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Phantasy and play: Susan Isaacs and child development

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Abstract

This article discusses the work of Susan Isaacs (1885–1948), the IOE's (Institute of Education), first director of the Department of Child Development. In addition to introducing child psychoanalysis to the UK, Isaacs was instrumental in mapping out the basis for a conceptual understanding of the role of aspects of imagination (which she termed 'phantasy') and play in the life of children. This allowed early childhood educators to develop holistic pedagogies that embraced both the intellectual and the social development of children. Her work has provided the basis for contemporary professional practice within the sector.

Keywords Susan Isaacs; early childhood; child development; Malting House School; psychoanalysis

Introduction

The early-twentieth-century work of educational psychologist Susan Isaacs (1885–1948) had a profound impact on early childhood education that continues to influence everyday life today. Her role as first director of the Department of Child Development at the IOE (Institute of Education) consolidated this approach, setting the foundations for subsequent early childhood research, teaching and teacher training endeavours at the IOE, which spread internationally.

Isaacs's professional interest grew out of a secular turn, rooted in psychology, that took place in the field of education at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her approach applied empirical techniques to the observation and recording of children's development and behaviour. As was common in the early days of psychology as a fledgling discipline, Isaacs's subsequent analysis of children's learning also incorporated various new psychoanalytical theories. This approach to understanding the development of young children was seen as an important form of scientific progress, spearheaded by the IOE. However, along with other pedagogic theories adopted at the time by the IOE, it also rejected two earlier aspects of teacher professionalism, causing great debate (Chamarette, 2021; Berner, 2008). The first of these rejected aspects was the idea that education should be based on particular philosophical tenets, which had frequently been rooted in religious practice. The second was the idea that transmission of a core body of knowledge should be placed at the heart of the curriculum. Both were replaced with a version of education that encouraged a deeper understanding of the inner life of the child, and the importance of play in relation to this.

This article begins by exploring the relationship between play and Isaacs's conceptualisation of 'phantasy' in early years education, relating it to a contemporary understanding of child development. At the centre of this understanding lies an appreciation that child development is intrinsically linked to the process of socialisation, rather than being purely biological and proceeding as an independent cognitive process regardless of any external stimuli. The article then describes Isaacs's work in the 1920s at the Malting House School in Cambridge, where her pedagogical approach was operationalised. Here, the child was positioned centrally, with adults as educational facilitators, in a manner typical of progressive educational approaches of the time. The article locates this educational model within a two-century-old philosophical tradition of education, with a timeline of influence that incorporates the writings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Freud and, in a more limited sense, Piaget and Montessori. It links this to the then newly founded field of psychoanalysis.

The article goes on to describe how Isaacs led the development of a Department of Child Development at the IOE in 1933. This was the first of its kind in England. Despite initial investment for the Department being very limited (she started in a half-time post with a single room, doing much of the teaching herself; she was also never given a Chair), the Department expanded rapidly and brought great prestige to the IOE in the years leading up to the Second World War. Although it was temporarily closed during the war, the Department reopened soon afterwards and expanded its work further, led by Dorothy Gardner, who had been one of Isaacs's students. The article concludes by discussing how Isaacs's legacy continues to inspire the field of early childhood education today.

Theorising child development

Isaacs's research primarily concerns itself with reconciling the biological and social aspects of child development. This was a conceptual problem of particular interest in the early decades of the twentieth century, during the period of social and educational reform that followed the First World War. At this time, research into child development had been encouraged by generous US philanthropic funding, which allowed several significant research institutes to be established in America. They subsequently engaged in unprecedented levels of experimental work (Bulmer and Bulmer, 1981; Thompson, 2016). The rate of expansion of interest in the field was such that between 1918 and 1929, the number of psychologists working in the area of child development had grown from 3 to 600 (Jones, 1956). This situation was not, however, reflected in Europe. The eugenicist Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) had made an earlier attempt at researching the development of children over the age of 11, and his disciple and public intellectual Sir Cyril Burt (1885–1971) had carried out work on the heritability of IQ via some potentially discredited twin studies (Samelson, 1997), but these were relatively rare examples. The Rousseau Foundation in Geneva (where Piaget was working) had received research funding from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial,

an American philanthropic fund set up by John D. Rockefeller in 1915 in memory of his late wife. However, this type of grant was the exception rather than the rule. This makes Isaacs's active engagement in the field all the more exceptional, given the apparent paucity of resources available for child development research in the UK at the time.

If we examine Isaacs's own childhood, it is possible to map an early origin of her interest. Born as Susan Fairhurst, Isaacs came from a large family based in the industrial North-West of England. (She later adopted her mother's maiden name of Sutherland, then, in 1914, took the family name of her first husband, botanist William Brierley, and finally, in 1922, the family name of her second husband, Nathan Isaacs.) Her father was a saddler who became a journalist, and a Methodist lay preacher; her mother, a milliner, died when she was 6. Her father went on to marry his deceased wife's former nurse. The relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter was strained, not least because it is possible the young Isaacs was aware that their relationship had pre-dated her mother's death (Gardner, 1969; Graham, 2009). Isaacs later trained as an infant schoolteacher at Manchester University, where she was taught by Grace Owen, described by Brehony (1997: 440) as a 'Froebelian Revisionist' and one of the people at the centre of a Manchester Froebelian hub, who in turn introduced Isaacs to the work of Dewey – Isaacs would later attribute her inspiration to Dewey in her book *Social Development in Young Children* (1933). Isaacs subsequently underwent psychoanalysis with John Carl Flügel (1884–1955) and later Joan Riviere (1883–1962), an early translator of Sigmund Freud's work. Isaacs's aim was to resolve some of the difficult issues surrounding her early home life. She subsequently became a psychoanalyst herself, then a full member of the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1923, and finally setting up in professional practice. It is likely that Isaacs was in fact the first practising British child analyst (Graham, 2009). During her training, she encountered the work of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, in relation to theories of infancy, as well as Jean Piaget's theories relating to the intellectual development of young children. All of these would prove to be highly influential in terms of Isaacs's later theoretical positioning. Isaacs has been described as a member of Melanie Klein's 'British School' or 'English School', which also included Joan Riviere, Nina Searl, Ella Sharpe, Melitta Schmideberg, Paula Heimann, John Rickman, Marion Milner and Hannah Segal (McEnroe, 1986).

Isaacs saw the role of learning by experience to be an integral part of a child's biological development, and similarly considered that the biological development of a child triggers certain forms of experiential learning. In this way, the development process could be regarded as symbiotic in character. It is possible to see clear similarities here with the work of Myrtle McGraw (1899–1988), a US neurobiologist based at Columbia University in the 1930s. McGraw painstakingly mapped the stages of development of human infants. She did this by devising a series of laboratory experiments that allowed very young children to devise their own movements in response to problems and stimuli, such as gravity, inhibition and judgement, using twin studies to demonstrate differences between nature and nurture. This allowed McGraw to demonstrate that development in young children has symbiotic characteristics, happening in response to external stimuli, rather than being exclusively genetic in origin (McGraw, 1935).

Isaacs understood child development as taking place in a similar way, with behaviour and experience inseparably intertwined (Isaacs, 1930a, 1930b, 1933, 1948b). Both women's work was significantly overshadowed by the work of experimental psychologist Arnold Gessell (1880–1961) at Yale, whose maturation theory dominated. Gessell argued that the sequence of neuromuscular development in infants is predetermined and invariable (Gesell et al., 1938; Gesell and Ilg, 1949). In this way, he took a diametrically opposed position to McGraw and Isaacs, and one which periodically (and controversially) incorporated some aspects of eugenics (Harris, 2011). Where Isaacs differed from McGraw, however, was in the nature of her experimentation, and the role of human relationships within it. During her period at the Malting House School from 1924 to 1927, which is described in more depth later in this article, Isaacs set up rigorous empirical processes to observe and record children's behaviour in the most minute detail, later analysing it through a psychoanalytical lens. This naturalistic environment for her enquiries resulted in the underlying processes and motivations of children's play being rendered properly visible and, within this, the vital role of what Isaacs terms 'phantasy'.

Defining phantasy

It is important to pay attention to what Isaacs means by the term 'phantasy', which is described most fully in her seminal paper 'The nature and function of phantasy' (Isaacs, 1948a). The term 'unconscious

phantasy' (and its spelling) came from Kleinian psychoanalysis and refers to a mental representation of an instinct, the unconscious basis for all mental processes. As Klein (1975: 294) wrote, in relation to the effect of what she calls children's 'desire to restore' forming part of their social development:

These tendencies to make reparation I have found in the analysis of small children to be the driving force in all constructive activities and interests, and for social development. We find them at work in the first play-activities and at the basis of the children's satisfaction in his achievements, even those of the most simple kind for example, in putting one brick on top of another, or making a brick stand upright after it had been knocked down – all this is partly derived from the unconscious phantasy of making some kind of restoration to some person or several persons whom he has injured in phantasy.

The divergent spelling of 'phantasy', as opposed to the more common 'fantasy', is deliberate, designed to differentiate it from daydreaming (Likierman, 2011). Klein saw phantasy as a rudimentary psychological activity, a powerful yet primitive underpinning of mental activity and the sense of self, allowing for adaptation to external situations and stimuli. Children's relatively uninhibited expression of this phenomenon was to provide Klein with key insights into mental processes within adults as well as children. She saw phantasy as representing the earliest form of mental life, as well as being ever present within adults at an unconscious level. In this way, it has been argued, Klein did not view phantasy as part of a sequential developmental process, but as a recurrent form of 'positioning' of the self (Likierman, 2011; Bar-Haim, 2017).

In the later work of Isaacs, unconscious phantasy describes something similar, namely an internalised method grounded in instinctual impulses by which children navigate and reconcile their environment with the relationships they experience around them. There are two aspects to this. The first is what Isaacs (1930b: 97–100) describes as a 'circumstantial relation', in which children engage in dramatic simulations of the world around them, for example pretending to use a telephone. This acts as a form of mimesis, a recreation or 're-presentation' of everyday life. The second aspect is what Isaacs (1930b: 101–3) terms a 'conative nexus of thought and phantasy', which allows children to develop symbolic thought, for example, understanding the symbolic value of fire. This acts as a form of diegesis, or indication of an underlying psychological narrative which reinterprets the situation. Within this framework, external realities are incorporated into phantasy, and children find themselves empowered to resolve inner conflicts and tensions.

A good example of how unconscious phantasy plays out in the imaginative life of children comes from a description of Isaacs's own childhood by her sister Alice Campbell (1952). She recounts how Isaacs's upbringing was coloured by a particular form of evangelical Methodism common in the north of England at the time. This involved the siblings being forced to attend what Alice calls religious 'revivalist orgies', which could last up to 10 days and be emotionally distressing for them. As a child, Isaacs took to re-enacting these religious meetings outside the home; at one stage, Alice reports, Isaacs regularly played at being a missionary on the train to and from school. She would choose an empty carriage, make a sibling kneel in front of her, and preach fervently at them (Campbell, 1952). If we analyse this incident using Isaacs's own definition of 'phantasy', we see play here as a form of self-expression, taking place on the child's own terms. It provided a means whereby Isaacs could express her feelings in a safe environment (for her, if not necessarily for the kneeling siblings), thereby exploring different ways of dealing with conflicting emotions surrounding the family's religious life and experiences. In this way, it could be argued, phantasy represented Isaacs's psychic reality, instinctively driven, with her inner world having a complex, continuous reality of its own.

As an adult, Isaacs was concerned with using psychoanalytical techniques in a similar way to understand play, particularly during her period as a teacher and researcher at the progressive Malting House School. It should be noted that psychoanalysis was not the only basis for the establishment of the school, as it had been set up mainly to encourage the children to develop scientifically enquiring minds (Graham, 2009). Nevertheless the Malting House School was one of only a few schools in the 1920s that explicitly operationalised psychoanalytical theories. The others included the Children's Home, which was established by the Moscow Institute of Psychoneurology in 1921, with Trotsky as patron, and which was attended by Stalin's son (Forrester, 2004); Anna Freud's 'Matchbox School' at Hietzing, near Vienna, which ran between 1927 and 1932 (Midgley, 2008); Dora and Bertrand Russell's Beacon Hill School (1927–43); and A.S. Neill's Summerhill School, established in 1921 in Dresden, before moving to Sonntagsberg in Austria, and then, in 1923, to Lyme Regis, before settling at its current site at Leiston in Suffolk in 1927.

Within the context of psychoanalysis, the occurrence of phantasy among Isaacs's young pupils – termed her 'child companions' in the dedication of *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* (Isaacs, 1930b) – was subject to daily scrutiny, as explained later in this article. This formed the basis for her meticulously executed scientific investigations, later described as a 'copious and careful record of phenomena' by Jean Piaget, Percy Nunn (Professor of Education at the IOE, 1913–36) and Jack Haldane (then Reader in Biochemistry at the University of Cambridge, and later Professor of Genetics at University College London, 1933–56) in an unsuccessful application for funds from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Trust, on behalf of the school. Isaacs took these observational records with her for analysis after her acrimonious departure from the school in 1927, in the aftermath of a love affair with the proprietor (Graham, 2009). Ultimately these Malting House School investigations and their findings would subsequently play a role in transforming the nature of early childhood education for many children. The next section of this article explains more about the origins of the school, and how Isaacs's theories of child development were influenced by her investigations there.

The Malting House School

As discussed earlier, during the period 1924–7, Isaacs was involved in the establishment of an experimental day and residential school for young children. The school had been set up and funded by the wealthy and eccentric entrepreneur Geoffrey Pyke in his home in Cambridge, catering for 20 children mainly aged between the ages of 2 and 7, mostly boys, and several with what might be described as behavioural difficulties. Isaacs had responded to an advertisement that Pyke had placed in a number of publications including *The New Statesman* and *Nature*:

WANTED—an Educated Young Woman with honours degree—preferably first class—or the equivalent, to conduct education of a small group of children aged 2–1/2–7, as a piece of scientific work and research. Previous educational experience is not considered a bar, but the advertisers hope to get in touch with a university graduate—or someone of equivalent intellectual standing—who has hitherto considered themselves too good for teaching and who has probably already engaged in another occupation.

A LIBERAL SALARY—liberal as compared with research work or teaching—will be paid to a suitable applicant who will live out, have fixed hours and opportunities for a pleasant independent existence. An assistant will be provided if the work increases. They wish to obtain the services of someone with certain personal qualifications for the work and a scientific attitude of mind towards it. Hence a training in any of the natural sciences is a distinct advantage.

Preference will be given to those who do not hold any form of religious belief but this is not by itself considered to be a substitute for other qualifications. (Drummond, 2000: n.p.)

The primary aim of the school was to encourage the children to learn from experience, in contrast to following an authoritarian model. It did this by providing an extraordinarily rich educational environment. Cameron (2006) describes how the Malting House School was located in an attractive building with a garden in Newnham, a leafy suburb of Cambridge not far from the iconic college 'Backs' which are picturesquely lined up along the River Cam. Part of the building comprised the Pyke family home, and the rest was given over to the functioning of the school. Isaacs (1930b, 1933) describes the painstakingly curated contents as including everything from child-sized furniture, books, domestic pets (dissected on one memorable occasion), art and craft materials, a gramophone and records, science equipment, including Bunsen burners, woodworking tools and a typewriter. The school initially permitted almost unprecedented levels of freedom for children to learn and behave how they liked, in order to give full expression to their interests and emotions. A frequently quoted example of how this played out in the daily life of the Malting House School is the death of the school rabbit, and what followed next:

The rabbit had died in the night. Dan found it and said, 'It's dead – its tummy does not move up and down now.' Paul said, 'My daddy says that if we put it into water, it will get alive again.' Mrs I. said, 'Shall we do so and see?' They put it into a bath of water. Some of them said, 'It is alive.' Duncan said, 'If it floats, it's dead, and if it sinks, it's alive.' It floated on the surface.

One of them said, 'It's alive, because it's moving.' This was a circular movement, due to the currents in the water. Mrs I. therefore put in a small stick, which also moved round and round, and they agreed that the stick was not alive. They then suggested burying the rabbit, and all helped to dig a hole and bury it. The next day, Frank and Duncan talked of digging the rabbit up but Frank said, 'It's not there, it's gone up to the sky.' They began to dig, but tired of it, and ran off to something else. Later they came back and dug again. Duncan, however, said, 'Don't bother, it's gone, it's up in the sky,' and gave up digging. Mrs I. therefore said, 'Shall we see if it's there?' and also dug. They found the rabbit, and the children were very interested to see it still there. (Isaacs, 1930b: 41)

At the Malting House School, Isaacs set up a rigorously designed investigative process, where initially staff members kept detailed notes, and subsequently stenographers were positioned on balconies around the edge of the house, meticulously recording every detail of the children's daily activities, described by her as 'objective behaviouristic records'. These detailed (and arguably highly intrusive) observations found their way into Isaacs's books *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* (1930b) and *Social Development of Young Children* (1933). These also influenced the Agony Aunt Column that Isaacs wrote for the publication *The Nursery World* between 1929 and 1936 under the pseudonym 'Ursula Wise' (Shapira, 2017), and her books *The Nursery Years* (Isaacs, 1929a) and *The Children We Teach* (Isaacs, 1932). By the second year, a third of the school were boarders, which meant that they were effectively under observation around the clock.

An eyewitness account of life at the school by Evelyn Lawrence indicates a degree of reflective practice as a consequence of this close observation, as Isaacs gradually came to realise that the children needed adult guidance, described as 'an element of guiding firmness', in order to thrive (McEnroe, 1986: 202). Isaacs did not come to this decision on her own, however. The psychoanalyst James Strachey visited the school and saw children running wild, kicking each other, poking sticks in each other's eyes and, on one memorable occasion, spitting in Isaacs's face (which she subsequently refused to wipe off until she received an apology, resulting in the child concerned not apologising and Isaacs being forced to call his bluff by having spittle on her face for the rest of the day). Strachey (1986) reported back to Klein, who broached the subject with Isaacs and Pyke, suggesting that unfettered freedom was resulting in fear among the young children in Isaacs's care (see also Shapira, 2017). Over time, Isaacs was to become increasingly critical of the inherent contradictions embedded within the interwar 'liberal project' that informed the underlying pedagogy of the Malting House School. She eventually came to the conclusion that unfettered freedom in itself could not provide the solution to key issues of concern, such as the tendency towards authoritarianism that existed within many forms of education at the time (Bar-Haim, 2017). Therefore some 'play' became off limits, an evolutionary process that the Malting House School had in common with other schools using psychoanalytical techniques (Barrett, 2018). Nevertheless, Isaacs still encouraged the role of phantasy as instrumental in allowing children to engage in what is broadly termed 'tendencies to restitution' by psychoanalysts; in other words, allowing children to restore what has been taken from the parents or rivals through the recreation of play scenarios. The story of Lena provides an example of phantasy enabling an exploration of hostility and resolution through play:

When the elder children heard that Lena had arrived, they said as if at some concerted signal, 'Oh that dragon has come' and ran into the schoolroom shouting in a hostile and intimidating way, 'Oh, there is the dragon'. Lena was at the other end of the room with Miss S. and did not seem to realise what they were saying. They were going to run near her and repeat it, but Mrs I. prevented this. During the next two or three days, they made occasional hostile remarks, but were on the whole quite friendly to her. It all appeared to be a phantasy game rather than real hostility to Lena; a few days later they invited her into their special rooms for play together. (Isaacs, 1933: 88)

In this way, Isaacs argued, children are able to develop socially conscious behaviour through their experience of the world, while guided by adults. The centrality of this experience to the learning process is often seen as a typical feature of what is termed progressive education.

Isaacs and progressive education

The progressive education 'movement' (if it can be called this) is often seen as being unified, whereas in reality there are key differences among many of the approaches used, although they overlap in some important respects. The theme of learning through experience, often described as 'naturalistic' learning, is common to these progressive theories of education generally, with *Emile* (1762) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–88) often presented as a foundational text. As Rousseau (1762/1892: 86) writes:

As he [the child] is incessantly active, he is forced to observe many things and to know many effects. He early acquires a large experience. He receives his lessons from Nature, and not from men. He learns the more rapidly, from the fact that he nowhere sees any intention to instruct him.

From this position, it is possible to map an intellectual timeline of influence ranging across thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Freud and, to a more limited extent, Piaget and Montessori, which ultimately culminated in the model deployed at the Malting House School. (This list is indicative rather than comprehensive; a more extensive analysis can be found in Giardiello, 2013 and Tyson, 2021.) The next influence in this notional timeline is therefore Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who further developed Rousseau's theories. He argued in his seminal work *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801) that books were not particularly relevant to early education for children, and that the focus of education should be seen as including the hands, heart and head, as opposed to the focus being primarily the function of intellect alone. He explains:

I had children in Stanz whose powers, not deadened by the weariness of unpsychological home and school discipline, developed more quickly ... I saw the capacity of human nature, and its peculiarities in many ways and in most open play ... I saw in this combination of unschooled ignorance a power of seeing *Anschauung* [view, conceptualisation], and a firm conception of the known and the seen of which our A B C puppets have no notion. (Pestalozzi, 1801/1900: 74)

Again, we see the idea of 'naturalistic' learning, with forms of knowledge twinned with the idea of an internal locus of control providing the foundation for self-learning and free investigation (Hewes, 1992). These principles would in turn be developed by Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), author of *The Education of Man* (1826), into the idea of the 'Kindergarten', or 'Children's Garden', with the first being established in Keilhau in Thuringia in 1837 (initially called the Child Nurture and Activity Institute). In this pedagogical model, childhood was seen as an end in itself, with children's needs being accommodated holistically. Froebel (1826/1885: 40) sees learning as taking place within the child's own life-world, through the medium of play:

the child develops his life in himself, his life with his parents and his family, life with a higher, invisible Power common to him and to them and also especially his life in and with Nature as nearing within it a life like his own. Life in and with Nature, and with the clear, still objects of Nature, must be fostered at this time by the parents and members of the family as a chief point of reference of the whole child-life. And this is done especially through play, through the fostering of child-play, which in the beginning is only natural life.

Just as in the case of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, children's activities and abilities are therefore seen by Froebel as providing the starting point for a 'natural' educational process. This is complemented by the learning context or situation, providing the basis for an ongoing development process. The theories of Froebel would have been very familiar to Isaacs, because her own professional training in education in Manchester had taken place within a circle of what Bar-Haim (2017) describes as 'neo-Froebelians'. They subscribed to a revisionist interpretation of Froebel's work which positioned socialisation, and to some degree social change, at the centre of early childhood education generally.

John Dewey (1859–1952), the next influence in this theoretical timeline, gives consideration to what he called this 'Kindergarten attitude' in an important chapter in his work *The School and Society* (1915), which explores Froebel's educational principles. Here he puts the ideas of Froebel in their historical context, in relation to the political situation in Germany at the time of their development, as well as at the time Dewey was writing his own book. As an American pragmatist, Dewey (1915: 117–18) presents an argument for his own kind of progressive revisionism:

There certainly is change enough and progress enough in the social conditions of the United States of today, as compared with those of the Germany of his day, to justify making kindergarten activities more natural, more direct, and more real representations of current life than Froebel's disciples have done.

Arguing against the neo-Froebelians and for realism in education as a means of achieving this, Dewey (1915: 117–18) continues in a critical vein:

There has been a curious, almost unaccountable, tendency in the kindergarten to assume that because the value of the activity lies in what it stands for to the child, therefore the materials used must be as artificial as possible, and that one must keep carefully away from real things and real acts on the part of the child. Thus one hears of gardening activities which are carried on by sprinkling grains of sand for seeds; the child sweeps and dusts a make-believe room with make-believe brooms and cloths; he sets a table using only paper cut in the flat (and even then cut with reference to geometric design, rather than to dishes), instead of toy tea things with which the child outside of the kindergarten plays. Dolls, toy locomotives, and trains of cars, etc., are tabooed as altogether too grossly real – and hence not cultivating the child's imagination.

The Dewey model, grounded as it was in activities and equipment much closer to real life, moves closer to the learning environment at the Malting House School. It does this via a rationale for providing children with lifelike situations in which to explore their desire to learn, playing out elements of what Isaacs (1930b: 97–100) would go on to call 'circumstantial relations' in doing so. For Isaacs, however, this was theoretically incomplete. It was the introduction of psychoanalytical techniques that allowed for Isaacs (1930b: 101–3) to operationalise her theories of the 'conative nexus of thought and phantasy'. In order to achieve this, Isaacs drew on the work of Melanie Klein, which emphasised play and developing the child's inner life (Shapira, 2017). Klein had moved to England in 1926, and had been an early adopter (and to some extent critic) of the theories of Sigmund Freud (1868–1939). This provided the origin of her own ideas, so Freud provides the next point in our timeline of influence.

Freud (1937) notoriously described the bringing up of children as one of the 'impossible professions', along with the governance of nations and psychoanalysis. He argued this on the basis that each is ultimately doomed to insufficiency. Unlike the neo-Froebelians, he did not see psychoanalytic education as having the potential for acting as an agent of social change:

Psychoanalytic education will be taking an uninvited responsibility on itself if it proposes to mould its pupils into rebels. It will have played its part if it sends them away as healthy and efficient as possible. It itself contains enough revolutionary factors to ensure that no-one educated by it will in later life take the side of reaction and suppression. It is even my opinion that revolutionary children are not desirable from any point of view. (Freud, 1937: 400)

While this may appear to be a somewhat extreme position, what it does allow for is an essential honesty about the imperfections of education as a process. Freudian concepts such as drives, the unconscious, morality and transference can then be used as a means of understanding and encouraging child development in an individual sense. Writing about the relationship of Freud to education generally, Britzmann (2011) uses the term 'wild education' (an homage to the Freudian term 'wild psychoanalysis') to embrace the framing of these difficulties of reconciling education, which often takes place in structured settings, and the hidden wishes of childhood, which do not. Within such an interpretation of child development, the play activities of children can be seen as symbolic manifestations of a deeper human reality, requiring resolution. It is here we get to the core of what Isaacs was trying to accommodate within her pedagogical model, particularly in terms of the way she considered the linking of thought and phantasy as integral to the process of child development.

There are two further points on the intellectual timeline to attend to briefly, and they are the work of Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Maria Montessori (1870–1952). Isaacs had visited Piaget's *Maison des Petits* in Geneva, and the visit was reciprocated to the Malting House School. Consequently, Isaacs's work at the Malting House School was supported by Piaget. However, although she expressed approval for the naturalistic environment in which the children at Piaget's school were able to learn, and the attention paid to the child as individual, Isaacs went on to reject many of his other ideas. She saw many of them as

overly formulaic, too grounded in a biological model of childhood, and not sufficiently accommodating of serendipity in children's learning, and that Piaget based his stages on the idea of an 'abstract child', rather than it being truly personalised (Shapira, 2017; Isaacs, 1929b). Similarly, in relation to the theories of Montessori, Isaacs also saw learning originating from within the child, although she rejected the use of Montessori materials and activities as overly didactic, and restricting the freedom of the child (Giardiello, 2013; Graham, 2009; Smith, 1985).

Despite the fact that these progressive theories impacted differentially on Isaacs's thinking, we can identify the areas where Isaacs saw her own child development and education theories overlapping with those of other educationalists and psychologists, and where they potentially differed. All these progressive theorists framed ideal forms of learning as essentially 'naturalistic' in character, growing from the learner's interests and abilities, although that frequently took different forms in a practical sense. Isaacs developed this by integrating the idea of a psychoanalytical aspect of professional practice in education, to offer deeper insights into children's play behaviour as it related to their developmental trajectories within particular types of learning environment. This innovation, discussed and analysed in detail in the five books she published between 1929 and 1933, drew sufficient attention to her as an educational psychologist and educator to lead to new opportunities over the next 15 years, leading up to her untimely death from cancer in 1948. One of the most significant of these opportunities was her leadership of the IOE's new Department of Child Development.

The Department of Child Development

An obituary of Susan Isaacs published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* stated that 'It is now no secret that the Department of Child Development in the University of London was largely formed for her' (Rickman, 1950: 55).

The Director of the IOE, Sir Percy Nunn, was an advocate of individualism in education, and had attempted to retrieve the Malting House School's funding situation some years earlier. In 1933, he invited Isaacs to start a department for the advanced study of the psychology and education of young children. This was intended to consolidate the IOE's significant turn towards the psychological sciences, building on Nunn's own personal interests and his earlier appointment of Cyril Burt in 1924 (who had resigned in 1931 to take up a post at University College London). It also reflected Isaacs's copious referencing of Nunn's work, and acknowledgements to him in Isaacs's own publications. This clear move away from a teacher training focus on philosophies of education (often religiously oriented), and towards individual aspects of psychology, was very much in the spirit of the age. Indeed, in a contemporary report on teacher training colleges, the new role of psychology was considered to be at the absolute epitome of recent progress, with education increasingly seen as serving to develop children's personalities, rather than to pass on a specific body of knowledge:

A new orientation has occurred because of the advancing knowledge of psychology, accompanied by and contributing to a new philosophy of education. The course on Principles of Education has become the substructure ... Through this course, students come to a realisation of the aims which will inform all their work in school, and they learn something of the nature of the children they will teach and of their own nature, so that they can understand the wisest ways of approaching their goals. These psychological principles they will apply in the teaching of all subjects to the children. The academic subjects and the crafts take their rightful place as a means of helping children towards a full realisation of themselves and also as a means of enriching the students' own personalities ... Such a theory of training seems to be widely accepted, but the revolution is not complete. (Council of Principals, 1938: 2; cited in Berner, 2008: 231)

Despite its lofty aspirations, the Department of Child Development was initially based in just one room in the IOE's building in Southampton Row, with Isaacs employed half-time and doing most of the teaching herself. However, the department soon expanded. Graduates of Isaacs's courses rapidly became the trainers of a new generation of early childhood educators, including abroad, contributing to a significant post-war expansion of the field. It brought with it a heavy emphasis on psychological theories (Woolridge, 1994; Smith, 1985). This expansion of the field was not matched with commensurate funding, however, as the Institute was not yet involved in primary teacher training, and therefore had no steady income stream

to support it. This meant that it was never possible to fund a Chair for her (it had also been impossible to do this for her educational psychology predecessor, Sir Cyril Burt).

Nevertheless, by 1939, student numbers had risen to 20 full-time, 10 part-time, 37 occasional and 70 intercollegiate (from teacher training colleges such as Goldsmiths, Furzedown, Maria Grey, and St Mary's). There were also 3 research students, and 4 students carrying out general research. The department offered a core course of lectures covering infancy and early childhood, with supplementary modules on child development, child psychology and mental testing, the teaching of psychology in teacher training colleges, and individual tutorials. Students were also able to attend lectures by senior Institute speakers, including Nunn himself, who lectured on Principles of Education (students were informed that his book *Education: Its data and first principles* (1920) was to be regarded as the sole core text, which led to it eventually being reprinted 20 times between 1920 and 1945). Other visiting speakers included the leading paediatrician Dr Donald Winnicott on mental health, then termed 'mental hygiene' (Gardner, 1969). By this time, the department occupied three rooms in the new Senate House Building. One was Isaacs's office, a second was used by students, and a third was used as a small observation nursery for half a dozen children between the ages of 2 and 4, attending for two hours a day during term time. This growth is all the more remarkable when it is considered that from 1935, Isaacs was suffering from breast cancer and undergoing treatment (she would eventually die from the disease in 1948).

Despite the move to new premises, the department was temporarily closed at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Isaacs (1941) was deployed to lead the Cambridge Evacuation Survey during the war, which tracked with extreme insight and sensitivity the experiences of 850 children evacuated from central London to Cambridge. Interestingly, the team of researchers for this project included John Bowlby, who had been studying under Cyril Burt, and possibly also Isaacs, as a PhD student, exploring psychoanalytic themes such as aggression, guilt and anxiety. Bowlby's PhD project remained unfinished, but it is likely to have informed Bowlby's later work on attachment theory, which emphasised the need for a stable home environment provided by the mother (Van Dijken et al., 1998; Giardiello, 2013).

Although Isaacs continued to write positive references for her many students, she would never return to the Department; her former student and biographer Dorothy Gardner took over the role of head. Susan Isaacs was awarded a CBE in 1948, just before her death, and she was subsequently memorialised by the Institute of Education through the large endowment fund for research fellowships in child development that was set up in her name.

Isaacs's legacy

These days, it is difficult to find a course on child development which does not contain a discussion of Susan Isaacs's theories of play. Her work predominantly dates from a period between 1918 and 1939, between two World Wars, when psychology was in its infancy and frequently indistinguishable from psychoanalysis (and in some cases even confused with parapsychology; see Chamarette, 2021). In her search for greater empiricism, Isaacs was one of a small number of English psychologists, including Sir Cyril Burt, who sought to use systematic observation as a means of documenting different aspects of child development with precision. Where Isaacs differed was in her analysis of the data she generated, using Kleinian psychoanalytical techniques, rather than statistical ones. The narrative style of her vignettes of the behaviour of young children is readily accessible, and it is easy to see how this might have contributed to the popularisation of her work.

This insightful approach allowed her to identify two distinct aspects inherent within children's spontaneous play activities. The first was what she termed a 'circumstantial relation' (Isaacs, 1930b: 97–100), which involved a process of mimesis, in which children emulated aspects of the world around them. The second was what she termed a 'conative nexus of thought and phantasy' (Isaacs, 1930b: 101–3), which involved a process of diegesis, in which children engaged with an instinctive underlying narrative that allowed them to make sense of their environment and the social relationships within it, also allowing them to develop symbolic thought. We could also perhaps add a third aspect to Isaacs's theory of phantasy and play, and that is a process of practitioner exegesis, key to optimising the educational environment around the child. I use the term exegesis here metaphorically, indicating a process in which early childhood educators are encouraged to pay close attention to children's play activities, critically analyse them, and record them in a way that focuses on the psychological development of the individual

through the medium of reflective practice. All three aspects seem necessary in optimising educational environments within early childhood.

Isaacs's child development theories were amplified in two respects. The first was through prolific publication, drawing on her observational materials from the Malting House School, and later from the correspondence from readers of her agony column in *The Nursery World* magazine, which was meticulously recorded and catalogued for later analysis. The second was through her relationship with Sir Percy Nunn at the IEO, as this enabled the Department of Child Development to be established, with a focus on educational psychology. Even though Isaacs's involvement as Head of Department was only to last six years, the groundwork was laid for generations of teacher trainees to absorb her teaching and promulgate her theories internationally. As a result, a fuller understanding of the inner life of the child became central to the lives of many early childhood educators, and this remains the case today.

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