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Early Years Practitioners and Parents Engaging in Child Study

Michelle, one of the nursery workers, had been on a course the day before. Claudette had worked as a supply worker to 'cover' Michelle's group. On her return, one of the children, James, made the following comment to Michelle: 'You weren't here last night and Claudette covered you all up'.

(Here James seemed to use his concrete experiences of 'covering' or enveloping to understand the fact that Michelle was not at nursery and that Claudette was there. Even the adults used the metaphor of 'covering' to express the concept that when one worker is not there carrying out her role, another replaces her.)

This chapter introduces:

- The important tradition of Child Study in Early Childhood
- How we approached children and families to carry out this study of children
- Carrying out observations and the different tools we have used
- Interpretation of observations using schema theory and psychoanalytic theory

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

We have a strong tradition both in the UK and in the field of Early Education, of making observations of young children engaged in play and conversation in order to understand their development and learning (Bartholomew and Bruce,

1993; Isaacs, 1930/1966, 1933; Piaget, 1951). Within education and care settings, we observe in order to make plans for each child's learning. At the Pen Green Centre and other early childhood settings, parents have been central to making observations of their own children as they know their own children best (Whalley, 1997, 2007). When we observe, we are trying to understand what each child is trying to learn about, so that we can tune in to and support their cognitive and emotional concerns. Workers, who are with children every day, can get to know children and families well but they also depend on parents supplying information from home, including who are important adults and other children to their child. Knowing about where families go and who they meet up with during the week can enable Early Years Educators to have genuine and meaningful conversations with children when their parents are not around.

LOOKING BACK AT OUR TRADITION OF CHILD STUDY

OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Susan Isaacs' accounts of young children's development and learning in the Malting House School, Cambridge, early in the twentieth century, has provided a way of recording and interpreting children's spontaneous actions, that is still relevant in the twenty-first century. Isaacs took cognition and emotions into account and produced two books on the children's development, one focusing on 'intellectual growth' and the second focusing on the children's 'social development' (1930/1966, 1933). The important learning for us today, was that Susan Isaacs did not compartmentalise these aspects. She used the rich, detailed observations of children, gathered over time, to understand their intellectual **and** emotional development. She presented the observations first and then made her analysis and interpretations. These first-hand observations can be treated as raw data, even today, nearly 80 years later.

Here is an example from Isaacs' writing showing the determination and resourcefulness of one child:

> 17.10.24 (Date) The children had been carrying water out into the garden in cans and jugs, and as there were some damp feet, Mrs. I. Said 'No more today'. Tommy (2;8) (age) was doleful when Mrs. I. would not let him take any more, and passing back through the school room, he saw the vases on the tables, full of flowers. Without saying anything, he put down his can on the floor, and took each of the four vases in turn, lifting the flowers out, pouring the water into his can, and putting the flowers back, and the vase back on the table. He then walked out into the garden smiling, and saying to the others, 'Tommy has some water now!' (Isaacs, 1930, p. 120)

We can draw a great deal from this one observation. **Practically**, Isaacs states the exact date, the age of the child being observed and enough detail for the reader to grasp what happened without getting lost in too much detail. Many workers trained in the UK have been well trained to observe and to record detail, but that detail can be irrelevant and not critical to what happened; for example in this case, it was not important to know the grip Tommy used to carry the can.

With regard to **pedagogy**, we can deduce that there was a fair amount of freedom but that boundaries were set, that is, 'No more today'. However, there was also flexibility. Whoever observed Tommy was truly interested in what he would do next. That deep interest in children's spontaneous actions is important.

As far as Tommy's **development** is concerned, at 2 years 8 months, he seemed to be interested in containing and transporting materials. He may have been able to use his containment schema at thought level with regard to his understanding that vases may contain water (even if the water cannot be seen). We are not told whether the vases were opaque, translucent or transparent. Even if the vases were transparent, he was able to come up with a plan to transfer water from the vases into his own can, demonstrating some flexibility in thinking and problem-solving. At the least, he could see that carrying more water outside was 'functionally dependent' on him transferring or transporting it from one container into another (Athey, 2007, p. 119). He also demonstrated some satisfaction in achieving his personal goal.

A contemporary of Susan Isaacs took a similar approach to the study of young children's development in New York, early in the twentieth century. The children who attended 'The Nursery School' ranged in age from 14 months to 3 years. Harriett Johnson's account also contains photos, showing how very rich the experiences offered to the children were (Johnson, 1972, pp. 170–1). Like Isaacs, and more recently Chris Athey, Johnson stated her beliefs clearly at the beginning of her account, 'The duty of the educator is to see that the capacities of each stage are fully realized, not that the stages succeed each other as rapidly as possible' (Johnson, 1972, p. xxxi).

Johnson gathered narrative observations to try to capture learning in action in young children. Johnson illustrated how individual children mastered skills over time, for example, using a slide or hammering nails. She followed Philip's progress, over time, in using both the indoor and outdoor slides. Here is a short excerpt from her observations. She was interested in his use of the slide and his control of his own body. The slide was high and Philip was practising going down head first on his stomach.

> 24 months (Philip's age) – Adult table was placed under the chute so that the children could climb and slide from the 'half-way station'. Philip was very appreciative of this arrangement which was placed for

> some older children. He continued after the others had left. They had pulled up an adult chair to stand in and once he stopped there to call 'Bye, bye, bye' at least a dozen times. He also paused on top of the table to shout 'Dah,dah'. He gave every evidence of elation and joy. (Johnson, 1972, p. 175)

Philip seemed to be repeating his actions in order to master his use of the slide. Using schema theory to interpret his actions, he was exploring an oblique trajectory, feeling the angle and resulting speed. He had probably mastered sitting and sliding down, and now he was varying the position of his body in order to experience the angle and speed differently. In emotional terms, he was deliberately taking on a challenge. He 'marked' or acknowledged this challenge with the language of separation by saying 'Bye, bye, bye'. This may have simply represented his departure onto the slide. It may also have represented his departure from his earlier state of not being confident about sliding down on his stomach to practising and becoming more confident. Philip may have been echoing language used by his parents or workers in similar situations that he had subsequently internalised as a way of behaving in times of challenge or struggle. He was very pleased with himself, what Trevarthen (2003) and then Tait (2005) have called 'chuffed' with himself.

The important point about making narrative observations is that we begin by observing and can then make links with any curriculum framework. We can also use any theory as a framework to deepen our understanding of children's actions and interactions. In this book, we use schema theory and attachment theory to deepen our understanding. We could also make links with the Early Years Foundation Stage Guidance, currently used in settings in England.

AN OBSERVATION TECHNIQUE FROM THE FIELD OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

The Tavistock method of Infant Observation Training involves the observer in visiting a newborn and family weekly for two years. The observation is recorded afterwards and is presented as the material for a work discussion group. The observer is open to the feelings evoked in him/her. Rustin (1989, p. 7) describes the method: 'The practice of systematic observation of the development of infants provides the observer with an opportunity to encounter primitive emotional states in the infant and his family, and indeed in the observer's own response to this turbulent environment.'

Although this intense and time-consuming course is intended to be part of the training for child psychotherapy, Rustin (1989, p. 8) points out that 'it has also proved very valuable for professional development of other workers in a variety of roles with children'.

MAKING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING VISIBLE

One way of making children's development and learning visible, and the focus of discussion, is through pedagogical documentation. We, at Pen Green, have learned a great deal from the Reggio Project. We have been challenged to think in different ways, acknowledging the importance of the group as well as individuals within each group. In Reggio, the workers focus on children's projects and each project is beautifully documented. A great deal of their documentation includes children's detailed drawings or photographs of sculptures or paintings, that often give insights into children's thinking and feeling. Carla Rinaldi (2006, p. 68) has written about the purposes and advantages of pedagogical documentation:

> To ensure listening and being listened to is one of the primary tasks of documentation (producing traces/documents that testify to and make visible the ways of learning of the individuals and the group) as well as to ensure that the group and each individual child have the possibility to observe themselves from an external view while they are learning …

Documentation makes revisiting and reviewing our thinking possible. Rinaldi also speaks about observation, not seen as 'an individual action' but 'a reciprocal relationship' (2006, p. 128). Rather than seeing observation as the task of one person, who tries to be objective, Rinaldi says 'Instead we have a world of multiple interacting subjects who construct reality starting from different points of view' (p. 128). She sees observing as 'not so much perceiving reality as constructing reality' (p. 128).

HOW WE APPROACHED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO CARRY OUT THIS STUDY

Workers and parents at the Pen Green Centre have built a tradition over 26 years of engaging in Child Study, to understand and provide exciting possibilities for children and as part of workers' own professional development. So, when we embarked on a new study, many parents using the nursery, were aware of what had gone before. Rather than attempting to be 'objective' by choosing to study children in a randomised way, we began by building on relationships with families we already knew and who were interested. Rigour does not necessarily come from being objective but from being aware of our subjective view.

As workers, we approached the parents, who we thought might be interested, individually at first. We explained what the study might involve and how the parents might engage with us in studying their children. It was important to indicate how much material we would gather and how often and where we

would meet with families to discuss and interpret our nursery observations and to hear about observations made at home. As always, we were flexible about how often and where we met. In a study of 'Involving parents in their children's learning', focusing mainly on cognition, we had found meetings where parents viewed and discussed their own and each other's children's development and learning to be hugely successful. In this project both workers and families seemed more comfortable discussing emotions in smaller groups or in a one to one dialogue.

ETHICS

An important aspect of any Child Study is ethics. I have found making initial contact with anyone, who might participate in a study, and talking through with them, as individuals, what might happen, critical to any study. Although confidentiality and anonymity may be desirable, the use of photographs and video material has made it almost impossible to anonymise the people involved.

In order to gain permission for this study, I spent time with parents and with children before any filming was done. Occasionally children felt uncomfortable being filmed and usually indicated their discomfort by their actions, for example, one day one little girl avoided me by going inside a tent and closing the zip. Sometimes children were pleased to see me and would chat or tell me where they were going to play next. One child claimed me as 'her' researcher and would tell other children that I was there to film 'her' and not them.

Workers in settings where an outsider comes in to film can feel quite vulnerable (Tobin and Davidson, 1990, p. 273). Asking individually for permission in such a way that children, parents or workers can say 'No' takes quite a bit of skill and we have not always got it right. Holding in mind that we hope to share power with others and to hear their views helps to some extent. Seeking permission at each stage of a study also communicates the message that permission may be given or withheld at any point and for any reason.

CARRYING OUT OBSERVATIONS USING DIFFERENT TOOLS

Generally speaking we notice what has significance for us. Children interested in grid-like shapes might notice the net curtains, scaffolding on the way to nursery and a tartan biscuit tin on the table, all of which have a grid-like form. As adults, we might notice children exploring repeated patterns (schemas) because we have recently been discussing and articulating what those patterns might look like. We may be sensitive to certain patterns at different times.

In order to observe, we need to pay close attention, a kind of active watching and listening. When we reflect on our observations of children, we sometimes use different tools to capture the main events. These are mostly:

- pen and paper
- Dictaphone
- camera
- video recorder.

If we are using the Tavistock Method (as mentioned earlier) we would watch carefully and record (using pen and paper or a computer) as much detail as possible afterwards, paying special attention to recording our feelings, as well as what we have observed in the interactions of others.

Adopting the technique Susan Isaacs and other proponents of Child Study used, means keeping a 'running record' of actions and language, often gathered while we are engaging with the children (Bartholomew and Bruce, 1993, p. 16). In Susan Isaacs' day, that meant carrying a notebook and pen and filling in the detail afterwards. It was and is most important to record accurately any language being used by the children, as language can provide such insights into children's thinking, as we saw with James at the start of this chapter. Dictaphones can be useful for recording children's language as well as our reflections on their actions.

We became interested in processes of learning rather than outcomes of learning and we found these processes were most easily captured by taking a sequence of photos or by filming. We could communicate what we thought we had seen with a set of photos. Filming added another dimension, enabling us to view the filmed material alongside parents. Tait (2007, p. 69) noted that 'The video we watched acted as a catalyst for dialogue', when working with a parent. She went on to point out that 'It was a tool that allowed us to revisit, review and reflect on what had been filmed'. The parent Tait worked with was able to 'see things from a totally different perspective'. Somehow, using video seemed to offer parents an opportunity to be alongside workers as equals, both expressing views and coming to 'a shared understanding' (Tait, 2007, p. 60).

Trevarthen (2006) described 'emotion as the quality of movement' and because we wanted to be able to gain a deeper understanding of children's emotions, we found filming to be most effective and useful. Jordan and Henderson (1995, p. 51) pointed out that 'video taping … produces data much closer to the event itself, than other kinds of re-presentation'. Holding a camera sometimes affected children's behaviour but, if they did not object to being filmed, they soon seemed to get used to the camera. Very occasionally a child was so interested in the camera and how it worked that it was impossible to film their involvement without the aid of a second camera.

In writing up the material for this book, I have become aware of another issue around video observations. When we watch video, we pick up so much information through all of our senses, that representing the observation in the written word is quite difficult. The advantage of video is being able to revisit and review original material in all of its complexity. In revisiting observations we see more each time, and representing that detail sometimes results in loss of communication with others. Another difficulty is presenting observations without judgement initially because, as human beings, we are analysing and trying to make sense of events all of the time. Narrative observations can be so long and complicated that the reader gets lost and misses the point. In settings, there may be no reason to transcribe everything observed, as filmed material can be part of a child's record of development and learning. It may be only when communicating with other professionals that we need to commit information to paper. It takes a great deal of skill and practice to present detailed observations succinctly.

TIME SAMPLING

When using the Tavistock Method, there is usually a time boundary of an hour a week for the observation to be made. This is similar to 'time sampling' as described in the literature about observation (Fawcett, 1996, p. 59). In settings, we often try to gather information over a whole session or day. Isaacs tried to gain as full a picture as possible of how the children were engaging in her setting.

At the Pen Green Nursery each child is the 'focus' of everyone's attention about once every six weeks. The focus children's names (two each session) are displayed on the large whiteboards in the main nursery rooms and it is everyone's responsibility to write about, photograph or film what they see those children engaging in throughout a whole morning or afternoon. In addition, workers spontaneously record anything they consider notable that any child engages in.

EVENT SAMPLING

Another way of managing observations is to sample certain events that are of interest to us (Fawcett, 1996, p. 60; Podmore, 2006, p. 42). At the Pen Green Centre, we have always been most interested in what the children **choose** to do and in how they play with each other, with adults and with the resources available to them. We are less interested in observing adult-led activities which we think may offer less insight into the children's interests, thinking and motivations.

At the start of the project on children's well-being and resilience, we filmed a small number of children being settled in to nursery by their parents/carers

and at reunion (an event sample). This is because we were interested in 'attachment' and in what sorts of things helped the children to feel secure at nursery (Bowlby, 1998). We went on to film children in 20–30-minute blocks (a time sample) during their nursery session, usually once a week. We found this filming very valuable as it enabled us to reflect on development and learning alongside children and their families.

INTERPRETING OBSERVATIONS USING SCHEMA THEORY AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

For this smaller study of eight children, I decided to use schema theory and attachment theory to make links and to deepen my understanding of the children's actions. It was only when we began to put together our observations of children's repeated patterns of action (schemas) with information from home, particularly in relation to separation, attachment and loss, that we began to gather evidence of a possible link between schemas explored and emotions experienced, across the group of children.

'CONTENT' AND 'FORM'

It seems important to note that when we are thinking about extending thought in young children by 'feeding' their current schemas, we are thinking about the 'form' rather than the 'content'. Traditionally, in settings, we have been concerned with offering 'content', for example, to extend an interest in clocks, we might offer a range of timepieces (related 'content'). Observation of the underlying 'form' might reveal an interest in rotation. Many more experiences could be offered to support and extend children's interest in rotation and circularity.

SCHEMAS OBSERVED

The following observable patterns of repeated actions were seen in the study of children's behaviour:

- Lines – making lines with objects or string.
- Trajectory – moving in or representing straight lines, arcs or curves.
- Oblique trajectory – moving in, using or drawing oblique lines.
- Dab – making a stabbing trajectory movement, sometimes resulting in a mark.
- Connecting and disconnecting – connecting themselves to objects and objects to each other and disconnecting.

- Proximity and separation – before children can connect, they sometimes place objects or marks in 'proximity' to each other or represent them separately (Athey, 2007, p. 73).
- Enclosure – enclosing oneself, an object or space.
- Enveloping – enveloping or covering oneself, an object or space.
- Containing – putting materials or oneself inside an object capable of containing them or objects.
- Inside – being interested in the inside space of a container.
- Subdivision of space – being interested in the subdivision of space, for example, upstairs and downstairs.
- Transporting – carrying objects or being carried from one place to another.
- Going through a boundary – causing oneself or some material to go through a boundary and emerge at the other side.
- Classification – when objects, people or materials are grouped according to their similarities. The classifications become increasingly refined.
- Seriation – ordering objects or people according to size or other comparative features.
- Rotation – turning, twisting or rolling oneself or objects around.
- Circularity – the shape made through rotation.
- Grid – vertical and horizontal parallel lines or bars, which intersect at right angles to each other.
- Positioning – children position themselves and objects in different ways, thereby gaining different views of the world and of objects. Some objects can be placed in vertical, horizontal or oblique positions.
- Core with radials – a co-ordination of a central core (enclosure) with radial appendages (trajectories).
- Transformation (not a repeated pattern but an aspect observed – transformation occurs as a result of some action, for example, sand becomes soggy as a result of adding water to it) – transforming oneself by dressing differently or being interested in changes of state. Definitions from Arnold (1997, pp. 45–8).

Some of these repeated patterns seemed to be more readily understood as part of children's emotional lives, for example, transporting objects from home to nursery offered John security and sometimes related to 'transitional objects' as described by Winnicott (1991, p. 4). Winnicott described transitional objects as the first 'not-me possession', 'a defence against anxiety' and acknowledged that they were symbolic of the mother. Spotting children using

schemas at a symbolic representation level was significant in our study.

Piaget, himself, acknowledged that 'The schemas relative to persons are cognitive and affective simultaneously. The affective element is perhaps more important in the domain of persons and the cognitive element in the domain of things, but it is only a question of degree' (1962, p. 95).

Piaget talked about 'conscious and unconscious symbolism' and gave examples of when a child might consciously be using one object to represent another. He observed his daughter, Jacqueline, aged 1 year 10 months, 'using a shell on a box to represent a cat on a wall'. She said 'cat on the wall' demonstrating her conscious use of symbols (1951, p. 171). In contrast, Piaget pointed out examples of when a child does not understand the significance of his own actions, for example,

> A child who has been made jealous by the birth of a younger brother and happens to be playing with two dolls of unequal size, will make the smaller one go away on a journey, while the bigger one stays with his mother. Assuming that the child is unaware that he is thinking of his younger brother and himself, we shall call a case of this kind secondary or unconscious symbolism. (1951, p. 171)

Similarly, when observing my grandson, Harry, 'playing with Teddy Tom' (a small teddy): 'Harry carried Tom carefully, saying "He's got no daddy", then "he's got no mummy" – "no brothers, no sisters"' (Arnold, 2003, p. 60). Harry was 2 years 10 months and this was a few weeks after his parents had told him and his sister that they were going to separate. I deduced from this that Harry was using Teddy Tom to express his own anxiety and fear of abandonment, and that this deeper meaning was out of his conscious awareness. It was often clearer to us, as parents and workers, when children 'projected' their feelings on to toys, particularly toys that could represent people. In her study, Janet Shaw concluded that 'An infant's concept of objects is initially formed through the projection onto them of aspects of her inner life … Symbolising anxiety through projection onto objects provided the child with a defence against directly experiencing the anxiety' (1991, p. 364).

We were also searching for instances where the link was less easily made, such as when Harry was connecting with string and not necessarily verbalising and animating his thoughts and feelings about his actions.

USING ATTACHMENT THEORY TO UNDERSTAND CHILDREN'S ACTIONS

Many hundreds of studies of 'attachment' have been made across cultures and have considered various aspects of attachment, separation and loss (Cassidy and Shaver, 1999). Mary Ainsworth et al. (1978) developed 'a laboratory

procedure that was designed to capture the balance of attachment and exploratory behaviour under conditions of increasing though moderate stress' (Solomon and George, 1999, p. 290). They noticed that children's behaviour, at reunion with their parents or carers, after a short separation, was significant and seemed to follow certain patterns. Their finding was that children were either: 'securely attached to mother', 'anxiously attached to mother and avoidant' or 'anxiously attached to mother and resistant' (Bowlby, 1997, p. 338). Subsequently Main and Solomon added a fourth category of attachment behaviour, described as 'disorganised or disoriented' (Solomon and George, 1999, p. 291).

Although we were interested in these findings, it was not our intention to make judgements about the security of individuals' attachment to their parents or workers. There was overwhelming evidence to suggest that, as human beings, we are all affected by our early experiences, particularly in relation to separation, attachment, loss and transitions. As parents and nursery practitioners, we wanted to use the research to help us understand when children's security was threatened and how we could help. Attachment theory provided the concepts and language to be able to discuss such issues. In a way, we were trying to bring into our conscious awareness the possibility that children might be exploring issues to do with separation and attachment.

SO WHAT?

Sir Isaac Newton said in 1675 'If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants'.

In some ways, we were feeling our way with this study. The tradition of Child Study in both early education and psychoanalysis offered us 'shoulders to stand on'. We also used our own experiences of relating to children and their families over a number of years. We knew that using video was important and, particularly in a study of emotions, would provide a way of revisiting and re-experiencing what happened.

Certain aspects are important if our observations are to be timeless:

- Stating the exact age of each child in years, months and days enables us to recognise development over time.
- Giving the context of an observation helps others to understand what's going on.
- Stating the time and duration of an observation also helps to communicate how important the concern or exploration was and how persistent children have been in pursuing a concern or interest.
- Written observations must communicate with others. That is the main pur-

pose and communicating clearly takes a great deal of skill and practice. Photographs can help with communication.

- If video observations are made, they need to be labelled in some way with the date and time. Watching and editing video takes time and those processes need to be manageable for workers during the normal working day.
- Even 2 or 3 minutes of video can demonstrate a great deal and can be used in training or to share with parents.

At the Pen Green Nursery, we are constantly striving to improve our methods of observation and communication. We are interested in what each child brings to the learning situation, and observing the children closely can give us insights into **their agenda** and the possibilities for development and learning. One technique we are currently using is an observation sheet to make sure that all essential information is recorded. An important aspect is reflecting together with parents about what their child is trying to understand or learn about. A second technique is to use a Possible Lines of Development chart (Figures 1.1 and 1.2), which is a sort of medium-term plan, starting with the child or children's interests at the centre. I cannot emphasise too strongly that we are seeking to understand which interests and schemas children are exploring. We cannot decide in advance what they will learn but 'feeding' their current schemas seems to go some way towards helping children to learn in a deep way.

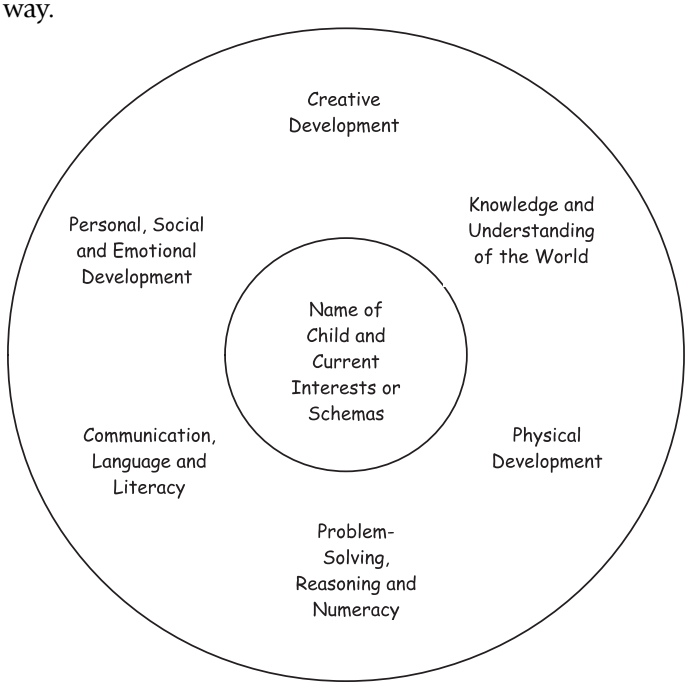

Figure 1.1 Possible Lines of Development chart
Source: Pen Green Team, 2009

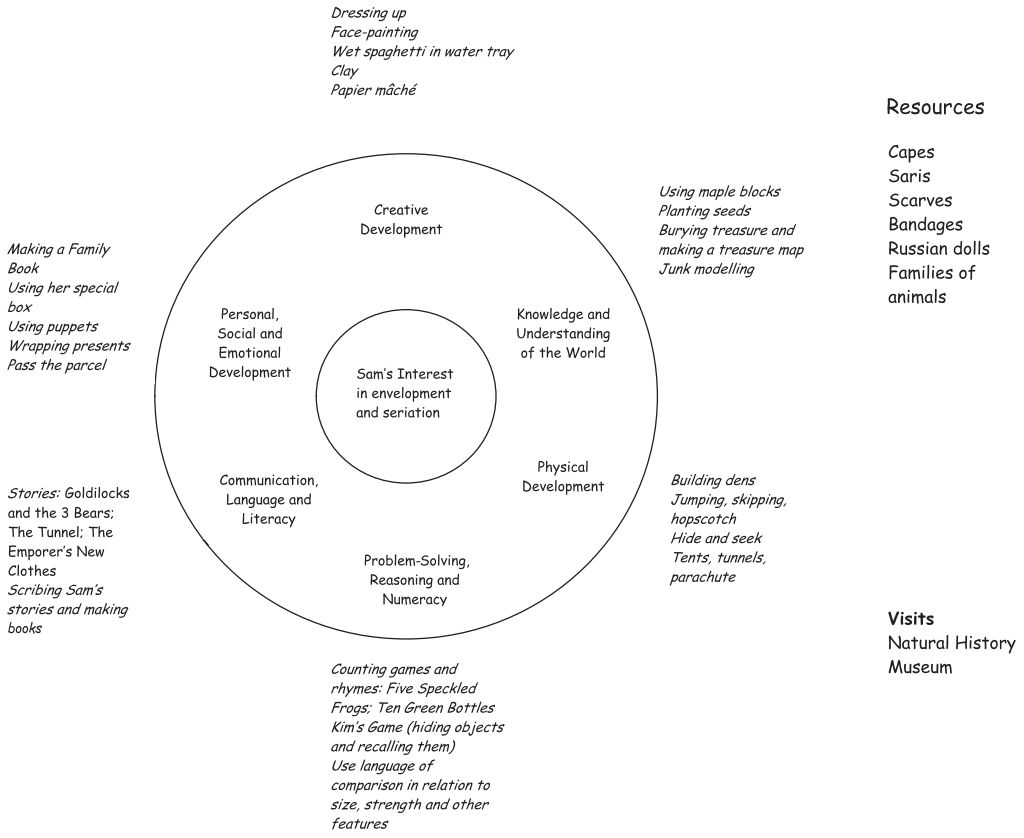

Figure 1.2 Possible Lines of Development for Sam
Source: Pen Green Team, 2009

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Fawcett, M. (1996) *Learning Through Child Observation*, Jessica Kingsley, London.

Isaacs, S. (1930/1966) *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Isaacs, S. (1933) *Social Development in Young Children*, George Routledge and Sons, London.

Johnson, H. (1928/1972) *Children in 'The Nursery School'*, Agathon Press, New York.

Pen Green Nursery Observation Sheet (currently in use)

Part One: Narrative Observation – Telling the Story

Name:
Date of birth/Age:
Date, time and length of observation:
Place:
How did the child get involved?

What happened next?

Part Two: Reflective Practice

What does the play/investigation seem to be about?

How did you support the play?

What new/supporting language did you introduce?

What learning do you consider took place?

Schemas	Involvement	Well-being	Pedagogic Stategies

Links to the Curriculum Framework Possible Extensions