The German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel lived from 1782 to 1852. The pedagogy that made Froebel famous was encompassed in his kindergarten, a set of strictly defined methods and activities for the education of young children, which he developed and refined in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Froebel’s kindergarten reached England in the mid-1850s, where it attracted a small but enthusiastic group of followers and practitioners. By 1900, Froebel’s followers in England had become awakened to movements in child study and psychology and Froebel’s prescriptions did not hold up to ensuing criticism. In most histories of English education, the story of Froebelian education in England stops there, with the so-called death of Froebelian early childhood pedagogy and its replacement with an eclectic range of pedagogies and institutions based variously on the work of Sigmund and Anna Freud, Margaret McMillan, John Dewey, Susan Isaacs, Maria Montessori and others. This article picks up this dropped thread, examining the English neo-Froebelian movement after the death of Froebelian methods by the start of the twentieth century. Based on analysis of the organizational records and publications of the Froebel Society, National Froebel Foundation, NSA and other professional groups connected with early childhood and progressive pedagogy, this article identifies several turning points in the institutional and ideological trajectory of neo-Froebelians in the most turbulent and decisive period of twentieth-century English pedagogical and policy debate. More specifically, this article shows that Stuart Hall’s theories of identity politics – as well as Eric Hobsbawm’s and Terence Ranger’s concept of invented tradition – can help us make sense of the apparently paradoxical persistence of ‘Froebel’ discourse in interwar and 1940s progressive English educational discourse despite what appeared to be a complete disavowal of Friedrich Froebel, the man and his pedagogy on the part of those wielding his name.

The birth and revision of English Froebel

The first kindergarten in England was started by German émigrés Bertha Meyer Ronge and Johannes Ronge in 1854. Through the Ronges’ and others’ tireless promotion of the kindergarten...
Kristen D. Nawrotzki

at exhibitions, club meetings and lectures, organized groups of kindergarten supporters began to take shape. The Manchester Kindergarten Association, founded in 1873, and the London Froebel Society, founded in 1875, served separately as early centres of kindergarten advocacy, with the London-based Froebel Society eventually taking over as the professional body of English Froebelians and their friends (Liebschner, 1991: xi). These societies were headed by England’s own kindergarten pioneers and heroines as well as such notables as the German émigrés Else-onore Heerwart and the Ronges; champions of women’s education Emily Shirreff and Maria Shirreff Grey; and other women and men who were drawn to the kindergarten cause (on Else-onore Heerwart as a key English kindergarten pioneer, see Heiland, 1992).

For several decades, these organizations tried to get the kindergarten as an institution and a set of methods and principles to be taken on board by state-sector schools while supporting the training and certification of teachers and governesses for work in private-sector schools and wealthy homes. Small, independent kindergarten training programmes were begun in England in the 1870s and 1880s, mostly headed by Germans or those who had studied in Germany under Froebel or his successors. Opportunities for young women to train as kindergartners (certified Froebel teachers) expanded quickly, such that by 1908, 5480 English women held teaching certificates issued by the National Froebel Union (NFU) and perhaps that number again had received some or all of the necessary Froebel training (Dombkowski, 2002; Raymont, 1928). At its peak in 1914–15, the London-based Froebel Society and its regional branches enjoyed a membership of approximately 3000 people, of whom 90% were teachers (Brehony, 1987).

By the start of the twentieth century, just as the English kindergarten movement was developing a solid institutional infrastructure in the form of professional organizations, training colleges and independent schools, the methods and principles of English Froebelian orthodoxy were challenged by new ideas about the nature of early childhood and the purposes and methods of education. The international intellectual and social strands that fomented these challenges included child study, and the works of G. Stanley Hall, John Dewey, Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori (see Steiner, 1998; Barnes, 1914; and Weber, 1971). In the 1920s and 1930s these would be joined by the work of the New Education Fellowship, national and international growth in child psychology and experimental schools based on the work of Arnold Gesell, Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Susan Isaacs and Jean Piaget. (See Murchison, 1931 and Brehony, 2004.)

In England in the 1900s and 1910s (as in the United States at the same time) orthodox Froebelism was on the decline, replaced by a new, revisionist concept of the kindergarten and early education. Whereas late nineteenth-century orthodox Froebelians had promoted their ideas and methods as being closest to what Froebel himself had actually taught or intended, a younger generation of revisionist Froebelians were increasingly receptive to critiques of Froebelian orthodoxy. As Kevin J. Brehony has explained, these critiques were based on new science-based understandings of child development as well as on changing beliefs about childhood itself (see Brehony, 2000a, 2000b). Thus it is no surprise that the members of the Froebel Society soon came to support scientific as well as humanist critiques of extant pedagogy and the innovation of curriculum and methods for teaching young children. Indeed, the Froebel Society’s lecture series and summer schools for teachers, parents, headmasters, governesses, school inspectors and nursery nurses in the 1910s and into the 1920s offered people in London and in the provinces a rare chance to interact with a broad array of new and innovative ideas in the field of education and child health, appealing to wide and even international audiences (The Froebel Society, 1927). The Society’s well-attended summer schools were praised by the Board of Education for their attention to theoretical and practical matters and for their efforts to encourage critical thinking among professionals.

Froebel Society members and their networks contributed to the ascendancy of a wider English progressive educational scene as the Society was broadening its scope to include an
Froebel is dead; long live Froebel!

interest in all activity-based and humanist-inspired forms of education for young children. In the wake of the horrors of the First World War, many people in England sought the constitution of a new social order through education. Although they differed in their approaches towards this goal, England’s budding progressives were unanimously against blind adherence to any one rigid system, however humanist or scientific it might seem. This rejection of didactic systems (the lesson of revisionist Froebelianism) was to remain dominant over the long term, encouraging the development of a uniquely English brand of eclectic early childhood education philosophy and pedagogy that drew on a variety of methods and approaches that arose in this period.

In large part, this meant that Froebel’s old, pre-industrial, mystical-romantic methods were cast aside, a fact not lost on English Froebelians but not mourned by them either. Revisionist (or ‘progressive’) Froebelians (e.g. Maria Findlay, E. M. Jebb, Elsie Riach Murray) opened the movement to the discussion, the critique, the embrace of the new, the scientific, the psychological and the philosophical as part of a great movement for educational reform that they hoped to lead (Cunningham, 2001). The rigidly applied gifts and occupations of Froebel’s kindergarten had been replaced by free play and a more flexible set of guided activities. By the 1910s, the content requirements for NFU certificates no longer included Froebel’s writings but instead focused on psychology and critiques of Froebel written by Americans G. Stanley Hall and John Dewey (Smart, 1982).

On the one hand, these alternative methods and forms of education presented competition for English Froebelians: competition for adherents and benefactors, competition for attention from policy-makers and government officials, competition for recognition as the experts and professionals when it came to the education of young children (Cohen, 1974). The springing up of educational innovations from all sides challenged the Froebelians’ professional hegemony in the field of early childhood education (Brehony, 1987). On the other hand, Froebelians realized that if they did not open their minds and meetings to the airing and critique of new views, they could not keep up with the dynamic and evolving field of progressive education reform. At the same time, the Society was in danger of spreading itself too thinly (The Froebel Society and Junior Schools’ Association. Committee Minutes Vol. 2, 1920–1929: 134).

It is in this context that the Froebel Society, no longer a specifically kindergarten or Froebel-focused organization, was faced with the task of reformulating its educational purposes, reconstituting its membership and refashioning its very identity. Thus the Froebel Society faced a key question in the interwar period: to Froebel or not to Froebel? From 1924 to 1944, the Society’s decision to keep the Froebel name and the impact of that decision can be understood as part of a skilful strategy of self-preservation through identification and identity (re-)formation.

When looking at questions of identity, it is important to be aware of what identity is and what it is not. In a very basic sense, identity is nothing more and nothing less than an interpretation of the self as projected outward (that is, performed) or else as perceived by others (as readers of that performance). But in seeking to understand individuals and groups such as the English Froebelians, we must be aware that identity is both contextual and contested. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, ‘identities are never unified and . . . [are] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ (Hall, 1996: 4). Rather than as an essentialist definition of what a person or a group is or does, identity ought to be understood as a form of representation of a separate set of meanings, some of which may even be contradictory. Given that identity appears to be so difficult to pin down, how can we identify it or understand its meanings in the case of English Froebelians? As the following discussion will show, Froebelians spoke quite openly amongst themselves both of their need for a corporate identity and of their difficulties in shaping one to suit their needs in periods of social and intellectual change.
A challenge to the Froebel name

The first open challenge to the Froebel name arose from the dire financial situation of the Froebel Society in the 1920s. Early in that decade, the Froebel Society's momentum seemed to peter out, its membership stagnating at around 750 to 800 members (Liebschner, 1991). Child Life, the Society's journal, had a low readership and financial losses in the 1920s and the Society was desperate to keep it going. The Society had never really had much money and in previous decades it had been bailed out repeatedly by individual benefactors and by the NFU (which continued to make money by charging fees for certificates). It repeatedly asked the new Nursery Schools Association (NSA) and other like-minded groups to combine efforts as a means of saving money. In late 1924, the Froebel Society sent out earnest proposals for amalgamation with the Child Study Association, the Montessori Society and the National Society of Day Nurseries as well, to form a kind of super-group, a 'League of Childhood' dedicated to the education, health and care of the young child (Ostle, 1925).

The Froebel Society believed that organizations' individual foci and even their identities (including their names) were best left intact but argued that it was 'such an enormous waste of plant to let these Societies each have to keep a separate staff of clerks, rooms to meet in, and office equipment, when fundamentally each Association is trying to help the young child' (ibid: np). Of any of the Froebel Society's potential partners, the NSA, with its vaguely Froebel-inspired programmes, some Froebel-trained members and its legal mandate (however weak) to expand and improve state-sector early education, was its favourite. For this reason, it was particularly difficult for Froebel Society leaders to accept the NSA's insistence on going it alone.5

The NSA rejected amalgamation with the Froebel Society for several reasons, but mostly because of the Froebel name. They felt that continued use of the name Froebel 'would be a great drawback', perhaps due to anti-German sentiments but also due to the dogmatic pedagogy the name had at one time represented. NSA leaders also knew that some key members of the Froebel Society's governing body would be loath to give up the name.6 By the same token, the burgeoning nursery school movement had attracted early education supporters from across the progressive spectrum including the Montessori and Froebel camps, and thus preferred to remain disassociated from any particular educational scheme or philosophy. An amalgamation of NSA with the Froebel Society, they felt, 'would perhaps hold back the movement rather than put it forward' (de Lissa, 1925: np). The Froebel name represented the past and was therefore a liability.

The NSA leadership, including Margaret McMillan and Grace Owen, preferred to think of their work as revolutionary and they hoped to capitalize on the modernity of their social/educational project to draw to its cause fresh enthusiasm among experts, policy-makers and the public at large (ibid). For a variety of reasons, then, the NSA needed to protect its independence (in the words of the NSA's Lillian de Lissa), to 'prevent a young and small Association, such as ours is, from being swallowed up or stereotyped by something as powerful as the Froebel' (ibid: np). By September of 1925, Froebel Society leaders were still pushing for 'some form of federation' with the Child Study Association, the Education Guild, the Educational Handwork Association and the NSA. While attendees expressed some interest in combining intellectual resources to create, for example, a common journal, newsletters or lecture series, they ruled out any official combination of the organizations themselves.7

To Froebel or not to Froebel?

This rejection hit the struggling Froebel Society just as it prepared to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 1925. The Froebel Society no longer had the staff, funds or membership to
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distinguish itself among the other, newer, more dynamic organizations in the field of early education (e.g. the NSA), so the Society decided to make the most of the only thing it did have: a long history. As part of the jubilee, the Society publicly lamented the loss of activism and vigour that had characterized its membership in the 1910s and declared its resolve to restore them. To this end, it published a pamphlet entitled *Then and Now* in order to reintroduce the work of the Society and the humanist values of its namesake, to explain concretely the difference between traditional and revised (‘modern’ or neo-) Froebelian infant education and to inspire individual teachers toward improvement. The Society hoped to regain momentum by referencing its vigorous past, but some Froebel Society members clearly worried that the maintenance of the Froebel name would backfire. By the late 1920s, people within the Society asked whether it was worthwhile for the organization to keep ‘harping upon the Froebelian string’ (Raymont, 1928: 20). They had removed his works from their teacher training curriculum and for years his name had rarely appeared on their summer school plans or their lecture series calendars. Did it make sense to keep it on their letterhead when experience showed that the Froebel name was a hindrance to the Society’s goals? Perhaps they would do better, ‘for practical purposes, as distinguished from historical interest . . . [to] have done with Froebel’ (ibid: 20)?

As reasonable as these questions seemed, however, Froebel Society leaders clearly understood that ‘historical interest’ could not in fact be separated from their organization’s ‘practical purposes’; on the contrary, they quite clearly saw representation of their past as essential to the negotiation of their professional identity in the present. The fact of the 50th anniversary celebration itself – like the Froebel centennial celebrations which followed in 1937 – can be seen as a conscious and important part of the Froebelians’ attempts to define their twentieth-century collective identity. Several scholars have written about the ways in which commemorations attempt to invoke a historical past by situating it within the context of the present. For example, archaeologist Jan Assmann has shown that cultivated memory (*Errinnerungskultur*) and references to the past (*Vergangenheitsbezug*) help to socialize the members of a group (or society) to their unique collective identity via the creation of a shared past (Assmann, 1922). As Stuart Hall explains:

> [t]hough they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.

*(Hall, 1996: 4)*

Invoking Eric Hobsbawm’s and Terence Ranger’s work on traditions (of which more later), Hall further claims that ‘[i]dentities . . . relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself . . . not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our “routes”’ (ibid: 4). As we shall see, in debating and deciding on their identity as organizations, England’s major Froebel organizations spent much of the 1920s and 1930s coming to terms with their routes.

Through the 1930s, English Froebelians continued to defend their claim to the name ‘Froebel’, even if the pedagogy they advocated was not strictly ‘Froebelian’ by orthodox definitions. Even after the decades of massive critiques levied at Froebel by members of the Society itself, the Froebel Society’s President T. Raymont declared in 1928: ‘[W]e are still not ashamed of the gospel of Froebel.’ (Raymont, 1928: 14). No shame in Froebel but no blind allegiance to him either. Outspoken members of the Society, including Raymont’s successor, Elsie Riach Murray,
insisted that humanist-inspired progressive education by any other name would smell as sweet. In her 1929 presidential address, she insisted that:

[I]t does not matter whether we call ourselves followers of Mr. Whitehouse in his account of his Bembridge school in 1928, or of Professor Dewey, in his school at Chicago about 1890 . . . or of Froebel at Keilhau from 1816 onwards. What does matter is that such theories, such ideals, should make real headway in our schools.

(Murray, 1929: 9–10)

First of all, this placement of Whitehouse, Froebel and Dewey under the same ideological umbrella is an example of how Froebelian identity included a wide range of (potentially or partly incompatible) perspectives understood apart from real time and space. Second, although this statement came from a woman who described herself as ‘an unrepentant Froebelian’, it was clear to all involved that it did matter what they called themselves (ibid). They were not blind to the ways in which their choice of identity could determine the very survival of their organization and its agendas.

They called themselves ‘Froebelians’ because the Froebel name provided a unique rallying point in their struggles to defend the youngest children against poor home environments, school overcrowding, the three R’s grind and other problems that were exacerbated by the economic crisis that gripped the nation for two decades after the First World War. The chronic slump led not only to joblessness but also to a drastic curtailment of government spending. As monies to fund schools and educational programmes of all kinds were reduced and new spending prohibited, Froebelians were limited in what they could reasonably demand of the Government in terms of educational reform. They had to be careful about how they framed their agendas, and their decision to keep the Froebel name was an important part of their framing strategy.

Of course, the Froebelian aura they wanted to keep was only vestigially related to Friedrich Froebel and his philosophy. They insisted that although Froebel’s methods were outdated, the underlying principles of his work had permanent value. Seen in this light, Froebel’s ideas could be seen as compatible with the newer, more scientific educational methods that the Froebel Society wholly embraced (Campagnac, 1934). Thus the Society had consciously to form a new public identification with the name Froebel by carefully crafting positive connections between the Froebel name and the best of modern education.

This type of identification was not just a way of putting on a pretty public face. The Society’s naming of Froebel as the common ancestor of all forms of twentieth-century progressive education put the Society itself at the centre of the imagined past as well as the present. In keeping the Froebel name, the Society also drew on symbolic resources from the history of the English (and international) Froebel movements to (re-)construct representations of itself and its work. The Society sought to identify itself anew with selected images of Froebel (his humanism, his love of children and nature) and with what it felt were the strengths of the English Froebel movement at its peak (a small but influential movement of passionate, dedicated and well respected experts). They also associated Froebel’s name with a new vision of Froebel as child scientist by linking his name and themselves with child study and modern psychology.

Froebelians’ conscious decision to use the Froebel name in the 1920s thus can be seen as a form of invented tradition as explained by Hobsbawm. Although Froebel’s name was not invented out of thin air, its use in the 1920s and beyond is an example of an old element used in new ways – a ‘(re-)invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm, 1983). Hobsbawm demonstrates that such references to the past – especially to a past whose continuity with the present is tenuous or even fictitious – constitute overt attempts to increase group cohesion and to legitimize present
or future action (*ibid*: 12). Both of these appear to have been true of English Froebelians at that time. In the face of declining membership, the Froebel Society sought to gain new members and to stop the defection of members to the NSA or other, similar organizations. Moreover, Froebelians needed to legitimate both their Society as an institution and their particular brand of early childhood education expertise. Most specifically, they needed the public and the Government to trust them as the arbiters of high-quality early childhood education at a time when others were also claiming authority in the field.

Through the Froebelians’ identification with the Froebel name, visions of community in the past could be elided with community in the present and the future. The conscious maintenance of the name lent the Society a front of continuity and coherence, of tradition and therefore of quality and reliability in a time of flux and uncertainty in English society and in its educational scene. The reinvention of Froebel may be seen as an effort to fill the gaps left once Froebelianism was finally discarded.

The extent to which any members of the Froebel Society actually believed in Froebel’s pedagogies is of minimal importance when we look at these claims, for English neo-Froebelian identity was not about allegiance to Friedrich Froebel as much as it was strategic and positional. As Stuart Hall notes, it is too much to expect an identity (in this case, a single interwar English Froebel identity) to be unified, even if it references a common past and suggests common goals. The Froebel identity encompassed a varied set of connected (but not necessarily compatible) ideas, beliefs, discourses and practices. Accepting this, we can look at the strategic aims of this group of educationists and assess whether these aims were in fact served well by their conscious identification with the Froebel name. If they could overcome the dogmatic baggage associated with the Froebel name, its use might help perpetuate feelings of coherence and continuity – especially at a time when the Froebel Society was close to financial insolvency and the field of early childhood education was undergoing rapid change. They had little to lose but much to gain.

**Froebel new and improved**

In 1937, English Froebelians celebrated the kindergarten’s centenary, which they used as an opportunity to affirm their identification with Froebel as well as to shape Froebel’s identity as a modern educator (Brown, 1937). In its journal, the Froebel Society noted the changes that it had witnessed and effected in early education since Froebel’s first kindergarten opened in Germany in 1837:

Many of the early forms of handwork have . . . disappeared. Drawing, painting and clay modelling are still in use, though these are all treated in a freer, more experimental way than formerly, but pricking, sewing on cards, paper mat-plaiting and geometrical and symmetrical paper-folding are no longer to be found in a modern Kindergarten. The advances made in child-psychology have shown that these occupations are not suitable for young children and that there are many others closer to their own interests and more suited to their development . . . The singing games, which had grown out of the life of the little village children of Thuringia, were at first simply translated into English and used – just as they were – for English town children, living in very different circumstances . . . This, too, has been altered. Now, our own old nursery rhymes are sung and dramatised by the kindergarten children, and songs are now written specially for them by real musicians and child-lovers. *This was what Froebel hoped would happen.*

(Nuth, 1937: 88–90) (emphasis added)
The Society’s observance of the 1937 kindergarten centenary helped to generate a kind of ethno-history of the neo-Froebel movement which legitimized its contemporary expertise and cemented its importance in questions of future policy and practice. Of all comers in the field of English educational reform, those under the Froebelian mantel were among the first and remained as the keepers of a long and dynamic tradition of early education.

Two years later, F.A. Cavenagh wrote to Society members about the continuity of understanding about young children from Froebel through to Dewey:

This living spirit of Froebel is seen not only in details such as the value now attached to handwork, nature-study, gardens, etc., but also in certain features of modern educational theory that reflect at least some of his views. These are (inter alia): (1) The importance of early education and the value of each stage for itself. (2) The need for Child Psychology: though Froebel’s own psychology was so faulty, yet he paved the way for ‘Child Study’, and so, ultimately, for scientific psychology. (3) The value of play, especially as developed into free play with toys and other material. And (4) although we may not agree with Froebel about the child’s divinity, at least we can follow him in holding that every child merits respect and treatment as an individual.

(Cavenagh, 1939: 19–20)

Indeed, from the Froebel centenary to the end of that decade, the Froebel Society sponsored speeches and articles addressing all the structural changes in English early childhood education since the start of the century, insisting on Froebel’s relevance – his crucial importance – to scientific changes in the understanding of childhood and child development. In this way, they were able to ‘invent’ a Froebelian scientific tradition and to equate the Froebel name with both continuity and change.

In defence of neo-Froebel

In the late 1930s, just as the onset of the Second World War began to shift English society into crisis mode, English Froebelians attempted once again to overhaul their more than 60-year-old movement, to infuse the movement with a new sense of energy and science-based expertise while redefining its goals and methods. It was a long time in coming when, in 1939, the National Froebel Foundation (NFF) was finally formed from the NFU and Froebel Society and Junior Schools Association (both of which were liquidated in the process). As the members of the NFF struggled to invent and defend the new organization’s institutional identity and purpose in the early 1940s, they were, in effect, claiming a space for Froebel in postwar England.

The first efforts of the NFF centred on the dissolution of the old NFU and Froebel Society and the constitution of the new organization from the best parts of both. In its earliest days, the main question the new organization faced was whether it should continue under the ‘Froebel’ name. Some within the diluted movement still wanted to make a clean break from all references to Froebel (not least because he was German). However, the NFF leadership (composed, as it was, of portions of the old NFU and Froebel Society leadership) saw things differently. They were supported by a vocal core of members, many of whom were from the generation that had delivered the most salient critiques of Froebel’s work. While they were pleased that their revisions of Froebelian pedagogy had been taken on board by the younger generation, they also felt that eliminating the Froebel name from their work would be throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Explaining this view in one of the last issues of Child Life in 1939, Professor F.A. Cavenagh agreed that ‘much of Froebel’s thought is now demoded – if not discredited; and
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much can never have been really understood by admirable kindergarten teachers’, and yet he felt all readers would agree that Froebel’s ‘long, careful sympathetic study of children . . . remains of permanent value’ (ibid: 18). While orthodox Froebelianism and its Führerprinzip were better off dead, the new NFF felt that there were enduring and important legacies of Froebel (or, more importantly, of English Froebelians) in England that deserved continued support (ibid: 18–20). The way these neo-Froebelians saw it, Froebel’s desire for children to be happy jibed with the teachings of the day’s most eminent psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, not to mention the work of Margaret McMillan and the NSA.

Two years later, Miss R. L. Monkhouse, Director of the new National Froebel Foundation, felt the matter of Froebelian identity still needed to be discussed. She wrote: ‘A year ago I discussed at the annual meeting the reasons why the name of Froebel is perpetuated in the new Foundation; but I find that some people are still puzzled.’ (NFF, 1940: 1). In her explanation, Monkhouse invoked the historical foundations of the Froebel movement in England and reiterated the importance of maintaining at least a nominal connection to that past. She admitted that ‘[Froebel’s] Educational thought was neither clear nor suited to English minds’, and she also acknowledged a connection between Froebel’s philosophies and the Hegelianism embraced by the German Nazi movement (ibid: 1). However, many within the widening English Froebel movement clearly felt there was much to be gained by associating the new NFF with the history and intellectual and social traditions (real or invented) of English Froebelianism. To start with an entirely new name would mean a loss of the public recognition earned by the Froebel Society and National Froebel Union in earlier decades; it might have undermined the credibility of the new organization altogether. So instead, the new organization kept Froebel in its title even as it all but omitted Froebel’s pedagogy from its agenda. ‘The retention of the name’, wrote Monkhouse:

is justified; but that does not commit the Foundation to any pedantic adherence to his view. We are no longer concerned either with the details of his method nor with his esoteric doctrines; on the contrary we are, I hope, eclectic in the sense that we are willing to learn from any source that will further the declared aim of the Foundation – ‘the enlightened education of children’. The modern Froebelian thus studies Dewey, Montessori, Decroly, Margaret McMillan (to mention a few names), and seeks for guidance in the works of contemporary psychologists.

( ibid: 1)

The NFF thus conceived of itself as neo-Froebelian and progressive, building consciously and directly upon the reputation and discursive heritage of its revisionist-Froebelian predecessors in hopes of securing high (not to mention scientific) status for the Foundation’s new, much expanded work. For, unlike the Froebel Society or NFU before it, the NFF presented itself as ‘the one voluntary society that is concerned with the education of all children from nursery school age to fourteen whether they are at home or in any type of school – Kindergarten, elementary, secondary, or private’ (emphasis in the original) (ibid: 1). This was, of course, a tall order, especially since this new mission brought the NFF into competition with other groups claiming expertise in the same area, not least of which was the Nursery School Association. Partly on the basis of its invented Froebelian traditions, the NFF leadership claimed for itself the role of watchdog over all other early childhood education organizations and agencies.

More than an examining body and more than a club or a conference organizer, the NFF was, in the minds of its governors, ‘the body which represents to the Government – and indeed to the world – the views and desires of Froebel teachers for the education of children and the

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training of teachers’ (Priestman, 1994: 2). This was a tall order, but NFF leaders saw the postwar years as a time of unprecedented potential for educational reform, a period in which neo-Froebelians would make ‘special contribution . . . to the training of the new democracy’ (ibid: 3). The NFF, the group’s Bulletin assured its readers, ‘carries weight’, not least because its leaders were ‘men and women whose opinions are respected in the educational world’ (ibid: 2). In its postwar publications, the NFF purposefully identified with the Froebel name and its historical significance while simultaneously affirming its disavowal of old-fashioned Froebelian pedagogy. In this way, it sought to emphasize its longstanding dominance of the early childhood field and to ensure its place at the centre of English progressivism present and future.

Conclusion

Taken by itself, the English Froebelians’ retention of the Froebel name after they had discarded Froebel’s teachings appears illogical. How could they keep the name Froebel while disavowing all that the name had once stood for? Hall’s assertions regarding the dynamic nature of identity formation and Hobsbawm’s concept of invented traditions help us to account for the simultaneous acceptance of the Froebel name and rejection of Froebelian teachings. Thus the apparent discord between the pedagogical discourse and the institutional actions of the English Froebelians make sense as parts of a strategy for the reformation of organizational identity. The NFF’s identity as a neo-Froebelian institution depended on the institution’s public redefinition of the adjective ‘Froebelian’ itself and the role that this adjective played in their institutional self-narrative. The contents of this self-narrative were partly determined by Froebelian leaders themselves but were also shaped by the contextual constraints, such as the presence of other groups competing for limited political or financial resources.

The question of whether ‘to Froebel or not to Froebel’ is emblematic of the kind of ambivalence that often occurs within social and educational reform movements. This may be related to what the political theorist Antonio Gramsci called ‘contradictory consciousness’, a phenomenon in which the irreolvable dualities comprising identities prevent individuals or groups from taking action or effecting change (Gramsci et al, 1971: 353). If movements and organizations do not form identities that can successfully embrace ambivalence, they split or splinter. In the case of the Froebel Society and, later, the NFF, ambivalence did not mean the demise of these groups (at least not in the interwar period), but it did mean that there had to be some changes to the Society both on the inside and on the outside in order for the group to survive and to continue its attempts to steer early childhood practice and policy in England.

Although the accommodation of ambivalence was necessary for the survival of Froebel organizations, neo-Froebelian identity may ultimately have been too inclusive for its own good. As Hall reminds us, identity cannot exist without exclusion (that is, without a way of determining who or what is outside the group). Furthermore ‘identity is constantly destabilized’ – leading to repeated revision – ‘by what it leaves out’ (Hall, 1996: 6). Who or what was excluded from neo-Froebelian identity, then? Like English Froebelianism in earlier decades, English neo-Froebelian identity encompassed all of those educators who were trained in a Froebel college and/or who held a Froebel certificate, but, as we have seen, it came to include almost anybody and almost any idea in so far as it related to early childhood. In conclusion, neo-Froebelian identity allowed a group of early childhood education experts and advocates to carve out a unique authority amidst a wide range of new ‘progressive’ pedagogies in the 1920s and 1930s, but its increasingly broad definition was of limited use in describing and dictating the self-understanding that its members should have. While the need for inclusiveness in a period of rapidly dwindling membership was obvious, it appears to have diluted neo-Froebelian identity...
to near meaninglessness in the long run, such that by the 1940s the NFF had taken a clear back seat to the masses of increasingly qualified and increasingly scientific voices claiming authority over young children, their education and related social policy.

Notes

1 By 1930, the NFU had awarded some 13,000 Froebel certificates in its 40+ year history.
2 Kevin Brehony was the first to publish using the term ‘revisionist’ in the Froebelian context.
3 Holmes contrasted regular elementary school practice with that at a ‘progressive’ school; Liebschner (1991) insists that the pioneering progressive school Holmes describes was indeed a Froebelian kindergarten, though neither Holmes nor subsequent authors writing about Holmes seem to have acknowledged that fact.
4 In the early 1930s the NFU had accumulated a reserve fund of at least 20,000 pounds sterling, which it had garnered from testing and certification fees over the years. For example, in 1936, the NFU tested 1215 candidates (Nuth, 1937).
5 Evidence for this may be found in the pleading letters sent by Froebel Society leaders to their NSA counterparts. These may be found in BAECE [13/4], BAECE Archives.
6 As above.
7 There was, eventually, a Federal Lectures Board supported by the various ECE-related organizations. BAECE[13/4]. “Minutes of the Joint Committee Meeting Held on Tuesday 22nd September, 1925, in the offices of the Froebel Society to Consider Some Form of Federation Between: The Child Study Association; the Education Guild; The Educational Handwork Association; The Froebel Society and Junior Schools’ Association; the Nursery School Association.” These organizations did all participate in conferences together and were members of the World Federation of Educational Associations, BAECE Archives.