In the last 50 years, researchers have developed three different ways of thinking about and researching babies’ development from birth, indeed before birth, through the first three years. The first of these is developmental psychology and the contribution of attachment theory and the concept of intersubjectivity. The second has been psychoanalytic theory and its understanding of the extremes of babies’ emotions, from intense rage to blissful contentment. Here, a central idea is that of ‘emotional containment’, as the interaction through which babies, as they develop through early childhood, gradually are able to integrate and manage their emotions. The third is the more recent one of neuroscience, with its focus on the crucial role of human interaction in brain development through the processes of synaptic generation and pruning.

Yet the three have converged to a remarkable degree of agreement about the profound influence on early development of infants’ interactions with sensitive and responsive adults. Whilst this is remarkable, what is in even more astonishing is to look back not 50 years but nearly 200 years to Froebel’s observations of babies. In these vivid and detailed descriptive accounts, there is so much to see that matches our modern emerging understandings. In the following sections, we draw out the links between Froebel’s observations, his commentaries on them, and how powerfully they can be understood as supporting and informing our current practices.

In this book Tina Bruce and others have set out and articulated the relevance of Froebel’s principles to contemporary early years’ practice. In relation to babies and children under three, Helen Tovey has illustrated how the principles translate into particular practices in work with babies and children under three, for example in heuristic play and the role of the key person (Tovey, 2013). This chapter is intended to build on that work and offer a little more detail on how Froebel’s ideas can be seen to underpin and inform much current early education practice from birth to three. In the chapter, we show this in five crucial areas of early years practice:

• Observation;
• Babies’ and young children’s special relationships in nursery;
• The treasure basket and heuristic play;
• How work with babies and under threes is understood and supported;
• The contribution of songs and singing in nursery practice.
Observation

Observation is the start of ‘child-centred’ practice. How else but through detailed and rigorous observation of what babies, 1- and 2-year-olds have to tell us about their interests, feelings and desires could we claim to be ‘child-centred’? Indeed observation is not only a means of guiding our own responses to the baby or young child. Observation can be understood as a resource too for babies and young children. The very act of engaging with a baby through eye contact, seems to help focus babies’ own return looking. Close eye contact and the attention it signals acts to raise babies’ states of alertness and responsiveness. Reddy, a developmental psychologist writing about ‘how infants know minds’ says this:

infants engage in complex face-to-face exchanges with other people, sensitive to direct gaze to themselves even at birth, and engage in complex proto-conversational exchanges with adults from two months, where they seem to respond to others’ acts towards them with recognisable emotional responses, noticing when others look at them, and even imitating actions themselves to call others

(Reddy, 2008: 91)

Froebel's own commentary on the close observations of the significance of observant attention, made some 150 years before Reddy’s, seem to match what she has to say:

The feeling with which the child is first welcomed . . . should lead to careful observation of the way in which he develops and expresses his thoughts . . . the first smile, which instantly distinguishes the young human being from any other creature. It shows that the child has reached the stage where he is becoming conscious and aware of himself. It is an essentially human characteristic . . . it is the way in which the child, while as yet without any means of expression, first enters into communication with other minds. The first smile is therefore the expression of an independent human mind

(Lilley, 1967: 75)

Froebel’s commentaries, based on detailed and emotionally moving accounts of a new born baby, show how much there is to be seen if only we can observe in a holistic way, allowing ourselves to notice how much the baby and young child has to tell us about her or his capacities. His observations laid the foundations for a long tradition of narrative naturalistic observations that were to be further developed by Susan Isaacs (Drummond, 2000) and Esther Bick (Sternberg, 2005).

Babies and young children’s special relationships in nursery

Froebel had much to say about the responsibilities of adults who fulfilled these roles. While much of his writing was concerned with parents’ attitudes and behaviours towards babies and very young children, he was not exclusively concerned with family relationships. His kindergarten pedagogics convey principles grounded in his view that:

one of the mainsprings of a child’s behaviour in all his searching and striving is the sort of care bestowed on his particular needs.

(Lilley, 1967: 80)
At times, he did not seem to have great confidence in adults’ abilities to do this well:

most people regard the child’s behaviour as meaningless . . . and even as merely fortuitous or conditioned only by physical circumstances in the earliest days. This is their view of such an event as the first smile, which instantly distinguishes the young human being from any other creature.

(Lilley, 1967: 75)

Yet, his child-centred philosophy offers a useful prompt for beginning a dialogue about the roles and responsibilities of early childhood professionals, especially in terms of the expectations and positioning of each individual in the ‘triangle of care’ (Hohmann, 2007) established with children and with their families. His doubt in the ability of many people to realise the significance of the details of children’s behaviour was counterbalanced by the great emphasis he placed for example on ‘mothers’ songs’ (see last section of this chapter) to their infant and how he saw these as having such a positive impact on early relationships and development as we describe in the last section of this chapter. In Froebel’s time, it was very rare for babies and under threes to be cared for outside of the family. Now provision for under threes in nurseries is common place and raises the question of how Froebel’s ideas might apply in these settings.

The pioneering work here has been done by Elinor Goldschmied, a Froebelian trained teacher. Goldschmied developed the idea of the ‘key person’ in nursery, drawing on the crucial importance for the baby of her or his first interactions with responsive and attuned adults. For Froebel, such adults meant primarily mothers, but we now know (Bowlby, 1988), that a number of different adults can valuably take this role. Goldschmied, drawing on this and her extensive training work in nurseries developed the role of the ‘key person’. The ‘key person’ was a named professional practitioner who would build a close and consistent relationship with the baby or young child in nursery and with family members at home (Elfer et al, 2011).

The principle of the ‘key person’ is now established not only in the English early years curriculum from birth to five, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a), but also in much early years policy internationally (Elfer, 2012b).

The Treasure Basket and heuristic play

Froebel believed that babies and young children learn from birth – at home and elsewhere, but particularly through experiencing the natural environments. He viewed young children as capable and agentic with an innate drive to learn. Although his writings demonstrate a range of examples of the ways in which adults’ sensitive and caring support can foster a baby’s growth, he did not separate development into domains but believed in a holistic and connected trajectory for the developing human.

Tina Bruce explains some of the detail of this in the form of Froebel’s Gifts:

Froebel emphasised the importance for the development of the law of opposites. He gave the baby the soft sphere first, (a metaphor for the Universe) and his second Gift was the hard wooden sphere, which contrasts.

(Bruce, 2012a: 57)

In current writing about nursery practice with babies and under threes, the Treasure Basket and the idea of heuristic play, alongside the ‘key person’, are often centre stage, again through the work of Elinor Goldschmied. Goldschmied produced two films: ‘Infants at Work’ (about the
Treasure Basket) and ‘Heuristic Play with Objects’ (with Anita Hughes). In the introduction to ‘Infants at Work’, Goldschmied explains:

The Treasure Basket is designed to offer an opportunity for play and learning with infants when they are able to sit up comfortably and before they can crawl . . . in choosing, mouthing, sucking, waving, handling and banging these objects, infants will concentrate their attention for considerable periods, often for up to an hour

(Goldschmied and Hughes, 1987)

Goldschmied made many other earlier films as her work and ideas developed and evolved. These were not originally published but have now been brought together by the ‘Elinor Goldschmied Froebel Archive Project Team’ led by Jacqui Cousins with colleagues working closely with the Archivist Kornelia Cepok, and the British Library Hall or Women and the National Children’s Bureau. The result is a beautiful video and booklet (EGFAPT, 2013). The close relation of the Gifts to the Treasure Basket and heuristic play is obvious. So in all of Goldschmied’s work, it is easy to see the influence of Froebel’s philosophy and ideas in her thinking about the heuristic (exploratory and discovery) value of the Treasure Basket and heuristic play.

The innate agency and creativity of babies, that inspired Goldschmied and which Froebel had also seen so much earlier, is now being noted in other fields as in this example from psychoanalytic theory of infant development:

the infant . . . is no longer just a sensual, appetitive little animal seeking gratification and a passionately loving and destructive creature. He is also when conditions allow, a little music student listening to the patterning of his auditory experience, a little art student studying the play and pattern of light and shade . . . a little dance student watching and feeling his mother’s soothing movements . . . a little conversationalist taking part in pre-speech dialogues . . . a little scientist working to yoke his experiences together and understand them.

(Alvarez, 1992: 76)

How work with babies and under threes is understood and supported

Froebel believed passionately that a child was a ‘dynamic embodiment of mind and spirit’ from the moment of birth. His conviction – that infancy and early childhood were exceptional periods for active exploration through play, ‘occupations’, communication and reflection, in a quest for deeper understanding of the self and connectedness to the world – was radical at the time. Yet these ideas chime with current thinking about the sensitivity of a young brain to environmental stimuli and attuned interactions in early education and caregiving.

Froebel substantiated his principled views with action, arguing that babies and young children deserve nothing but the best in terms of a teacher’s attention, character, knowledge, understanding, skill and talent. Collectively his philosophy and accompanying activities demonstrated a conviction that high expectations of and for babies and young children, must be accompanied by high expectations of and for those in whose care they find themselves. He recognised the intellectual, emotional and physical demands of caring for young children and sought to support mothers and other carers through education and training including the resources and materials (with accompanying instructions), which he produced for kindergarten and home contexts.
Froebel believed that a failure to provide high quality early experiences from birth would lead to lost opportunities for learning and potentially to irreparable damage to a person’s character and potential. Therefore, he set out to educate parents and early childhood (kindergarten) teachers, providing written guidance and bespoke resources (‘Gifts’). His decision to enlist and educate women as early childhood teachers was pioneering.

Although Froebel advocated that early childhood educators must be loving, knowledgeable and skilled, his writings about childhood and children tell us much more about his essential expectations of them. Care and education were intrinsically linked for Froebel who saw mind and body as interconnected. His ideas about care can perhaps be understood through his writings that illustrate his beliefs about the dispositions of those in caring roles, particularly mothers but also early childhood educators. In describing his belief in the innate capacity for nurture possessed by all women (a contentious view in twenty-first century socio-political contexts), Froebel simultaneously portrayed an educational purpose. Educators, in Froebel’s terms, are all those who care for children but in so doing must be filled with a care about children. A caring disposition underpinned an educational orientation in early childhood practice. Every interaction with a baby provided an educational or learning opportunity – for the child and adult alike – made all the more fulfilling (again, for both) where the adult possessed and demonstrated positive feelings for a child’s being, wellbeing and growth.

Much work is now underway to understand the demands on nursery staff, particularly working with babies, of offering these kinds of interactions. Even here, Froebel was ahead of his time. Through his ‘Mother Songs’, for example, he sought to draw out feelings of love that he believed lay latent. In so doing he recognised that the exhausting demands of caring for a young child may stifle positive emotions and he not only acknowledged this situation but tried to offer a means to ameliorate and support through training and advice. This recognition is important for today’s practice in which the need for opportunities to de-stress, de-brief, offload or simply talk through the demands of caring for babies and young children is often neglected or overlooked (Elfer, 2012b). This may be all the more vital where staff who care for babies and very young children are the less experienced, less well qualified and ill-supported compared to their colleagues caring for older children and in view of evidence demonstrating their eagerness for relevant high level education and professional development that offers dialogic opportunities (Goouch and Powell, 2013a).

**Songs and singing in nursery practice**

Froebel was convinced of the importance and value of singing and its multiple, beneficial effects for babies and their carers. A liking and capacity for singing were prerequisites for his kindergarten staff and he believed all practitioners needed ‘to be specially trained in children’s songs . . . to elevate the heart and open the mind’ (Froebel, 1891: 253).

Singing was a vehicle or conduit for conveying emotion between a parent or carer (especially a mother or other female) and a baby or young child. Froebel believed that singing had purposes beyond musical development and thought it would ‘produce, first of all, in man, an all-sided development and presentation of his nature’ (Froebel, 1885: 269). An holistic approach to singing underpinned his statement that ‘the educational requirements of the time . . . can be completely obtained only by the appropriate co-operation of song’ (Froebel, 1899: 178). Singing was not simply a stand-alone activity, but was used to reinforce and strengthen other learning activities, particularly the ‘games’ or hand actions that Froebel devised. He believed that learning began in the realm of ‘sensation’ which was later referred to as ‘feeling’ and singing could enable
words to affect the feelings of an individual and were more likely to influence the child’s ‘mind’ if they were sung.

Froebel voiced strong support for links made between singing activities in the kindergarten and singing at home. He praised mothers who copied out the songs that were sung at the kindergarten and he talked about the transition of games from kindergarten into family life at home. Mother Play and Nursery Songs were intended to influence family and home dynamics in such a way that children and their development would become more highly valued. Singing and the carefully composed songs could bring together two different contexts and cultures, with the intention that singing would help position the child and their development at the centre of home culture. Froebel also devised songs to encourage women to develop maternal instincts, believing they would help them recognise and understand their feelings towards the children in their care. The songs were also intended to enable mothers or carers to better understand and see the value in the role of caring for a child.

Although Froebel described development in holistic and connected ways, his writings also show that he believed that singing (and associated actions) could positively affect relationships and social and emotional development, physical (gross and fine motor) development, moral development and spirituality, cognitive (including language) development and in so doing nurture wellbeing amongst children and the adults singing to them.

Currently in England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS; DfE, 2017b) locates singing solely as a means to facilitate musical expression and creative development, although it is acknowledged that singing may be one of the many ways in which young children communicate their ideas. For Froebel, singing was similarly purposeful – although he also recognised the act as intrinsically pleasing – but the benefits he attributed to singing were much more extensive and encompassed a more holistic spectrum of development and learning.

Today’s policy and practices for the education and care of babies and children up to three reflect a rich hybrid of historical influences. While practice that claims overtly to be affiliated to Froebel may not be widespread in the UK, his ideas and principles resonate with many contemporary theories and are often found woven through practice without recognition of his influence.