Case study

Another time, another place: developing Social Studies in a nursery school

Jane Whinnett

The context

Balgreen Nursery School lies in the west of Edinburgh. One hundred and twenty children attend the nursery and most live in the local area. The nursery has a strong ethos of inclusion, mentioned as a strength in inspections. One third of the children in the nursery are bilingual. Arabic and Polish are the most common first languages of the children with English as an additional language. All of the children attend part time and are funded by Scottish Executive funding. The staffing consists of a head teacher who teaches part time, two principal teachers who job share, a head teacher, relief teacher and four Early Years Practitioners. The adult to child ratio is 1:10. The nursery was built in 1939 to a design common in Edinburgh at that time, strongly influenced by the Mcmillan sisters. It has veranda doors stretching the length of the rear of the building, creating a continuum of space indoors and outdoors.

Aims and methods

The development of young children’s understanding of place and time was explored as part of the implementation of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, with a focus in particular on the subject area ‘Social Studies’. The aim was to demonstrate the relevance of Froebelian principles and pedagogy in curriculum development. The principles for curriculum design were laid out in the document ‘Building the Curriculum’. These include:

- personalization and choice,
- challenge and enjoyment,
- breadth,
- depth,
- progression,
- relevance and
- coherence.

The method employed was observation of children engaged in first-hand experiences and play. Building the Curriculum 2 Active Learning (2007) advocates spontaneous play and first-hand
experiences to engage children in learning. The involvement of the family and community was essential in building a strong context for the children’s learning. Opportunities for involvement in a variety of experiences together were offered. Observations were analysed using the curricular outcomes at the early level.

Rich first-hand experiences helped children to think about what they had experienced in the past. Their families had a fundamental role in this. Creating opportunities for children and families to have shared experiences enhanced the reservoir they could draw on in play. These experiences included discussing baby photographs or photographs of family events, outings in the local area or to museums or places of interest. Handling real objects and using these in play allowed children to demonstrate what they knew (e.g. using a scrubbing board, mangle and clothes pegs to do the washing). Children began to understand now and not now, the past or long ago. The continuum of space from indoors to outdoors in the nursery supported children’s developing geographies of their local area. Parents and children together learned new skills in sewing to re-present their experiences, using digital photographs and Google Maps.

Further analysis of the observations revealed the development in children’s thinking moving from experimentation with objects in the here and now to functional thinking and more abstract thought (Athey, 1990). This framework was useful to consider children’s progress and to report to their parents and primary school.

Discussion

Developing a relevant pedagogy for young children that supports the values and design principles of a new curriculum is a challenge. The temptation to break learning down final outcomes, in the name of breadth and progression, into teaching pathways and present these to children in small groups or en masse can seem an attractive prospect. This approach undermines the personalization and choice, challenge and enjoyment, depth, relevance and coherence that an approach based on children’s holistic experiences, play and with the support of their family and the community can offer. Fragmentation of children’s learning in a curriculum divided into subject areas and lead by outcomes undermines the child’s natural desire and search for unity. Fragmentation is not the same as diversity. Diversity recognizes the uniqueness of each child. It is important not to present a solely Eurocentric view of the past given the diversity of the nursery population and to be aware of the living conditions and family circumstances of children’s extended families abroad.

The role of the practitioner is crucial in this approach. Skills in observation and analysis to extend children’s learning, preparation of the environment indoors and outdoors and understanding of the development of children’s thinking are all elements of Froebelian training. They provide a secure foundation to build a curriculum for excellence.

Conclusion: ways forward

Froebelian principles can underpin development of a new curriculum. Starting with observations of children and extending their experience with rich first-hand opportunities allows them to make sense of the world around them and to develop thinking about the past and places that are important in their lives. Ultimately, this is about personal identity and locating yourself in a family, community and humankind. It is the unity of holistic experiences that make each one of us human.
Part III

Research studies documenting, debating and evaluating Froebelian approaches

Introduction to part III

Tina Bruce

Research studies documenting, debating and evaluating Froebelian approaches

In 2012 the Froebel Trust was founded. The wise and far sighted leadership of Peter Weston, who Chaired the Research Committee of the Incorporated Froebel Educational Institute (IFEI), had begun to take the research funding in a more Froebelian direction. There is therefore some overlap through the transition from IFEI to the emergence of the Froebel Trust. The greater focus on identifiable Froebelian themes in the research was further developed by Trisha Maynard, who was the inspiration and initiator of this book. Her successor Chair Peter Elfer, has shown great commitment to furthering the funding of research which illuminates issues, challenges, debates and ways forward highlighted through research exploring Froebelian themes.