ECIE4012

The Principles of Learning and Teaching

Portfolio

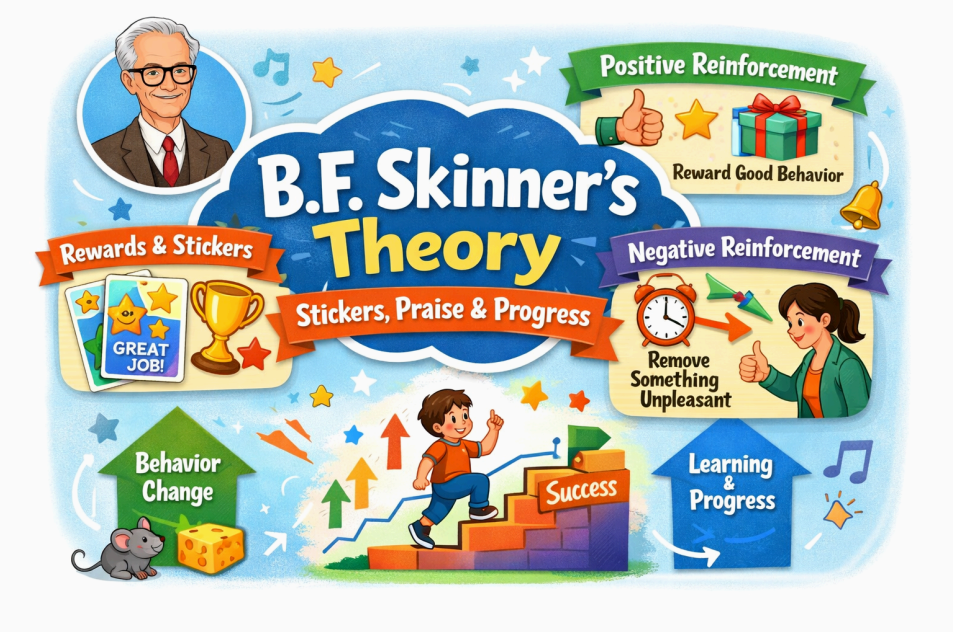
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Blog 1

Demonstrate your understanding of a theory of learning from the following list:
Bruner, Skinner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel

Stickers, Praise and Progress: Skinner's Secrets for the 21st-Century Classroom.



(OpenAI, 2026)

If you've ever held up a sticker and watched a classroom go from chaos to order, you've already used Skinner's behaviour theory. Personally, I find those moments magical — a simple sticker, a bit of praise, and suddenly the chatter settles and children focus. Skinner (1904–1990), psychologist and rather famous pigeon-trainer, developed operant conditioning: the idea that behaviour is shaped by its consequences (Skinner, 1953; McLeod, 2023). In simple terms, what we reinforce, we see more of — and what we don't, gradually fades. When a child receives a sticker, specific praise, or even an enthusiastic "Wow, I love how you're sitting!", that positive reinforcement increases the likelihood they'll repeat the behaviour (Cherry, 2022; Miltenberger, 2016). Behaviour that isn't reinforced, meanwhile, tends to disappear through extinction — something many teachers recognise when certain routines mysteriously vanish over time. Behaviourism works because it links actions

with outcomes in clear, predictable ways, making it practical, powerful, and easy to spot in any classroom, even amidst the daily chaos we all know too well.

- Do something desirable → receive reinforcement → behaviour increases.
- Do something undesirable → remove reinforcement → behaviour decreases. Simple. Effective.

Simple. Effective. No deep psychoanalysis required.

Skinner identified three key tools:

- **Positive reinforcement** — adding something pleasant (praise, stickers).
- **Negative reinforcement** — removing something unpleasant ("Finish this and you don't have to tidy up!").
- **Punishment** — a consequence that reduces behaviour (rarely used in modern classrooms).

Behaviourism assumes that learning is observable, measurable, and influenced more by the environment than by internal thoughts (Watson, 1913; Smith, 2021). Or in teacher language: *what we reward, we get more of.*

Skinner's ideas are thriving in modern classrooms because reinforcement provides consistency and predictability. Children, like adults, love knowing what to expect. Adults don't turn up to work because laminating brings us joy; we turn up because we are reinforced – salary and the occasional biscuit! Students respond the same way, when they know positive behaviour leads to rewards, engagement improves (Cooper, Heron and Heward, 2020). By consistently reinforcing wanted behaviour — being on task, listening, sitting correctly — those behaviours increase.



(OpenAI, 2026)

For example: The other day, I was working with a small group of four. Three were focused and working brilliantly. The fourth? Doing laps around the table like it was an Olympic race.

Do I chase them? Ignore them? Let three kids work and forget the fourth? Nope. I went full Skinner: pulled out my sticker sheet and praised the three on-task students. The result? The runner froze, stared, and suddenly walked over, sat down, and joined in — all to get a sticker. No bribery. No chasing. Just positive reinforcement in action. Skinner would have been proud. I was just relieved no one escaped to the corridor. Sometimes, reinforcement can even prevent the classic "it's fine, I'll do it myself" meltdown. Last week, I asked a student to hand out worksheets. Normally, they'd argue or drop them on the floor. But after a few consistent praises and stickers in previous tasks, they grabbed the stack and marched off like a tiny, determined classroom manager. Small wins, big impact.

Beyond Rewards: Conditioning in Action:

Skinner's theory isn't just about rewards — it's also about conditioning, and this is where I see it working most powerfully in my classroom. Operant conditioning suggests that cues or signals can prompt behaviour because children learn that certain actions lead to certain outcomes (Skinner, 1953).

A really simple example of this in my own practice is our *"Come join the circle"* song. At first, it took patience and consistency. We sang it, we waited, we repeated it (a lot). But over time, something clicked. Now, when that tune starts playing, I don't need to give reminders or chase anyone around the room. The children walk over to the carpet and sit down, ready to learn. No stickers. No bribes. Just a familiar cue — operant conditioning in action, Skinner-style.Skinner described these cues as *discriminative stimuli* — signals that tell a learner which behaviour is likely to be reinforced (Skinner, 1953). The song itself isn't a reward; it's a trigger. The children have learned to associate the sound with the action of coming together on the carpet, because that behaviour has consistently led to positive outcomes in the past. Skinner famously argued that behaviour is shaped by consequences, and honestly, I see this play out daily. Whether it's a child suddenly sprinting back to the carpet when they hear the song, or a reluctant learner transforming into a focused superstar thanks to a well-timed sticker, the pattern is the same. In my classroom, this means I don't need to nag, bargain, or plead. Instead, I reinforce the behaviours I want to see — consistently, calmly, and creatively.

So yes, I keep my praise ready and my stickers shiny. Not because Skinner said so — but because it works.



(OpenAI, 2026)

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Blog 2

Demonstrate your understanding of a theory of learning from the following list:

Bruner, Skinner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel. The theory must be different to Blog 1.

Froebel, Free Play & The Controlled Chaos of Primary Classrooms.

Why Learning Through Experience, Scaffolding & a Spiral Curriculum Actually Works (Even on a Monday Morning).

If someone told me 10 years ago that a 19th-century German philosopher (Friedrich Froebel) would shape how I survive—sorry, teach—in a modern primary classroom, I would have laughed. Yet, here I am, proudly living my best Froebel life, armed with natural resources, open-ended questions, and a level of patience I didn't know I had. And the funny thing is, you're probably using his theory too without even realising it—every time you celebrate play, follow a child's lead, or pretend you absolutely meant for that spontaneous learning moment to happen.



(Banner C, 2025)

Froebel's constructivist theory basically says: children learn by doing, by exploring, by experimenting, and by generally making delightful mess. He believed that play was the highest form of learning, and honestly, on the days when our carefully planned activity is completely ignored while a child decides to turn a pinecone into a scene from the Gruffalo, I believe it. This belief fits well within the Curriculum for Wales, especially in Foundation Phase. Wales champions learning through play, experiential discovery, and child-led

exploration. The guidance given to us celebrates curiosity, physical exploration, creativity and active learning. Thie Curriculum for Wales explicitly recommends play and active learning, especially in early years. Guidance encourages learners to investigate, take risks, explore outdoors, solve problems and follow their own interests (Welsh Government 2022).

In our ALN classroom, some of the best learning happens ins sensory trays — even though it often looks a mess. The regular use of trays filled with green-dyed spaghetti (which instantly becomes the *Gruffalo's scrambled snake*) or a full Weetabix construction zone are a great way to encourage imagination and learning through play. There is no end-product from these scenarios, just hands on play. The children scoop, squeeze, cut, build and explore at their own pace. One minute they're building a Weetabix skyscraper, the next it's collapsed in a dramatic "natural disaster". But through the mess, they're developing fine motor skills, communication, sensory regulation and imaginative language — all through play they have chosen themselves.



(Banner, C, 20205)

Recording learning through photos and videos instead of written work links closely to Froebel's theory because it captures the *process* of learning, not just the outcome. Froebel believed children learn best through hands-on, meaningful play and self-expression (Froebel, 1826; Bruce, 2021) — and, realistically, no one wants a Weetabix-covered exercise book. Using Seesaw allows me to document real, lived learning moments like sensory exploration, communication and problem-solving, particularly for my SEND learners whose progress isn't always visible on paper. It also strengthens home-school links, something Froebel strongly valued, by helping families understand how play supports development and learning (Tovey, 2017).

Even the United Nations backs Froebel, which feels like a fairly solid endorsement. Article 31 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to rest, leisure and play (United Nations, 1989), and when I give children time to explore loose parts, build dens, create stories or simply engage in free play, I'm not just supporting learning — I'm upholding their rights. At the heart of Froebelian practice is the belief that children construct knowledge through hands-on, meaningful experiences (Froebel, 1826), and my role is to scaffold rather than control. For me, this means joining their play, asking open questions, gently nudging their thinking and then stepping back before I smother their independence… or attempt to rescue the glitter pot when I definitely shouldn't (Bruce, 2021).



(Banner, c 2025)

In conclusion, the principle of “encouraging free play learning to create opportunities for spontaneous and self-initiated learning” sits at the very heart of my practice and reflects Froebel’s belief that play is the highest form of development in early childhood (Froebel, 1826; Bruce, 2021). His ideas remain deeply embedded in modern education because they give us permission to trust the process — to trust that children’s play is purposeful and that their curiosity drives learning. When we provide time, space and meaningful resources, children naturally develop resilience, creativity and problem-solving skills. While this approach is not always tidy (and rarely glitter-free), it leads to authentic, joyful and child-centred learning that supports the whole child rather than just academic outcomes. Ultimately, Froebel’s legacy reminds me to step back more often, observe more carefully and trust the beautifully “controlled chaos” of the classroom — and I’m fairly certain he would have approved, with a quiet nod and a very serious beard stroke.

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Blog 3

Identify, discuss, and evaluate the theoretical approaches to learning linked to your theories from Blogs 1 and 2.

Operant Conditioning vs Play-Based Learning: The Ultimate Classroom Tag-Team.

Anyone who has worked in education knows that teaching is built on a mixture of theory, instinct, and caffeine. Whether you're calming a class with your best “stop that stare” or watching a child create a fully improvised narrative involving a pinecone, three dinosaurs and the Gruffalo, you’re already drawing on theories. Two of the biggest influences in my own class are B.F. Skinner and Friedrich Froebel: one gave us reinforcement systems, sticker charts and structure; the other gifted us play, exploration, and full permission to embrace (and justify) beautifully productive chaos. Both shape my daily classroom life—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes hilariously. Together we are going to compare the theories of these two theoretical giants, exploring how their ideas influence teaching and learning in real classrooms—particularly ALN settings where predictability and freedom must coexist.



(Open AI, 2026)

Skinner's Behaviourism: The Practical Magician of the Classroom.

Skinner's operant conditioning sits quietly behind many of the behaviour strategies we use every day — even if we don't label them as "behaviourist." At its core, the idea is simple: reward the behaviours you want and they increase; stop reinforcing the behaviours you don't and they gradually fade away (Skinner, 1953; Watson, 1913). No therapy couch required — just cause and effect.And it works. Stickers, specific praise, or a well-timed "I love how you're sitting" can calm a classroom with impressive speed (Cooper, Heron & Heward, 2020; Miltenberger, 2016). One moment things are edging towards chaos, the next there's a sudden outbreak of perfect sitting and focused faces — all because someone spotted the sticker sheet.In ALN settings, this clarity really matters. Predictable routines and clear expectations help learners feel safe and regulated, while also making life easier for adults. When children know exactly what behaviour is being reinforced, there's less anxiety, less conflict and far more calm.

That said, behaviourism isn't without its critics. Some argue it focuses too much on what children *do* and not enough on what they're thinking or feeling (Piaget, 1952; Bruner, 1966). There's also concern that over-reliance on external rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation — children may work for the sticker rather than for understanding or enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Behaviourism also includes discriminative stimuli — cues that prompt behaviour because children learn what follows them (Skinner, 1953). As mentioned in the previous blog, our "Come join the circle" song is a perfect example: no sticker, no countdown, just a familiar signal that feels safe, predictable, and inclusive — exactly the kind of low-stress support our learners thrive on.

In short, Skinner brings order—but he won't help anyone build a Weetabix skyscraper or turn spaghetti into the Gruffalo's scrambled snake.

Froebel's Constructivism: Champion of Play, Curiosity and Glorious Mess.

On the opposite side of the fence sits Froebel, who believed children learn best through exploration, experimentation and meaningful, hands-on play (Froebel, 1826; Bruce, 2021). Rather than relying on external rewards, Froebel championed intrinsic motivation, imagination and curiosity — ideas that feel very at home within the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). In ALN settings especially, play-based learning can be genuinely transformational. Sensory trays, outdoor learning and loose-parts play support communication, self-regulation, creativity and fine motor skills all at once. One well-thought-out sensory tray can often deliver far more learning than a worksheet ever could — particularly when that worksheet is likely to end up soggy, shredded, or glued to the table.

That said, Froebel's emphasis on free play hasn't escaped criticism. Some argue that play alone does not guarantee learning and that without adult guidance, key skills or concepts may be missed (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997). Others suggest that purely child-led play can disadvantage learners who need more structure, modelling or explicit teaching — a

consideration that feels especially relevant in ALN contexts. This reminds us that play still needs intentional planning and sensitive adult support to be truly inclusive. Documenting learning through photographs and videos allows us to capture this rich process in ways traditional written outcomes often miss (Tovey, 2017). For many learners, the journey — not the finished product — tells the real story of progress. Froebel's approach may be messier, but it nurtures creativity and independence—qualities that no sticker can buy.

Why the Best Teaching Lives in the Middle.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Placed side by side, Skinner and Froebel often appear to sit at opposite ends of the educational spectrum: one offers structure, predictability and clear behavioural outcomes, while the other champions curiosity, creativity and child-led exploration. In reality, effective classroom practice — particularly in ALN settings — rarely sits at either extreme. Behaviourist approaches provide the routines, boundaries and emotional safety many learners need to feel secure, while play-based learning offers the freedom to explore, experiment and make sense of the world in meaningful ways. A visual timetable, a familiar song or a clear expectation may help a child regulate, but it is often through play that deeper learning happens. When structure supports play rather than competes with it, learners gain both clarity and creativity. Ultimately, the most inclusive practice isn't about choosing Skinner or Froebel — it's about knowing when to lean on structure, when to step back, and how to blend both to meet the needs of every learner.

Blog 3: Reference list

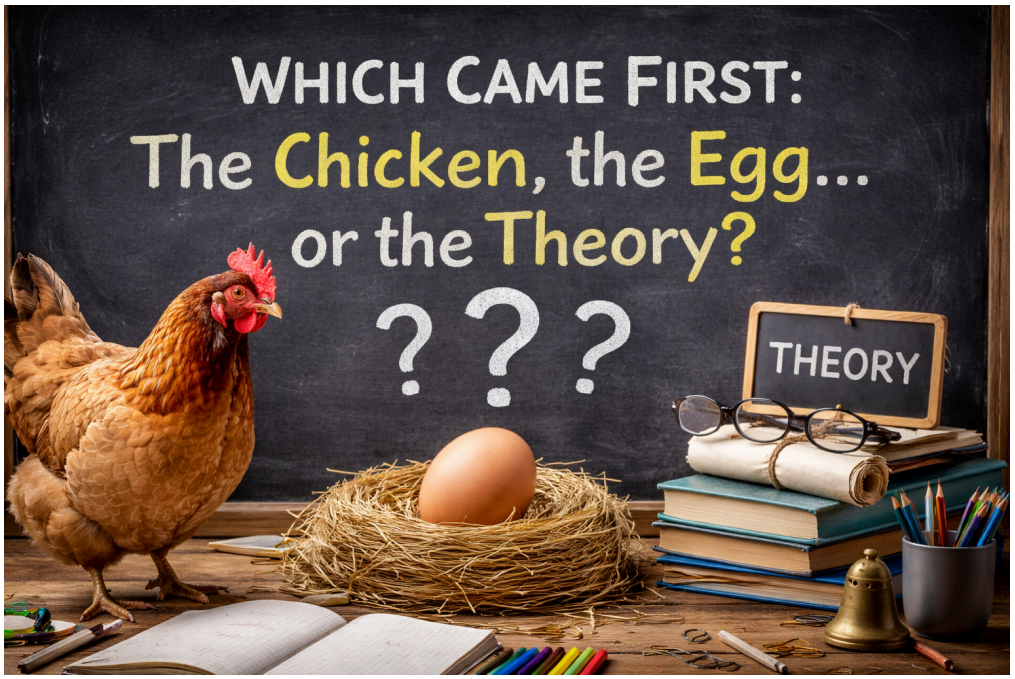
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Blog 4

Draw on experiences from your own setting to identify resources and strategies used to support effective teaching and learning, linking back to your chosen theories in Blogs 1 & 2

Which Came First: The Theory or the Classroom?

*There's that classic question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Working in education, I think we have our own version — **what comes first, the theory or the practice?** And honestly, I've seen it go both ways.*



(OpenAI, 2026)

For some people, it's theory first. They go straight from school to university, learn all about Skinner, Froebel and a long list of other educational giants, and then arrive in the classroom already shaped by those ideas. Their teaching style grows from lecture notes, textbooks and carefully highlighted sections about how children *should* learn.

Then there's the other route — **my route**. I started working in a classroom before I ever studied educational theory. I didn't walk in thinking, *"Today I shall apply operant conditioning"* or *"This activity aligns beautifully with Froebelian principles."* I walked in thinking about how to keep children safe, engaged and regulated — preferably without anyone escaping under a table or launching a chair (a win is a win).

It wasn't until I started studying educational theory that I had a big "ohhh… that's what I've been doing" moment. Suddenly, all the everyday strategies I relied on — stickers, praise, routines, sensory play and loose parts — had names and research

behind them. I realised I'd been using principles from Skinner's operant conditioning and Froebel's play-based approach without ever knowingly inviting them into my classroom (Skinner, 1953; Froebel, 1826).

In my case, practice definitely came before theory. But instead of feeling behind, it made everything make sense. Understanding the theory helped me see why certain strategies worked so well in my ALN classroom, why structure reduced anxiety, and why learning often happened best when I stopped interfering and let the mess happen. So for me, the answer to the chicken-and-egg question is simple: **the classroom came first, the theory followed — and once it did, everything clicked.** Turns out I'd been doing educational theory all along… just without the reading list, and with a lot more glitter.

When I step back and really look at my classroom practice, Skinner's influence shows up most clearly in the way I use structure, routines and reinforcement to support behaviour and engagement. Visual timetables, familiar songs, clear expectations and consistent praise help create a predictable environment where children know what is expected and what will happen next. Rather than chasing behaviour that's going wrong, I focus on reinforcing what's going right — praising effort, attention and participation so those behaviours naturally increase. In my ALN classroom, this predictability is invaluable; it reduces anxiety and helps learners feel safe enough to engage. Over time, the need for constant rewards often fades as routines become habits and children begin to regulate themselves.



(OpenAI,2026)

Of course, as a newly opened LRC, just as we start to feel like we've cracked it — children sitting at the table to eat, coming to the carpet at the sound of a familiar song, knowing exactly what comes next — a brand-new learner joins us and reminds us that routines are not universal knowledge. Suddenly, we're back at the beginning: gently introducing expectations, reinforcing the basics and celebrating tiny wins all over again. It's a bit like building a beautifully organised system only to hit reset… but watching each child settle, feel safe and begin to predict their day makes starting again completely worth it.

That said, as effective as this approach is (and I'd say it works about 95% of the time), it doesn't work for everyone. While many learners respond well to praise and rewards, some are far less deterred by negative consequences such as losing time off swimming or being placed in social isolation — consequences that, in theory, should reduce unwanted behaviour. When those strategies fall flat, it raises important questions. Is it self-sabotage? Is it a learning difficulty that makes understanding consequences more complex? Or is it simply that the consequence doesn't hold the same meaning for that child? What I've learnt is that when Skinner doesn't quite land, it's rarely defiance for the sake of it — it's behaviour communicating something that needs understanding, not punishment.

Froebel's influence is most obvious in the way learning happens through hands-on, sensory experiences rather than through pages in a book. In our LRC, learning rarely looks tidy or paper-based, and that's very much by design. Sensory trays, loose parts and practical activities allow learners to explore at their own pace and engage in ways that feel meaningful to them. For many of our pupils, written work can be a barrier rather than a true reflection of understanding, so learning is captured through action, talk and play instead. Using Seesaw allows us to record progress through photos and short videos, showing the learning process rather than just the finished product. A picture of a child independently engaging or problem-solving often tells a far richer story than a worksheet ever could — and it helps families see that play isn't "just play," even if it does involve Weetabix, spaghetti, and the occasional mystery smell.

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