Chapter 4: The learning relationship: principles of effective learning and practice in the early years (CH)

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Critical issues (F)

- *What are the key learning relationships?*
- *How can they be implemented and evaluated?*
- *How do we know that learning relationships are effective?*

Introduction (A)

This chapter will present a model of learning that focuses on the interactions and transactions between children and adults and their learning environments. The chapter will follow up on the ideas about effective teaching and learning and developmentally informed practice in the early years introduced in Chapter 3. As with the philosophical ideas presented in Chapter 3, readers will be given parameters and guidance for how they can sift various forms of evidence and reach informed decisions.

Defining a learning relationship (A)

Historically, definitions of learning relationships have tended to include the child and the teacher only. This traditional view of teaching has been challenged and the relationship has been widened to other participants. For interactionist writers such as Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is seen as a negotiated human construct. It is not something that exists to be consumed. There is a joint construction of meaning, a so-called *co-construction*, as the child *interacts* with others to learn about the world. Sameroff (2009) argues that when children are learning, interaction is not simply *interaction* but a *transaction* where one party (usually the child) is changed by the actions of the other. He challenged the interactionist perspective and theorists such as Vygotsky, for making the assumption that interaction can occur between the child and another, namely the adult, during which both parties remain constant over time. He does not maintain that the relationship is unidirectional with the child acting on his environment, or the environment influencing the child. Rather, it is a bidirectional relationship, where both the environment and the child have influence on each other. His theory suggests that the child, whom he terms the 'phenotype', has a transaction with the 'environotype', who are the peers, family and anyone in the cultural environment who can, potentially, socialise the child. He likens the environotype to Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This environotype influences the child through interaction over his/her lifetime and not just as a snapshot in time. The environotype also

has the responsibility for regulation of the child, so that the child can become an adult. It is an "*organisational framework*" (Sameroff, 2009:15).

Learning and acquisition of knowledge then, is a dynamic process involving many other key parties, such as:

- the teacher;
- other children;
- parents and;
- other key adults in the children's lives at school, at home and in their wider environment.

Students need to obtain the skills to incorporate these key players into their teaching practice, in order to facilitate an environment for children, where optimum learning can take place. A sense of fun in learning can also help to develop the learning relationship between the teacher and the children and the children and each other. Teacher educators can support students in this endeavour through enabling peer-to-peer collaboration.

Reflection (F)

Consider the following idea for a workshop with students

Workshop on the theme of Physical Development

Students had received a lecture on the theoretical underpinnings previous to the workshop, and were encouraged to put that theory into practice and teach each other to juggle. The learning outcome of the activity was to facilitate the students' reflection on the theory, i.e. the parts of the body required to learn such a new skill, but also the interactions they had with their classmates and the lecturer. They were given instructions and had to guide their partners in relation to these instructions. They may have had to adapt the instructions depending on the level of ability of their partner. They may have had to demonstrate and/or coach their partner. They had to pay special attention to the differentiation in the room and the many differing abilities among their classmates. The students were given time at the end of the session to reflect on the activity. They used Gibb's model of Reflection (1988). This helped them to reflect on their role as the teacher in the facilitation of the learning relationship between their classmates and themselves, and how they reacted to various aspects of the task and to each other.

- As an educator, what key messages would you highlight to students from this type of activity?
- How would you do so in a way that opened up a discussion rather than simply telling students what to look for?

- Could you use such an approach for other aspects of training? Perhaps you could draft some ideas and share with colleagues who might also be working with you on various courses.

Children as collaborators in the learning relationship (A)

Young children, can share goals and play together; this ability to take a role each enables children to play collaboratively. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) maintains that peer play, in particular, is important for children around the age of four years. This is, she contends, when children can develop reciprocal and collaborative play. This, in turn, facilitates interaction where learning can follow. Adults, including students and trainees, should not be preoccupied with simply transmitting knowledge, but with creating a stimulating environment where a child's learning can take place, i.e. as an enabler. Child-initiated play can provide a context for this type of learning to take place.

The student or trainee's role in child-initiated collaborative activities (B)

Howard (2010) highlights the crucial role of the adult in children's play. She maintains that adults should strive to be accepted as play partners by children. This might mean understanding the theoretical underpinnings of play, so that practitioners can approach tasks playfully. Increasing students' understanding of play may encourage their interaction with, and indeed their instruction through, play with children. Smilansky's (1968) teacher continuum could be used to inform trainees of how to develop a playful approach in their practice with young children.

Smilansky's (1968) model suggests that the adults' role might include:

- Visually looking on, where he/she encourages the children to play out a variety of roles and situations using language, and stands by to assist if needed;
- Offering non-directive statements such as: *I see you have the pots and pans*;
- Posing questions to encourage the child to use the appropriate language, such as: *now you have the pots and pans, what will you do with them and what will you say*?
- Using directive statements, by deciding what roles the children will play, or by directing where the play goes next;
- Modelling the appropriate language or actions themselves, by using a prop.

Research has shown that the adult is an integral aspect of children's play and that the majority of young children actually defined play as having a practitioner or teacher present (Howard, 2010). This, however, may not be the case for all children. Students need to be

able to act reflexively when interacting with children through play, to adapt their approach, depending on individual children's needs or preferences.

There can be tension, between the pedagogical frameworks surrounding play, on the one hand, and policies to which teachers, practitioners and students adhere, on the other. This results in recommendations for practitioners which are ambiguous (Wood, 2010). As a result, work-play dichotomies exist, which can result in children being left to play in non-interactive ways with adults, and play being viewed as something that does not underpin learning.

Furthermore, when adults approach children's play, they can receive an unwelcoming reaction from young children, as they are not always used to playing alongside adults. This can result in a reluctance on the part of students to interfere in children's play. However, in Howard's study, young children were found to have a broad perception of play, which *included* the presence of a teacher. When it comes to younger children, then, students have a responsibility to approach play, join in and set up precursors through story, in order to be accepted as play partners. Increasing the understanding of play can simultaneously empower students and allow children to be creative. Pushing the boundaries in teacher education can be beneficial with regard to the role of the adult. For example, workshops could simulate early years classrooms and small group instruction, so students can experience what young children experience. Instructors could employ early years playful pedagogies such as socio-dramatic play in the teaching of their own module content, so trainees can see best practice modelled.

The student or trainee's role as a direct instructor in small groups (B)

Small group instruction can also provide opportunities for children to interact directly with the practitioner or student. Both the student and child can answer and ask very specific questions related to the lesson content. Opportunities arise for conversations to occur and for each child to be able to contribute to the discussion at his/her level.

Children's responses may vary across the age-range in the early years. Babies and toddlers, who have not yet learned how to fully verbalise their needs and responses, may rely on non-verbal communication strategies along with vocalisations. Students need then, to become accustomed to the careful scrutiny of young children's responses during small group instruction. Such young children may not have developed the skills to work in a group. These children may require one-to-one attention. Due time and consideration has to be given to all children in the group, so children feel that they are all valuable contributors, no matter how they engage or respond. Students need to experience working one-to-one, or in small groups, with all ages in the early years cohort while on placement. This can help students to identify and practise strategies which increase young children's engagement in learning. Such a strategy might include starting from the child's own interests.

Starting from the child in the learning relationship (A)

Bruner (1976) argued that the best context for the development of the learning relationship was from the child's own interests and/or experiences. Children use their own previous experiences on which to build new knowledge. Fisher (2013) echoed this viewpoint, emphasising the importance of working with young children on authentic tasks in meaningful contexts, rather than delivering abstract instruction, which is out of context for them. Students can provide learning environments that mirror real world settings. While students can learn to cater to children's interests and agency in relation to their learning, a balance needs to be struck between the rights of the individual child to pursue their own interests and the needs of the overall group. Students can be guided to manage this by allowing children to express their creativity in certain tasks, while adhering to the wider curricular content. An equitable approach to including the children's interests can be encouraged. Fisher (2013) argued that starting with the children's interests is the key to unlocking their motivation and ultimately their learning.

Dweck (1999) contends that motivational processes influence the child's acquisition, transfer and use of knowledge and skills. If the child is extrinsically motivated, the motivation is coming from outside the child. For example, the child may be reacting to reward systems imposed on him/her in the classroom. This level of support usually fails to support children's actual learning needs and can lead to disaffection. However, if the child is intrinsically motivated, levels of interest and perseverance are increased and learning is optimised as a result. This can lead to increased well-being in the child, which can develop children's self-efficacy. This can all have a positive effect on his/her learning (Dweck, 1999).

Students need to be able to recognise motivation patterns of young learners. This ensures that they can identify when children do not wish to participate, do not understand, or have a more general need. Teacher educators need to encourage students to pay close attention to children's interaction with other children and the materials which they encounter in the setting. These behaviours can act as signifiers to the student as to the overall level of engagement of, and learning opportunities taken by, the children. This can take the format, for students, of more formalised age-appropriate assessment practices, in order to ascertain whether their instruction has been effective.

Reflection (F)

- How will you enable students to distinguish when particular strategies are/ are not appropriate?

- Do you think students and professionals are likely to be comfortable in all the potential contexts they encounter? If not, how can you help them to become more open to different learning contexts?
- How will you ensure that students are aware of the need to be responsive to all of the children and yet to balance the needs of the whole group?
- You might also reflect on how each of these questions relate to how you will work with the different students in your groups.

Assessment of the effectiveness of the learning relationship (A)

Effective teaching can be broken down into three constituent parts, i.e. planning for children's learning, supporting children's learning and reviewing children's learning or assessment. Reviewing children's learning creates the opportunity to both provide insight into students and trainees' own effectiveness, but also to shine a light on the children's thinking and learning (Drummond, 2012).

Modes of assessment of children's learning (B)

Standardised testing *(C)*

Summative standardised assessment or classroom testing can be an effective way for assessing knowledge gained in relation to certain criteria in test conditions. Standardised testing is used widely in research and has been useful in this regard (Sammons et al, 2008). The results from such studies have informed policy shifts and furthered the case of early learning. These tests have rigorous norm-referencing to ensure they are reliable and valid. However, in the early years classroom contexts, standardised tests can omit other relevant strengths of the young child. Students need to learn to question what they specifically wish to assess and then make a reasoned judgement about which form of assessment to use. For example, students may wish to investigate a more holistic depiction of the young child. Here they may need to consider**:**

- skill development
- stimulation/motivation
- security
- talk
- multi-sensory responses
- achievement
- practice and perseverance
- understanding
- feedback

- variety and diversity

These dimensions may call for a more formative approach to assessment. This encompasses many different assessment methods for learning. One of these, the most pervasive and useful assessment technique in the early years – observation – will be discussed here.

Observation (C)

Observations of individual children in the early years are much more manageable in a small group. It can be challenging for practitioners to find the time in large groups – when the needs of so many children are so diverse – to assess and observe children fully (Drummond, 2012). The small group affords the practitioner the time to observe and interact with the child for longer periods and obtain a more reliable assessment of the child's holistic ability. One strategy for documenting the small group observations of children's learning is through the use of *Learning Stories.*

Learning stories (C)

A learning story is a snapshot in time relating to an observation of a child or small group of young children (Carr and Lee, 2012). Learning stories can make the *thinking,* and the interactions associated with that thinking, visible. It is worth noting that like standardised testing, learning stories cannot present a full and holistic picture of the child's learning, as they are only a snapshot and may not take place often enough. However, their beneficial use in relation to capturing the strengths of the child are discussed here. Figure 4.1might be a useful way of conveying the Learning Story cycle to students.

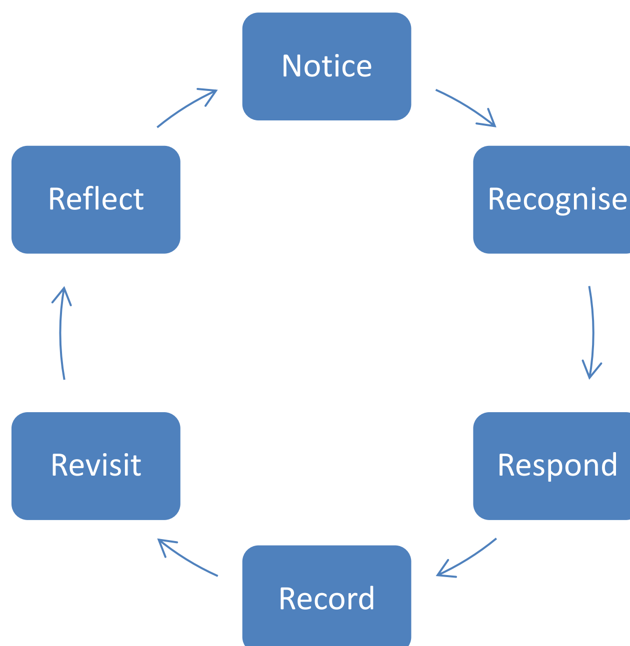

Figure 4.1 Learning Story (Carr & Lee, 2012)

Crucially the assessment process begins with a student noticing a child's interest. Students might recognise this as a learning opportunity to be observed and begin observing the child.

They may be active participants in the observation, or simply respond by providing a problem or resources for the child to use, to pursue this interest. Then they begin to record what they see. Students may record after the event, or take notes while it occurs. Either way, the student will be finalising their write-up after the learning activity.

Teacher educators can coach students in writing these observations using the following starting points.

- Use photographs as a starting point (If the students have permission to take photographs of the learning episode). Students should describe the photograph in relation to the learning that was taking place, rather than only offering a caption for it.
- Use subjective, rich language in the description of the event. Educators can provide examples of photographs or video footage already present in the school to facilitate students' practice of this.
- Write in the first person to ensure their voice is a strong presence in the record.
- Focus on the positive attributes of the learning episode and what the child can do rather than what they have failed to do.

After the student has described the event, they must then record the significance of it in relation to the child's learning. This may be directly related to the learning goals, skills and dispositions in the Early Years Foundation Stage and may even be subject specific. Educators can support students by discussing the events in relation to the curricular frameworks and teaching standards.

An ideal time to practise the use of learning stories is when students are in the classroom on practical placements. Students can focus on 4 or 5 target children over the course of a month during their placement and complete learning stories for these individual children. Educators can scaffold and support students in developing skills which they will go on to use when teaching independently.

This type of documentation of assessment is one area where students can develop skills for working in partnership with another of the key players in the learning relationship: parents. Parents are offered a blank page in which to respond to the story. This may be an anecdote regarding the child engaging in a similar activity in the home learning environment. Or they may choose to simply respond to the learning activity as presented from the setting. Educators can facilitate the interpretation of parents' responses and support the student in using the information for future discussions with parents. Educators may be present during these discussions and offer feedback to students regarding their approach to future learning for the child. What should be emphasised during the process to students, is that the parents' contributions are valid, useful and an integral part of a wider learning relationship.

Parental engagement (A)

Children's development can be supported by parents and practitioners working in partnership (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008). Feelings of security and acceptance are enhanced as children observe warm relationships between their family and setting staff. This supports children's developing social skills and strengthens connections to their culture and sense of identity. Reynolds and Clements (2005) suggest that partnership between settings and parents should encompass any interaction on behalf of children, along with parents' participation as active partners in their child's education. They argue for recognition from practitioners that parents are a primary influence on their children's lives.

From the parents' perspective also, research suggests that parents seek to have their views taken into account by the setting (Fitzpatrick, 2012). But there are challenges associated with active engagement of parents in the learning relationship.

The main challenge is time. This is a factor which challenges all parties. For example, parents are often constrained by work commitments and their engagement can be limited as a result. Time constraints can also provide a challenge for staff with the pressures of fulfilment of curricula and paperwork.

Parental engagement can also be limited by socioeconomic factors. Parents may be experiencing lower confidence as a result of limited educational opportunities. Confidence is a theme that is mirrored in staff experiences too. Staff often cite a lack of confidence about their own professional expertise as a mitigating factor in how they engage with parents. Part of this could be related to the minimal preparation they receive for the role. Ward (2018) argues that opportunities for interaction with parents should become an integral feature of placement for pre-service practitioners. In addition, she recommends, the facilitation of pre-service and in-service practitioners' reflection on the practitioner-parent relationship (Ward, 2018).

Promoting parental engagement (B)

Epstein's (2001) model could be used by educators to prepare students in relation to the promotion and facilitation of parental partnership. The model suggests six elements.

1. *Parenting*: support parents to create home learning environments which support 'children as learners' in the home.
2. *Volunteering*: recruit parents to help at various stages in the school day/year with activities in the school or trips out.
3. *Communicating*: establish robust and frequent two-way communication systems to track the child's development and progress in all areas.
4. *Learning at home*: offer information which might support parents' attempts to learn with their child at home, e.g. booklists.
5. *Decision-making*: ensure that parents are actively involved in policy and strategic decisions that are made in the setting in relation to the child's learning.

6. *Collaboration with the community*: recognise and use resources from within the child's community to enrich the curriculum in the setting, e.g. cultural or social practices or community health (Epstein, 2001).

Parental involvement needs to reflect the diversity of families in communities. This will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 5. However it is worth noting here the valuable, and often overlooked, contribution that fathers can make to the learning environment. The Department of Health in Australia (2014) has recommended several ways in which to further engage fathers. The report suggests that students could:

- observe how often they specifically involve fathers;
- involve fathers in policy planning or setting development;
- develop father-friendly activities, such as social events;
- provide an approachable atmosphere at the setting;
- reference the positive role of fathers in setting publications;
- use the father as a first point of contact in communicating with parents.

Practitioners have a responsibility to empower parents in the belief that their contribution is valid, valued and necessary. It can be difficult and challenging. A knowledge-power tension can exist in practitioner/parent relationships. Generally, setting managers do strive to give parents an active voice in their child's education, while not compromising the practitioners' professional status. Some students will go on to eventually manage settings themselves. It is essential that they are given the knowledge and skills to engage parents as partners.

Educators can positively promote the parental role and provide strategies for their students that will enable the involvement of parents in the management of the setting. This might include:

- ensuring that parents have read and understood the setting's policies and procedures;
- involving parents in the design, ratification, review and updating of those policies;
- inviting parents to be collaborators, rather than consumers of educational experiences in the setting

Parental involvement is a central cornerstone of the learning relationship and the students' adequate preparation for this aspect of it is essential. They need to develop the skills to recognise when this relationship is functioning effectively, and when it needs to adapt different or new pathways

Reflection (F)

- What sort of feedback from educators might help students to develop their confidence in the evaluation of their interaction with parents?
- How can educators structure their programmes to include opportunities for students to engage directly and formally with parents?

- How can educators best advise students to respond to the variety of informal feedback, positive and negative, that they may receive from parents?
- How can we advise students to reach out to parents who may be less forthcoming than others?

The importance of care in the learning relationship (A)

Contact with young children can be all encompassing and the implications in terms of "emotional labour" for students and professionals were discussed in Chapter One. In relation to the learning relationship in practice, the Key Person system in England means that practitioners are explicitly required to develop interactions with young children (Department for Education, 2017). Practitioners need to:

> *"ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents"* (Department for Education, 2017: 22)

When a young child is new to the setting he/she will look for familiarity so as to feel comfortable in the new environment. This helps him/her to gain a foothold and ultimately increases his/her self-esteem. This can be challenging when staff are working part-time and the child is attending full-time, or vice-versa. The key person may not be present for key moments. In this scenario, it is imperative that there are procedures for when the key person is absent. As it is possible for a child to attach to many key people (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978), the child can be introduced to an alternative or substitute key person who can support that child.

The key person will be expected to maintain a professional distance while still enabling an attachment to occur. This balance can be a challenge for new or early career practitioners. Students need adequate training for addressing the particular circumstances they are facing. For example, if the child has additional needs, it behoves the management of a setting to provide information, support, ongoing guidance and strategies for the practitioner for the management and learning relationship with the child on day-to-day basis. Professional dialogue has a key role to play in this. Strategies can be discussed and experiences can be shared with colleagues. Professional dialogue with professionals outside of early years is helpful and necessary in some cases. Access to parenting charities, psychological services, social workers and other key professionals on a regular basis can help the student to reflect on, and obtain knowledge on, best practice. This facilitates a more holistic approach to the development of the learning relationship with the child and indeed supports the trainee's own emotional well-being.

Reflection (F)

- Consider how you view the multiple learning relationships so far discussed. How can you accord each equal significance?
- Is this possible or desirable? Why do you think that?
- Can you foresee any tension between different layers of relationships?
- Which aspect of each of these learning relationships do you think students might find most challenging and how could you build in opportunities to have professional dialogue around these matters?

The influence of policy on the development of the learning relationship (A)

As noted in Chapter 1, a body of evidence has been growing internationally that has been concerned with the increasing regulation of early education and care (Urban, 2015). This regulation has taken the form of increased accountability linked to an emphasis on quality (Sammons *et al.,* 2008). It is hard to dispute an emphasis on quality outright, due to the benefits that might have for young children. However, if this emphasis is coupled with stringent measures of accountability in relation to children's academic outcomes, then this can affect the staff who are interacting with young children. The pressure to assess and complete profiles can reduce both the spontaneity and creativity of trainees' teaching and the time spent interacting with young children.

Baseline assessment (B)
One particular measure of accountability that was introduced by the English government (2016-time of publication) and subsequently opened up as a saleable product to the private sector innovation labs, was baseline testing of young children. When it was first introduced, it was mandatory for settings to engage in it. Following pressure from early years lobby groups, this subsequently changed to suggested best practice (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2017). Assessment of young children using analytical tools has become a criterion for success in inspection reports and can dictate parental preferences. However, some commentators have remarked that such baseline testing can be problematic, as it reduces early education and care to an economic commodity. Early education can be used to achieve government targets on social mobility, as the child is tracked throughout his/her schooling. Baseline tests have been regarded as being quite reductionist, as they usually measure children's development in a number of curricular areas with only two options, i.e. whether the child has reached a particular milestone or not. Some children may not meet that particular milestone at all, and some children are very near meeting it, i.e. the very next day. In these cases, the children's development and learning is being represented inaccurately by a single time point. This is particularly pertinent in the increasingly diverse context within which English early years settings operate (Moss, 2014). All children cannot be uniformly assessed in this way. For example, it is not always appropriate, or suitable, to assess children with additional needs in this way.

Baseline assessment attempts to reduce young children's complex learning to a single number, thus representing extreme educational reductionism. Baseline can be understood as 'nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge and a robbing of meaning from individual histories' (Malaguzzi, from Cagliari et al., 2016: 378) and therefore stands in contrast to sociocultural theory, which has demonstrated that children learn within and through sets of social relationships (Broadhead, 2006; Fleer, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial that students have an awareness of the limitations of such assessment techniques, which contrast with the now accepted theoretical foundations of interactional learning. Ongoing professional dialogue with a particular focus on the critical awareness of the suitability of such assessments, with regard to children's individual and diverse needs, would enable students to consider the whole child's development.

More broadly there is an increase in data production, following an overall trend for the expansion of data and accountability agendas in society more generally (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Students need to be introduced to the ethical, moral and indeed pedagogical debate surrounding the management and collection of such data. It is the responsibility of the teacher educator to empower the student to question what they are being asked to adopt in relation to their practice in the future. Placing an emphasis on development of students' critical thinking skills in relation to the effectiveness of pedagogy might address this to some extent.

Developing critical awareness and evidence-based approach to practice (A)

With the widening possibilities for access to first-hand research about the early years, with avenues such as Open Access journals, social media and news websites, it can be challenging for students to assimilate all the information on offer. Chapter 6 will address this issue in detail. This section will meanwhile focus on some ideas to support the development of students' critical thinking skills in order to enable them to develop an evidence based approach to practice. This includes an analytical appreciation of the conclusions an author or researcher is making and whether these are justified, based on the methodology that was employed. This does not mean that students need to have an in-depth knowledge of the intricate details of research or analysis methods, but an overall appreciation for when research has been carefully and robustly carried out would be helpful. Some key aspects of rigorous research might be:

- the suitability of the methodology used in relation to the research question posed;
- the participants, i.e. in a quantitative study, whether the sample size sufficient to be seen as representative and in a qualitative study whether the participants' views accurately represented;
- the generalisability of the context of the research;

- the presence of any bias and how this might have been addressed.

Professional dialogue with colleagues and between students and educators can offer the opportunity to discuss evidence in this critically aware manner. Engaging in meaningful and challenging conversation with experienced peers about the often-contradictory research evidence can enhance students' appreciation, understanding and critiquing of the learning relationship. This practice has the potential to increase students' personal and professional confidence to question policy decisions relating to their development as competent and caring early years professionals.

In a nutshell (F)

The learning relationship is an organic ever-changing relationship that depends on the key players that constitute it. When working together, parents, other adults, other children and the child can develop a rich, diverse and caring learning relationship. The evaluation of this relationship is central to its success. Age-appropriate methods of assessment must be considered seriously if this relationship is to keep evolving and developing.

Reflections on critical issues (F)

This chapter has examined the importance of the learning relationship for children's development. It has put the child at the centre; underscoring his/her agency in relation to his/her learning needs and has highlighted the centrality of interactions between adult and child to respond to those needs. It has also emphasised the importance of developing real and practical relationships with parents. It has provided guidance on the appraisal of these relationships in relation to the wide ranging, and sometimes contradictory evidence that is available to students. It has positioned professional dialogue at the centre of the challenges covered; accentuating the positive effects it can have on students' developing practice.

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