**[Karen]:** So, developmental theories focus on learning and development taking place in continuous stages from birth to adulthood and the educator responds to and plans for children in relation to their developmental stage, whereas post-structural theories recognise that knowledge is based on multiple perspectives and that all experiences are socially constructed and therefore open to interpretation. They seem to position the educator as playing a very active role.

**[Karen]:** Given that there are so many different theories that inform our approaches to children's learning and development, does the role of the adult vary depending on the theory that you might use in supporting children's development in play?

**[Sarah]:** Yes.

**[Karen]:** I know.

**[Sarah]:** Yeah, okay. I'm trying. Yes. Look, there are many theories that offer different ways of seeing the world. And no single theory can explain everything, but they can inform our practice. Being able to hold other ideas and perspectives allow us to see things in a different way for the world around us. And really, if you think of you started with developmental theories, they're varied and vast, with more contemporary framings from the more foundational knowledge that came before. And really, I'm not sure that the field is stuck on linear fixed stages. Many practitioners work within children and their care and their context and environments and families using multiple theories to inform their practice.

**[Sarah]:** If you look, it's over 10 years ago that the early childhood strategy in Australia offered multiple perspectives, including of course, brain science, medical knowledge. And there's a vast array of knowledge that we can draw on, because a theory may be humanist, others may be post-human, others post-colonial, offering ways to think about our relationship with each other, our living world, and the non-living world.

**[Sarah]:** My colleague Sue Mentha always says, she says a key point from post-structuralist is the word structural. What came before as a way of seeing the world has now opened up to the post, as that refers to where we are now that offers other views. And while many of these views have existed for a long time, they weren't given the space in ways of thinking about children, context, and different learning.

**[Sarah]:** So yes, I think theory can help practice to vary and to develop because contemporary theories, if we've gone back to children's play, they can sort of tell us about the complexities we've just spoken about and the group dynamics about being and knowing in play and considering culture. And while they're helpful, they don't do all do the same thing. It's that they help for certain things.

**[Sarah]:** So if I wanted to understand the children's relationships with other species, I might not use cultural historical theory because the focus of that is on the human experience, where in my research, I did use cultural historical theory because I really was wanting to understand about play and imagination. And it really helped me.

**[Sarah]:** Vygotsky's writing on play and his writing on childhood and imagination really helped me understand that phenomena, to understand that space that children enter in, what we'd call sociodramatic play, and how when children enter this space, they operate in dual roles. They are self and they are other. They create this double subjectivity. This is a liminal space where they are both self and other. They are Bluey, they are child. They are a superhero, they are child. And that really helped me understand this ‘inbetween’ space of what happens in there.

**[Sarah]:** And then when I used cultural historical theorization of imagination, that helped me to understand, "Ah, so what children are doing in there, Vygotsky talks about, is highly creative." He actually says that social dramatic play is where creativity first emerges because it's centred around the imagination. He talks about how, as they are in this double subjectivity, they are using their reality, because imagination is grounded in reality. They're using all different things from their reality. A bit of that that I saw on the TV, a bit of that that happened at dinner, a bit of that that I saw at my early learning centre today. And they're reworking it. They're combining these parts of reality to create something that didn't exist before. And this is highly linked to their emotions. They might choose something because the affect is exciting. "I want to play with that because that's really exciting."

**[Sarah]:** That theory was really helpful for my research. I think using theory to assist with practice or using theory to exist with research, which then hopefully informs practice, is really helpful. But yeah, different theories do different things. Does that make sense?

**[Karen]:** It does make sense. And there are two things that I pulled out of that, Sarah. And one I think is really important to kind of highlight, and that was when you started and we were talking about developmental theory and you said that theories become contemporary. And that means that other people come along and add to that body of work and maybe change our thinking about that body of work. And you said that you didn't think anyone would be solely relying on those linear approaches to theory.

**[Karen]:** And I think that I pulled that out because when I started teaching a long, long time ago, it was developmentally appropriate practice. And that informed the puzzles that I put out. I put out so many pieces because I knew that on a continuum, these children reasonably could do a little less than that and maybe a little more with that, but that was where I pitched it. And that you really need to constantly be learning about theory as an educator because it changes as other people contribute to it.

**[Karen]:** And the second thing that you really made me think of there was about relying on multiple theories, not one theory, and we'll find the answers to the questions that you have about children and their play, or even perhaps the pedagogical decisions that you want to make about the experiences that you create or offer to children about play.

**[Sarah]:** Yeah. And I think that theory by its nature is dynamic. It changes, and as our practices. And I think that point about looking other... The reason I brought up Sue Mentha is, she's a colleague of mine, because I think teams discussing theory is really important. I learned more about theory, of course, reading it and writing about it, but actually talking about it to colleagues. So Sue is an amazing colleague, that we can just nut something out by actually talking about the things that we don't quite understand. And that sort of engagement with theory, it's a living. It's living, it's moving, it's useful for practice.

**[Karen]:** I think sometimes people think theories are fixed, and we often rely on…sometimes if you bring to mind a theorist, they're people that sometimes have not been alive for a very long time now. We're not, I don't think, sometimes so good at thinking about contemporary theory that way. But we say in early learning that children are theorists, that they're creating and hypothesizing every day, and they must take in on board and then discard thousands of theories a week and not afraid to do so.

**[Sarah]:** Yep, absolutely. Children's working theories. And I'll just go back to that point that you suggested. While there are particular bodies of work that align to certain theories, so it's not just a big melting pot. I think that's really important. But the theories that exist is people have taken those, and what they're doing now with them is building on that work. And that's really exciting, as well as, of course, new theories that help us see things that, like I said before, were always maybe there. But maybe they weren't privileged, because we know certain theories have been privileged, so I think that's really important.

**[Karen]:** Yes. I think the idea that we have bought into play theories that we favour for particular reasons or theories that we've been taught that have been brought into privileged spaces is really important. And I often think it's useful for educators when they're doing their program planning to not only be reflecting and making visible children's working theories, but also their own. And I like to say to educators, what are you thinking about at the moment and what theories are you working on or what theories are you exploring in what you're seeing the children doing?

**[Sarah]:** Nice, yeah.

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