can be encouraged by favourable conditions.
- The people (both adults and children) with whom the child interacts are of central importance.
- Each child's education is seen as an interaction between that child and the environment he or she is in, including in particular other people and knowledge itself.

The last principle can be expressed as a triangle involving three aspects of the curriculum – the child, the context, and the content. This is shown in Figure 2.2.
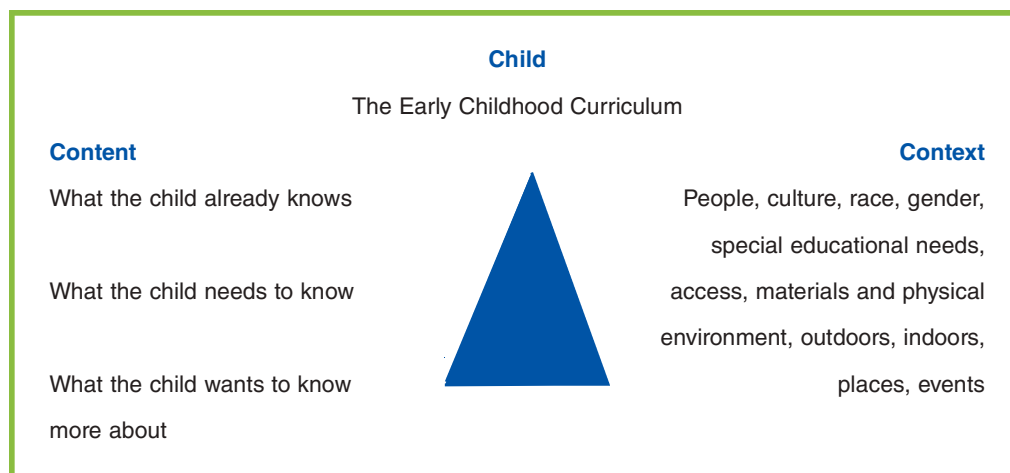
Child

The Early Childhood Curriculum

Content

What the child already knows

What the child needs to know

What the child wants to know more about

Context

People, culture, race, gender, special educational needs, access, materials and physical environment, outdoors, indoors, places, events

Figure 2.2   The three Cs of the early childhood curriculum (original source: Bruce, 1987)

Making appropriately flexible long-term plans

Record-keeping needs to be a continuing dialogue between long-term plans and the individual child's development and learning day by day and week by week. Incidental and spontaneous learning events can then be incorporated into long-term plans. This enriches the original plan.

Chris Athey (1990: 30) stated:

> … unreflective child centredness has led to the false belief that every child requires a unique educational programme. Constructivist teachers know that many children share similar cognitive concerns.

By using long-term planning charts which are of a flexible, organic and growing nature, plans can be carried through in ways that suit children. Individuals can be catered for and particular areas of knowledge introduced. Assessment and evaluation need to be interwoven.

Can we overdo the writing down of evaluation?

Practitioners need to be aware of the possibility that we might overdo the writing down of a child's development and learning through rigidly pre-structuring our observations in ways which in the end give us less information. The same problem can apply where evaluation is concerned. There are dangers attached to writing down in advance too much about material provision, or in planning too far ahead. Practitioners need to beware of pre-structured programmes through which children are determinedly taken.

Final thoughts on current practice

This quotation from the Blockplay Research Group's publication, *Exploring Learning: Young Children and Blockplay* (edited by Gura, 1992, directed by Tina Bruce), through which five groups of staff working in five very different educational settings regularly met and discussed record-keeping in relation to blockplay, perhaps best sums up the aspirations of this chapter.

> Perhaps our most significant contribution to the record-keeping debate is the glimpses offered of the potential of record-keeping as a shared point of entry for adults and children in the gaining of insight to our own thought processes. As we develop our capacity for self-conscious thought, record-keeping becomes less formidable. (1992: 152)

What we have learned

- In this chapter we have looked at examples of current practice in record-keeping, soundly based on the principles of early childhood education. They involve parents, teamwork, observation of children and reflecting with a focus, leading to flexible advance planning.

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- The ideal characteristics of useful records are:

  - They keep faith with the heritage and basic principles of the early child-hood traditions.
  - They help the partnership with parents.
  - They encourage children to reflect on their own learning.
  - They are user-friendly, and make efficient, effective use of time and energy, in order that they are easy to share with parents and colleagues in the team, across disciplines (e.g. health, social services and the voluntary sector, as well as education) and with the child's future teachers.
  - They might use a variety of techniques, written, audio and video record-ings, photography, files of children's work, and records of achievement.
  - They link an assessment of a child's progress with an evaluation of what that child has been offered.
  - They inform through sharing, planning and organisation, showing the progress made and the next steps both of individual children and groups of children.
  - They link with the current requirements of the day, as appropriate or legally required.
  - They are flexible.
  - They are capable of a fine focus and to yield specific information.
  - They are easy to review and summarise.
  - They show starting points as well as growth points.

Reflections on this chapter

- Which of the 12 points above are in place in your setting?
- When you read through the remaining chapters of this book, which of the ideal characteristics of good observation and informed planning via effective and meaningful records will you wish to focus on in order to take forward your thinking and practice?

📖 Further reading

Athey, C. (1990) *Extending Thought in Young Children: A Parent Teacher Partnership.* London: Paul Chapman.

Bruce, T. (2011) *Early Childhood Education* (4th edn). London: Hodder Education.

Bruce, T. (ed.) (2012) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today.* London: Sage.

Bruce, T. and Spratt, J. (2011) *Essentials of Literacy from 0–7: A Whole-Child Approach to Communication, Language and Literacy* (2nd edn). London: Sage.