A Short Guide to Early Childhood Pedagogy

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1 About this resource

A Short Guide to Early Childhood Pedagogy is intended to support family day care educators' ongoing professional learning and development by stimulating and encouraging critical reflection about:

- the pedagogical approach they take
- the values, beliefs and theoretical perspectives that influence it
- a range of other theoretical perspectives that may inform your approach.

As highlighted in Australia's National Quality Framework and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, ongoing professional learning and reflective practice are essential elements of an educator's work. To continue to refresh and grow professional knowledge and practice, it is important for educators to take the time to think deeply about their daily work, ask themselves why they do what they do, challenge their assumptions and continue to draw on a range of theoretical perspectives to inform their work.

FDCA has created this *Short Guide* as part of our ongoing commitment to produce practical resources for our members that assist in strengthening pedagogical practice and performance. It is complemented by a Companion Resource which provides further information for members who would like to delve a little deeper into the details of the theories and theorists featured in Section 4.

While this *Short Guide* speaks directly to the family day care educator, it is also designed as a support resource for educational leaders, who work with family day care coordinators and educators to:

- promote and support a culture of professional enquiry
- challenge taken for granted approaches
- generate new thinking to support continuous improvement.[1]

> ❝ Different theories of child development offer signposts to different ways for understanding young children.

Source: DEEWR (2010) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Learning Framework for Australia,* p.55

2 What is your pedagogical approach and where has it come from?

> **"** The term pedagogy refers to the holistic nature of early childhood educators' professional practice (especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships), curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning.

Source: DEEWR (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, p.12

Put most simply, pedagogy is not just about the **what**, it's about the **how**, that is, the knowledge, skills, and techniques you draw on to provide the children in your care with opportunities to develop and learn.

Reflection

When was the last time you thought deeply about the pedagogical approach you take and where it has come from?

Whether you realise it or not, your pedagogical approach draws on your own understanding of early childhood education and how children learn and guides the myriad of decisions you make every day as an educator.
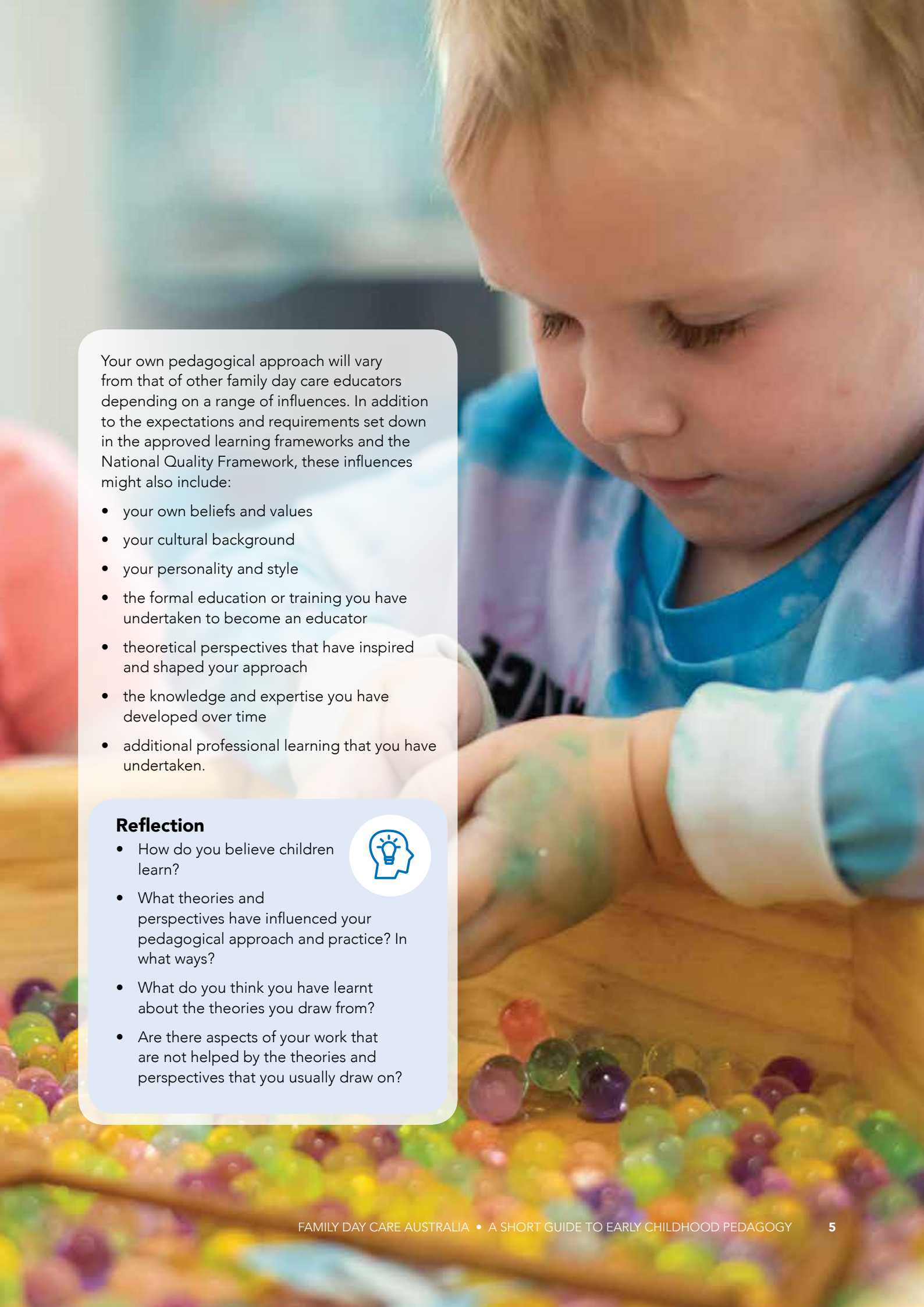
What influences your pedagogical approach?

"Skilful educators are aware of their beliefs and knowledge and the theoretical perspectives from which they come. This is important because it helps us to understand why we decide on:

- content for our curriculum – what to teach, planned experiences and learning
- approaches for managing behaviour
- how we set up the environment
- what resources we choose
- particular programs or methods
- which teaching strategies to use
- how we will relate to people
- how we assess."

Source: DEEWR (2010) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Learning Framework for Australia*, p.10

Your own pedagogical approach will vary from that of other family day care educators depending on a range of influences. In addition to the expectations and requirements set down in the approved learning frameworks and the National Quality Framework, these influences might also include:

- your own beliefs and values

- your cultural background

- your personality and style

- the formal education or training you have undertaken to become an educator

- theoretical perspectives that have inspired and shaped your approach

- the knowledge and expertise you have developed over time

- additional professional learning that you have undertaken.

Reflection

- How do you believe children learn?

- What theories and perspectives have influenced your pedagogical approach and practice? In what ways?

- What do you think you have learnt about the theories you draw from?

- Are there aspects of your work that are not helped by the theories and perspectives that you usually draw on?

3 The importance of drawing on a range of pedagogical theories

The EYLF expects educators to draw on a range of theoretical perspectives to inform their work. This is because considering theories:

- can stimulate your thinking and challenge you to reflect on how you do things and why

- provide opportunities for you to consider different perspectives that you may not have contemplated before and what you might do differently as a result

- encourage you to reflect on the judgements or values that might influence your thinking, beliefs, and pedagogy

- help you to deepen your understanding of your own professional practice and of the children, families, and communities you interact with in your role as educator.

Examining and considering a range of theoretical perspectives about early childhood education and children's learning is an important aspect of cultivating, refining, and enriching your own professional practice, or pedagogy.

> " Drawing on a range of perspectives and theories can challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:
>
> - investigate why they act in the ways that they do
> - discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
> - recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable but also limit their actions and thoughts
> - consider the consequences of their actions for children's experiences
> - find new ways of working fairly and justly.
>
> Source: DEEWR (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, p.12

In section 4, you will find information about the key theoretical perspectives that have influenced, and continue to inform, early childhood pedagogy in Australia, as well as some prominent theorists in each category.

This resource is not meant to be a comprehensive review of all theories and philosophies relevant to early childhood. Rather it is intended to be a condensed reference guide that can be used to stimulate self-reflection, or as a basis for reflective discussions with fellow family day care educators, your coordinator or educational leader. It can also serve as a quick refresher or a starting point for further research into theories you have not previously considered.

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Theories relevant to early childhood pedagogy in Australia

Theories relevant to early childhood education vary widely in their central focus. For example, theories may mainly focus on:

- children's development and /or their behaviour
- how children interpret or construct knowledge about their world
- how the children interact with others and their environment
- the influence of family, culture and a child's own experiences on their learning
- assumptions around power, equality, and curriculum expectations.

In Australia, the EYLF identifies five groups of theoretical perspectives that have contributed significantly to early childhood pedagogy in Australia today. Together, these theoretical perspectives inform the *Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes* that underpin the Framework.

The table on pages 8 and 9 provides an overview of these five groups, some prominent theorists in each category, some of the key ideas associated with each theoretical perspective, and some broad implications for educators' practice.

It's important to note that the boundaries between the various groupings of theoretical perspectives and specific theories are not definitive. Aspects of some theories may overlap or merge with others. Other aspects may be quite dissimilar and even present opposing viewpoints.

Some theories, such as classic behaviourist theories, may no longer be widely embraced, and other theories, such as post-structuralist theories are relatively new. Furthermore, continuing research in the field of infancy and childhood will, without doubt, lead to new theoretical perspectives in the future.

Finally, it is worth noting that educators often adopt a blended approach to their programs and practice, by drawing on two or more theoretical perspectives in order to deliver quality outcomes for children.

Key theoretical perspectives in early childhood education[2]

Theoretical Perspective	Prominent Theorists	Central theme/s	What does this look like in practice?
DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES	**Friedrich Froebel** founded the first Kindergarten; first proposed play was central to children's learning and development. **Jean Piaget** developed the *Theory of Cognitive Development*, proposing 4 main stages of cognitive development. **Rudolf Steiner** founded the Steiner/Waldorf Movement, based on Steiner's 3 seven-year phases of child development. **Maria Montessori** identified 4 'planes' of development; led to the development of the Montessori Method. **Howard Gardner** developed the *Multiple Intelligence Theory*, identifying 8 types of intelligence.	Children go through specific stages / phases of development as they change and grow. Stages of development are seen as either continuous or discrete, depending on the theorist's view. Children learn best when actively engaged and exploring their environment and following interests. If children have a safe, secure childhood they will be prepared for life.	Educators provide open-ended play-based opportunities for children to explore and construct knowledge about their world and to follow their interests. Educators observe children to understand where they are 'at' developmentally, and to identify their personal learning styles, areas of strength, interests and other individual differences. Educators use this information to guide them in planning learning experiences and assist in identifying individual learning goals.
SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORIES	**Lev Vygotsky** developed the *Socio-cultural Theory of Cognitive Development* identifying the critical role of culture and language in children's learning and development; coined the concepts of the 'More Knowledgeable Other', and the '*Zone of Proximal Development*'. **Jerome Bruner** put forward an 'interactionist approach' to children's language development; coined the term 'scaffolding') **Urie Bronfenbrenner** developed the '*Ecological Systems Theory*' to explain the influence of the numerous environmental and societal influences on a child's development. **Loris Malaguzzi** developed a socio-cultural educational philosophy and pedagogy which led to the Reggio Emelia Educational Project.	Relationships play a key role in children's learning. Children play an active role in their own learning and should be given opportunities for choice in what they learn. Children learn in multiple ways through the socio-cultural belief systems to which they are exposed, through relationships and interactions with others, as members of different social groups and though wider socio-cultural influences.	Educators take children's socio-cultural contexts into account in terms of expectations, planned experiences, resources used, assessing learning and everyday routines. Educators acknowledge and respect that children have diverse ways of being, knowing and understanding, which have been developed through prior experiences and other influences. Educators use a range of strategies (e.g. active and responsive listening) to understand and connect with children. Children's learning is scaffolded as needed by the educator, for example through modelling, questions or other prompts.

Theoretical Perspective	Prominent Theorists	Central theme/s	What does this look like in practice?
SOCIO-BEHAVIOURIST THEORIES	**Ivan Pavlov** developed Pavlov's *Theory of Classical Conditioning*, i.e. learning responses through association with certain stimuli. **Frederic Skinner** developed the *Theory of Operant Conditioning*, i.e. the idea that behaviour can be shaped by neutral responses, positive reinforcements or punishments. **Albert Bandura** put forward *Social Learning Theory*, investigating how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behaviour.	Children's behaviour can be shaped, changed or unlearned through association with certain stimuli and/or others' responses to that behaviour.	Educators reinforce or shape appropriate behaviour by using strategies such as 'reward systems'; they also avoid reinforcing inappropriate behaviour through various strategies.
CRITICAL THEORIES	**Juergen Habermas** developed the *Theory of Communicative Action* that proposes practice cannot be developed or changed where issues of common importance are not discussed by the participants of that group. **Paolo Freire** best known for his book "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" in which he critiqued what he called the 'banking' model of education and proposed an alternative 'problem-posing' model.	Children have the right and the ability to make their own decisions and choices regarding what and how they learn. Power within a society is inextricably linked to the dominant language and culture and leads to structural inequalities e.g. regarding race, gender and social class.	Educators support the development of children's 'agency' e.g. by including them in decision-making processes about their learning. Educators take time to critically reflect on their practice; they challenge the beliefs and assumptions that may underpin their planning and educational programs as well as the routines they follow, the language they use and how they assess children's learning.
POST-STRUCTURALIST THEORIES	**Michel Foucault** put forward a '*Discourse Theory*' that explored the relationship between power and language and challenged the beliefs we hold about what is 'normal', 'true', 'right' or 'wrong'. **Pierre Bourdieu** put forward a *Theory of Practice*, in which he examined the mechanisms by which culture is reproduced and transformed and how the stratification of various groups within society is maintained, resulting in varying degrees of inclusion, power and status for some groups, and exclusion for others. **Gaile Cannella** challenges the dominance of developmental and socio-cultural theoretical perspectives in the field of early childhood education and claims they have allowed middle class, patriarchal, monocultural and even colonist, views of the world to perpetuate.	Children's identities are multi-faceted and fluid and influenced by social settings and contexts. Knowledge is socially constructed. This means that there are multiple ways of knowing and learning and there is no one absolute 'truth'. Some so-called accepted truths and viewpoints are given more weight while others are ignored, and this has implications for equity, social justice and social inclusion.	Educators observe the power dynamics between children, as well as in other relationships e.g. between educator and child. Democratic participation and inclusive values and practices are promoted. Learning experiences are planned with the intent of bridging different ways of knowing and learning. Educators implement a critical enquiry approach to their pedagogical approach and use a variety of strategies to address issues of inclusion, bias and discrimination.

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In conclusion

> "When educators seek to understand the theoretical perspectives that underpin their practice they are engaging in the type of lively culture of professional inquiry that the Guide to the NQF says is important for achieving the National Quality Standard.

Source: DEEWR and Early Childhood Australia (2012): *What have theories got to do with it?* NQS-PLP, e-Newsletter No31.

As mentioned at the outset, examining and considering the various aspects of your own professional practice in light of a range of different theoretical perspectives is essential to a critically reflective and intentional pedagogical approach. It is also an integral part of the cycle of continuous improvement, which in turn leads to improved outcomes for children.

Sometimes it is difficult to develop a critical perspective of your own practice in isolation. Often it is better if you share your thoughts or questions with a trusted colleague such as your coordinator, educational leader or a fellow family day care educator. You might find the Reflection questions opposite useful to explore as a starting point.

If you'd like to learn more about the theoretical perspectives relevant to early childhood in Australia, we have created a *Companion Resource* to this *Short Guide* that includes more detail on each of the featured theories and theorists. It also includes some examples of how each theory might look in practice. You can find this *Companion Resource* on FDCA's Member Zone, under the Resources and Fact Sheets tab.

Reflection
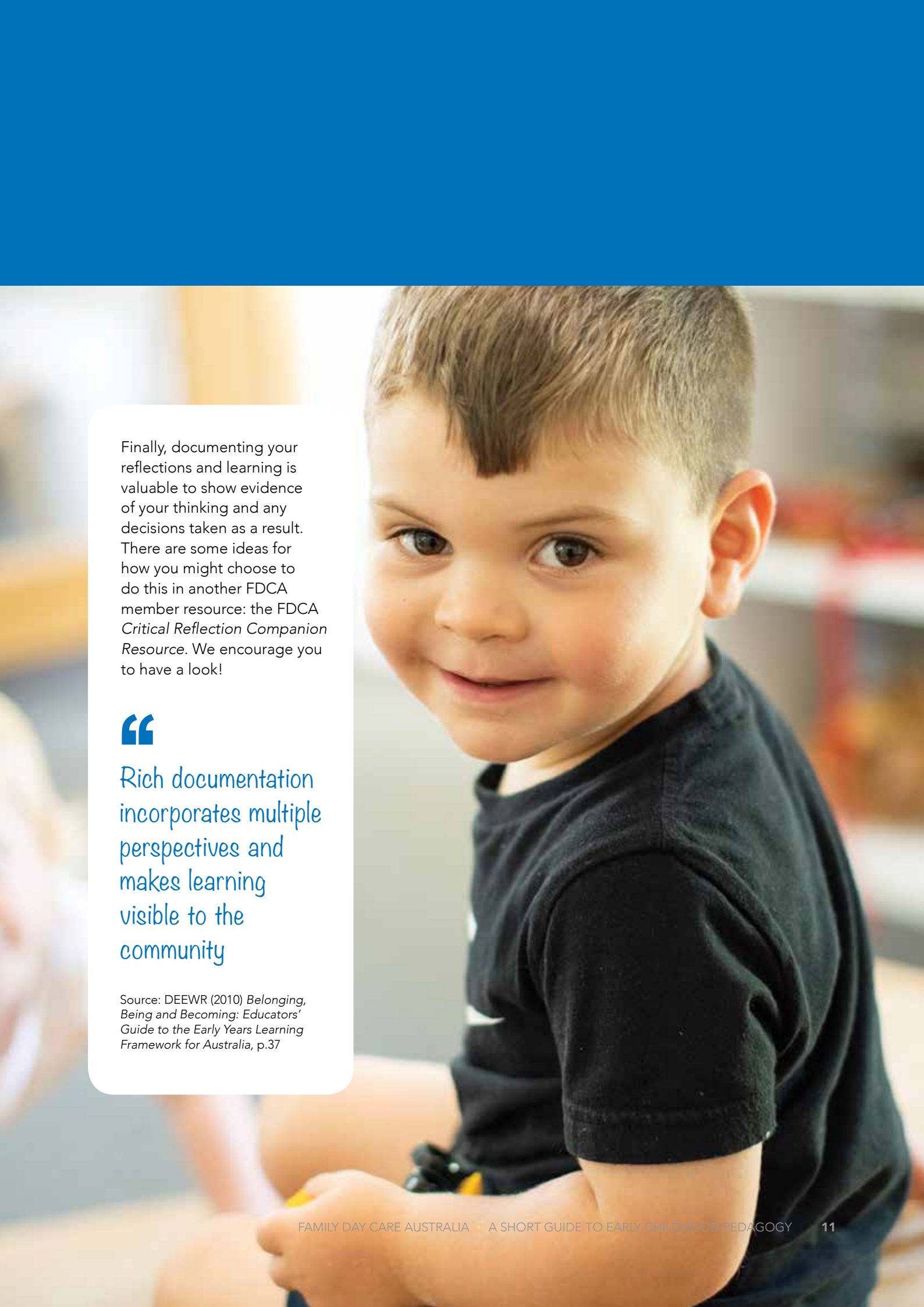
Which groups of theories or individual theorists had you heard of, or were familiar with?

What theories and perspectives have shaped your thinking and your practices the most? Why do you think this is?

Which theories and philosophies resonate most with you? Why do you think that is?

Which theories and philosophies do you feel are furthest from your approach? Why is that?

Which theoretical perspectives or theories would you like to know more about?

Finally, documenting your reflections and learning is valuable to show evidence of your thinking and any decisions taken as a result. There are some ideas for how you might choose to do this in another FDCA member resource: the FDCA *Critical Reflection Companion Resource*. We encourage you to have a look!

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Rich documentation incorporates multiple perspectives and makes learning visible to the community

Source: DEEWR (2010) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, p.37

1   Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2020). *Educational Leadership in Family Day Care, Stories from the Field: The Educational Leader Resource Addendum for Family Day Care.*

2   This table is adapted from that shown in Nolan, A and Raban, B (2015): *Theories into Practice, Understanding and Rethinking Our Work with Young Children and the EYLF, p.7 & 8*, as well as that shown in *DEEWR (2010). Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Learning Framework for Australia, pp 54-57.*

References:

DEEWR (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*

DEEWR (2010). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Learning Framework for Australia*

DEEWR and Early Childhood Australia (2012): *What have theories got to do with it?* NQS-PLP, e-Newsletter No31

Nolan, A and Raban, B (2015): *Theories into Practice, Understanding and Rethinking Our Work with Young Children and the EYLF.*

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