The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice  
Re-articulating Research and Policy  
Tina Bruce, Peter Elfer, Sacha Powell, Louie Werth

Mother’s Songs in daycare for babies

Publication details  

Sacha Powell, Kathy Goouch  
Published online on: 01 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Sacha Powell, Kathy Goouch. 01 Aug 2018, Mother’s Songs in daycare for babies from: The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice, Re-articulating Research and Policy Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023  

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction

This chapter describes a research and development project, which explored the nature and purposes of singing with babies in formal, out-of-home early years settings. The project was a collaboration between university researchers (Powell and Goouch, with Louie Werth in Phase 1–2013) and Early Years practitioners from 15 private day nurseries in southeast England. The project included reference to and reflection on Froebel’s principles, his Mother Songs (‘Mutter und Kose-lieder’, Froebel, 1843/2015) and his views about songs and singing. While this perspective provided a pedagogical framework, it was not our intention to persuade the participants to subscribe to any one philosophy, including Froebel’s.

Project design

In total, 29 practitioners were involved in the research in 2012–13 and 2014–15. They all worked with babies and children up to two years of age in the specially designated ‘baby rooms’ (and/or toddler rooms) of their nurseries. The research was subject to scrutiny by the University’s Ethics Committee and adhered to BERA (2014) ethical guidelines.

A series of six, half-day professional development sessions was organised for two successive project groups. These were held at the university and ran over one academic year each (in 2013 and 2014) with research enquiries taking place concurrently. The latter consisted of naturalistic observations, discussion groups using video recall, semi-structured interviews and a self-completion questionnaire with a combination of closed and open-ended questions about the nature, purposes and origins of songs and singing in the participants’ baby rooms.

All the participants took part on the basis of voluntary, informed consent and were aware of the intersection of research and development activities. They were invited to submit ‘data’ for the research elements of the project and could withdraw this without explanation. But the weaving together of development sessions with research enquiries placed them in a position of potential vulnerability and a dialogue about the research was maintained throughout the project in an effort to minimise the chance that the practitioners might feel misinformed, misled or coerced. A group of the practitioners was invited to comment on the analysis of data and to participate in their interpretation.
**Babies in daycare**

The child should, from the very time of his birth, be viewed in accordance with his nature, treated correctly, and given the free, all-sided use of his powers.

(Froebel, 1898, 2005: 21)

In England in 2015, there are no publicly available, aggregated statistics on the number of babies and children under 1 or 2 years of age who are registered in formal childcare settings, but we estimated the figure to be in the region of half a million (Powell and Goouch, 2012). Traditional care patterns have become disrupted over recent decades and the growth in the number of women in the workplace appears to have increased demand for formal (e.g. non-familial) childcare in recent years (Brewer, 2007).

This increase in the use of formal care services for young children has been coupled with an interest among policymakers in reconceptualising childcare provision as early childhood education for the birth to 5 years age group and reconfiguring mechanisms for quality assurance and control. In the last decade, changes to the law have meant that services must register with the education inspectorate, Ofsted, which regulates and judges provision according to a defined framework of processes and standards (Ofsted, 2015; Grenier, 2017); and since 2008, have been mandated to provide early (birth to 5) education in accordance with the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a), which outlines the ‘requirements for learning and development and for safeguarding children and promoting their welfare’.

Building on decades of psychological research, recent neuroscientific evidence has been used to construct the earliest period of brain development as intense, critical, predictive and experience-dependent. Simultaneously, babies and young children have been reconstructed as capable and agentic. In consequence, early education services have been recast as the means by which young children’s early learning can be nurtured, standardised and measured; and social inequalities that impact negatively on some children’s life chances can be reduced. Families are now actively encouraged to make use of formal Early Years provision. Investment by successive governments in England has created a system of free early education for all three and four-year-olds and two-year-olds from lower income households. The uptake has generally been high and the most recent statistics have shown that 89% of parents who responded to the annual government survey about childcare said that were in receipt of this entitlement for their 3- and 4-year-olds (Huskinson et al, 2014: 12).

But, as others have cautioned, early education cannot be the sole panacea responsible for eradicating socio-economic inequalities for young children (Bertram and Pascal, 2014; Waldfogel, 2012; Lynch, 2013); and to conceptualise Early Years provision in this way places a profound burden on those working with young children. Certainly, it has been shown that high quality early education can lead to numerous benefits for many young children and evidence to this effect from large data sets or longitudinal studies (e.g. Osborn et al, 1984; Sylva et al, 2010) has sparked politicians’ interest in early education as a public rather than solely private concern (Jackson, 2018).

Despite the birth to five years coverage of the EYFS, the provision of free early education funding for children aged two years and older creates a two-tier system. Explanations for this distinction may be numerous and may incorporate economic, socio-cultural and political reasons (see Vincent et al, 2007 and Holloway, 1998). For example, insufficient funding overall to offer universal, free early education; political aversion to a distinct move away from traditional childrearing patterns if there is overt encouragement of formal daycare for the very youngest
children; and an insubstantial evidence base demonstrating low-risk/high-benefit outcomes of exposure to early education from infancy. There may also be a sufficiency problem; it has recently been reported that the Early Years sector has felt the strain of providing enough high quality places to respond to the introduction of the free entitlement for (some) 2-year-olds (Doward and Thomas, 2014).

The distinction created by the entitlements may also create a false impression about the nature and purposes of Early Years provision for children under and over 2 years of age. This may be reflected in the tendency for more highly qualified staff to work with the older nursery children rather than with babies and toddlers, as indicated by the findings of the evaluation of practitioners who had achieved the post/graduate (Level 7/6) ‘Early Years Professional Status’ (Hadfield et al, 2012).

Furthermore, despite growing political interest in the first ‘1001 days’ from conception to age 2 that has resulted in the establishment of a cross-party parliamentary group on the provision of high quality health, care and education services for this age group, the principles and practices of early education for children under two remain comparatively under-researched in the field of Early Childhood Education in the United Kingdom. Latterly, in the UK, notable influential exceptions include the work of Abbott and Moylett (1997), David et al. (2003), Goldschmied and Jackson (2003), Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003), Abbott and Langston (2004), Nutbrown and Page (2008), Roberts (2010), Trevarthen (e.g. 2011), Elfer et al (2011), Clare (2012), Bruce (e.g. 2012a), Atherton and Nutbrown (2013) and Mathers et al (2014). All have emphasised the importance of knowledgeable, respectful practitioners whose attentively responsive caregiving creates a foundation for nurturing babies’ and young children’s wellbeing, learning and development as they experience life in Early Years settings, such as day nurseries. Elsewhere in the world, and in the context of different national curricula for the Early Years, academics have similarly emphasised the importance of a dynamic, relational approach the care of babies and toddlers by trained and skilful early educators (see Degotardi and Pearson, 2009; Dalli et al, 2011; Sosinsky et al, 2016).

**Singing as a pedagogical tool**

Our project sought to foreground the possibilities that singing might offer for extending the pedagogical repertoires and philosophical reservoirs from which practitioners might draw in their ‘baby room’ work. We were eager to explore the synthesis of these elements, in line with Froebel’s view that the practice of singing is a means to externalise and share inner ideas and feelings as well as to connect the inner and outer manifestations of the self. In our project, we aimed to help practitioners to explore their own beliefs, question practices and consider theories about babies’ care and their role in relation to this; and to consider the expression (and management) of emotion through these musical encounters, particularly within lullabies.

Although by no means a universal activity, our focused explorations of baby room practice over the last 10 or so years have suggested that singing is commonly employed in the everyday care of babies and toddlers. Friedrich Froebel’s influence on practice appears to be timeless in this respect. Singing continues to be promoted as an educational activity for the nursery, and songs and finger plays are tools to enhance children’s learning experiences. But Spratt (2012) has argued that singing in the nursery today rarely reflects Froebel’s intentions and is more commonly employed to distract and keep babies happy than for educational purposes. The tentative findings from our initial phase of this project concurred with Spratt’s view; those involved in our study reported that singing was predominantly employed as a functional tool – to distract, calm, soothe, corral or manage babies and young children. But the practitioners’ views about
the purposes of singing ranged over many educational intentions including language development and social participation. However, these activities play out within a particular curricular framework that is infused with contemporary socio-political ideology. During the first phase of our project, the motives that practitioners expressed for singing with babies, which were linked to educational purposes, did not necessarily resonate with Froebel’s philosophy about babies and their learning in the company of adults (Powell and Gooouch, 2014; Powell, Gooouch and Werth, 2014, 2015). Consequently, while Froebel’s legacy places singing firmly within the repertoire of Early Years practices, the underlying rationale may be distinctly different.

The current EYFS foregrounds the educational purposes of singing (developing musical expression and creativity). But it fails to acknowledge or promote its affective potentiality. In contrast, Froebel attributed complex meaning and purpose to singing after spending many years observing and noting children’s songs and games before embarking on his own Mother Songs book. He believed that songs and the closeness of singing would help adults and babies to make intimate, emotional connections; and that babies’ responses within these singing encounters would convey their interests to those caring for them. Singing remains at the heart of idealised, contemporary nursery practice and the value of connectedness to babies’ families is upheld. But the space in between is fraught with tension and complexity as practitioners are tasked to balance babies’ emotional needs and demands and their responses to these with parents’ preferences and diverse views of professionalism.

Our interest for this project lay in the intersection of these ideas about singing: the simultaneous unfolding of an emotionally nurturing dimension and an educational purpose, reflecting Froebel’s philosophy for Early Years provision to conflate acts of caring and educating within a child-centred orientation of pedagogy.

At this juncture, we would like to foreground our interpretation of the term ‘pedagogy’: not as pertaining to the act of instruction or didactics, but as teaching and learning through cooperative endeavour and in direct relation to the multitude of environments in which this happens (BERA, 2003); nor solely as action but also as the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and understandings that inform and influence the orientation of activities. In line with an ecological perspective, we have taken the view that pedagogy does not evolve in isolation but is a dynamic interaction of individuals, their contexts and wider socio-cultural belief systems together with the vestiges of previous iterations and experiences. This may involve ideological ‘inscription’ such as that derived from policy documentation (Popkewitz, 2004), organisational values, dominant traditions as well as academic training, literature, peer influence or parent pressure.

**Exploring song and singing**

Singing is a universal human activity that crosses but is also shaped by cultures. The study of singing in different cultures – ethnomusicology – shows that what counts as singing is not always obvious. The Muslim call to prayer may sound to the uninitiated like a form of song but is not classed as singing by followers of Islam (Potter and Sorrell, 2014). This suggests that what Mithen (2006) argued was ‘singing’ among our Neanderthal predecessors may not necessarily have been thought of in those terms by those making the variously intoned ‘Hmmmmm’ as a means of communication. Equally, the exaggerated musicality of so-called ‘motherese’ – the sing-song communication of a parent or carer to an infant – is more formally called infant directed speech (IDS), rather than song; and the distinction between speech and song has been intensified by the introduction of the specific terms ‘infant directed song’ (Trehub et al, 1993) and ‘singese’ (Dionyssiou, 2009). Motherese may have melodic qualities but is considered a form of speech, even to the extent that researchers have argued that mothers whose language is tonal
Sacha Powell and Kathy Gooch

(such as Chinese or Xhosa) break the rules of their language by ‘changing the lexical tones . . . in favour of the globally universal and emotionally evocative melodies of IDS’ (Mithen, 2006: 74; see also Grieser and Kuhl, 1988). It has been hypothesised that a ‘mother’s intuitive behaviour supports the infant’s innate communicative capacities’ and that the two engage in ‘communicative musicality’ (Malloch, 1999: 30). But the care of babies extends beyond mother-infant dyads and those who nurture or ‘parent’ infants include fathers, siblings, grandparents, members of extended families or close-knit communities and, increasingly, those who are paid to care, such as nursery professionals.

The concept of ‘communicative musicality’ that Malloch originated and subsequently elaborated in partnership with Colwyn Trevarthen suggests that ‘musical narratives allow adult and infant . . . to share a sense of sympathy and situated meaning in a shared sense of passing time’ (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2008: 4). At the heart of their conceptualisation of this musical engagement between two or more humans is the sharing of an emotional connection. But their ideas are not without criticism of their broad definition of musicality and an innatist theoretical perspective (see Black, 2010). For example, the concept’s requirement that infants are viewed as socially adept and capable sits more easily within certain socio-cultural frames than others. As DeLoache and Gottlieb (2000) so richly show, what an infant is or represents varies widely and affects how cultural groups interact with their youngest children. Although the act of singing may be a universal human behaviour, cultural constructs regulate beliefs about music and musical interactions with others, including babies and young children. But the challenges to Malloch and Trevarthen’s (2000) claim that infants are innately musical and engage in communicative musicality stem from paradigmatic rather than cultural perspectives (if these can be separated). Their concept derives from Stern’s (1985) belief that babies and their intimate carers can attune to and share one another’s internal, emotional states, focused attention and sense of self (or subjectivity), thereby becoming ‘intersubjective’. This contemporary perspective resonates with Froebel’s beliefs that babies were born with innate capabilities, which nurturing relationships could help to unfold; and that singing was a conduit for emotional exchange (Elkind, 2015; Spratt, 2012).

Trevarthen (e.g. 1979) argues that the ability to read and respond to others’ emotions is intentional whereas other psychologists have countered this view by arguing that babies’ responsive behaviours, such as imitative tongue protrusion, are not intentionally intersubjective but are perceptive (Le Page and Theoret, 2007, cited in Trehub, 2008: 50). Nevertheless, local customs permitting, there does seem to be convergence where the value of musical communication is concerned: singing to babies not only is multicultural (although not universal) but also is ‘good’.

Our project invited practitioners to engage critically with these ideas, to explore their own beliefs about singing and to reflect on its place, features, functions and effects in the settings where they worked with babies and toddlers. In so doing we were also inviting them to examine the ways that their roles were constructed and to make connections to the pedagogical orientations or frameworks that shaped their work. Throughout the project, we highlighted the principles and traditions of the nineteenth century, German pioneer of early childhood education and strong proponent of singing with babies, Friedrich Froebel. Our aim was to provide a pedagogical cornerstone for consideration and debate about relational issues, values and identities. At the start of the project, none of the participants had heard of Froebel or was aware of his legacy (Elkind, 2015; Spratt, 2012; Bruce and Spratt, 2011).

Froebel revealed, revered, reframed

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was a great advocate of play, games and activities to support the nurturance of the child and to develop a bond between children and their mothers or carers. His
philosophy for the care and education of children through play emphasised the importance and value of singing and its multiple, beneficial effects for babies and their carers.

Froebel believed that anyone who worked with young children needed to be specially trained in children’s songs and to have a liking and capacity for singing; and that babies and young children needed to sing and to be sung to by their mothers and other carers. He also composed numerous songs and gave instructions about their performance. One collection is known as ‘Mutter-und Kose-Lieder’ (Froebel, 1843), or ‘Mother Songs’. The first seven songs (of 55) pay particular attention in their composition to the feelings of a mother for her baby. Froebel intended to help and guide mothers to recognise and convey emotion, expressed through singing. He believed this would cultivate babies’ connectedness to their mothers and vice versa and the world surrounding them both, as well as to their inner spiritual selves.

In contemporary Early Years practice, this perspective raises a number of issues that were deliberated by the project groups. None of the project participants had heard of Friedrich Froebel when our project sessions began. We introduced some of his ideas to the groups using his own words as prompts for discussion and always with reference to the participants’ own, contemporary practice. We also provided each participant with a summary of Froebel’s principles which were discussed during the group sessions; and a copy each of Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today (Bruce, 2012a).

The intention was twofold: firstly, to raise awareness of Froebel’s immense and enduring contribution to early childhood practice; and secondly, to involve the groups in a critical exploration of their own and others’ philosophies and theories.

We focused on singing as a pedagogical tool, making clear that deconstruction of the practice of singing was a vehicle for investigating underlying or associated beliefs and assumptions (especially about the communication of affect) and highlighting Froebel’s principled approach to the promotion of singing within a pedagogy for the Early Years.

We also shared some recent research evidence and/or theoretical propositions. In particular, many discussions revolved around the concept of ‘communicative musicality’ (Malloch, 1999; Malloch and Trevarthen, 2000, 2008), which was introduced in an early group session. This concept refers to the predisposition and intentionality of babies and their intimate carers (principally mothers) to initiate and respond to one another’s emotive communications following musically rhythmic patterns; and therefore this extends to suggest the intrinsically musical and creative nature of these parent-child interactions. The participants were offered the following statement to consider:

There is evidence that even newborn infants, with their very immature though elaborate brains, limited cognitions, and weak bodies, are specifically motivated beyond instinctive behaviours that attract parental care for immediate biological needs, to communicate intricately with the expressive forms and rhythms of interest and feeling displayed by other humans. This evidence of purposeful intersubjectivity, or an initial psychosocial state, must be fundamental for your understanding of human mental development.

(Trevarthen and Aitken, 2001: our emphasis)

The musicality of communications with babies and the question of predisposition, which Froebel also implied in his writing, were considered in relation to the following quotations, for example:

You long to nourish your baby’s feelings, to stir the pulses of his heart . . . In some way, in some slight degree, you must make him feel the love which inspires all you do. Hence, as
the little play goes on, you begin to sing; and love, the melody of the heart, is revealed in
the melody of the voice.

(Froebel Mottoes & Commentaries, 1895b: 74)

Nawrot (2003): babies (5–9 months) can perceive affect and the emotion content of music
as well as pre-school children and young adults can.

Trehub and Nakata (2002): what motivates mothers to interact musically with their
babies is love and a desire to communicate, without there being any musical goals in mind.

And in relation to the current policy context for Early Years work:

Research shows how music plays a key role in emotional understanding and early
patterns of adult-infant attachment. Where sensitive adults respond to babies’ babble and
gestures by reciprocating, and extending by building on young children’s innate musicality,
playful interactions through songs, rhymes and movement have been seen to be fundamen-
tal to language development and healthy wellbeing. It is important therefore to see music
threading through these key areas and not being confined to a single area of creative devel-
opment as suggested by the current EYFS.


The participants were initially asked to consider the following questions and then their thoughts
were shared and deliberated within the group:

In your view and your experience:

• Does singing stir up emotions/feelings? (If yes, when/how? Whose?)
• Does singing convey emotions/feelings? (If yes, when/how? Whose?)
• Which emotions/feelings?
• What kinds of responses have you noticed from babies to your/others singing?
• (Why) Does any of this matter?

Their inexperience and initial reluctance to explore ideas about emotions became evident dur-
ing the sessions, ‘You think about an activity, but just normal things you don’t really think about
it’ (Participant record). Our language and use of the term ‘intimacy’ in relation to engagement
with babies created a visible and audible discomfort in the entire group, with one participant
expressing what seemed to be the group view that ‘intimacy is a dirty word’ and ‘we will be
judged’ if using the term ‘intimacy’ in the nursery (Field notes from session). The fact that this
term was felt to be so risky and to have inappropriate connotations was surprising but the
ensuing discussion was useful in unravelling some complex issues about emotional bonds and
professional boundaries. However, ‘closeness’ or ‘being in the moment’ with a baby were offered
by the group as familiar and comfortable expressions and which they felt were an acceptable
substitute for ‘intimacy’ with babies.

The nature of interactions, the cause of interactions and the effect of interactions, again,
were unfamiliar explorations, with the group agreeing with one participant who claimed: ‘It’s
an instinctive thing [singing]. You’re taught to change a nappy but you’re not taught how to
interact’ (Session field notes and participant record). As in the first phase, working with practi-
tioner participants required prompts and supports, but by encouraging the storying of practice
and through reflective conversations centred on films taken in practice, the group were able to
begin to develop a retrospective ‘mind-mindedness’ (Meins, 1997), noticing babies’ emotional responses and articulating new understandings about this.

There was frequent mention of ‘special moments’ with babies, although also a suggestion that these engagements are fleeting and occasional rather than regular or sustained, perhaps reflecting the busyness and numbers of babies in rooms, all demanding attention. The ideas of quietness, and particularly ‘stillness’, in baby rooms provoked lively discussion. The thought of being still during the working day was clearly contentious; to lie quietly with a baby, singing, humming – we were told – would be perceived as unusual, unless getting a baby to sleep, purposeful and short lived.

Singing to ‘cheer up’ a sad baby was the most frequent response to the questions above, with either ‘happy’ or ‘sad’ occurring in all responses as the only emotive terms used in reference to the effect of singing. Singing as part of the working day rather than in close interactions with babies, as a way of cheering up tasks as well as babies was also a feature of working practice:

I think it can build a strong relationship with a child because if you’re singing to them and sat, you’ll be sitting with them, they’ll be getting your attention and you can kind of get to know what they like and what they don’t like but I mean a lot of us, we just sort of sing, we all just sort of break, if we’re sweeping we’ll just sort of sing while we’re sweeping or washing our hands or I think it’s just done naturally and the children pick it up as well, and I think if they remember singing while doing something they’ll remember the singing and might kind of do it more often.

(Participant interview)

Articles, texts and extracts were offered for consideration to the group, and as prompts for discussion. Although many of the ideas, and the language in which they were presented by their authors, appeared convoluted to them, the participants readily engaged in attempts to unravel their meanings, to apply these to lived experience and discuss their implications for developing contemporary, baby room pedagogy. As Froebel said,

Mind breathes mind . . . The telling of stories refreshes the mind as a bath refreshes the body; it gives exercise to the intellect and its powers; it tests the judgment and feelings.

(Froebel, 1898, 2005: 307)

The participants were both impressed and intrigued by the connections between Froebelian ideas about the natural environment, singing and observational practices and their own practices. For example ‘you don’t actually realise you’re doing Froebelian things’ (participant interview), and ‘Quite nice that you can relate it to someone. His ideas have developed, not just one way. You need people like him to spin it on, but people throw in their ideas, and it changes’ (Participant interview). Creating connections to Froebel in this way appeared to be helping the participants to feel less like victims of policy as they were supported in articulating their intentions and actions through stories from their practice. We have previously referred to this (Gooouch and Powell, 2013a) as the difference between ‘signalling’ (through description and storying) and ‘signifying’ (through critical reflection) aspects of practitioners’ work (with reference to Vygotsky, 1986), and have indicated the deep significance of enabling discursive opportunities to prompt and support, in safe contexts, these kinds of exploratory and reflective responses.

One issue that arises from the focus on Froebel’s ideas from within the project concerns the implication that all mothers inherently feel warmth for their babies, although they may not
know it at first; and with appropriate support and encouragement they can come to express
loving feelings towards their babies, including doing so through song. This idea is problematic
in several ways:

- It presumes a particular representation of ‘good’ parenting/carer behaviour that endures in
  contemporary western discourse but is one that we encouraged participants to engage with
  enquiringly rather than accepting it acritically.
- The relationship between genetics and environments is highly complex but it is generally
  believed that these are synergistic. The ‘emerging lines of research from epigenetics suggest
  that not only can nature alter nurture, but nurture, in turn, has the power to modify nature.’
  (Jacobsen, 2009).
- We now know that chemical imbalances in the brain (such as those experienced in post-
  natal depression and exacerbated by environmental risk factors) may negatively impact
  mothers’ abilities to interact with their babies in the ways that Froebel envisaged. But the
  adults’ own attachment relationships with other adults have also been correlated with their
  emotional interactions (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007).
- Similarly, babies’ individual traits are agentic; these not only influence the nature of initial
  interactions but also continue to shape these over time (Cuthbert et al, 2011).
- Culturally specific beliefs and practices shape the interactions of adults with babies in their
  communities and there may not be a single, universally appropriate ‘method’ for nurturing
  young children (DeLoache and Gottlieb, 2000), although the value attributed to singing is
  widespread (Levitin, 2010).
- Many babies have multiple, ‘primary’ carers with whom they spend much of their time
  from birth or soon afterwards. This may be the result of cultural preferences or may stem
  from societal trends such as parents going out to work soon after the child is born.
- The relationship between a baby’s carers (such as baby room practitioners) and parents/
  family is sensitive and complex (Brooker, 2010). Those caring for babies may not be biol-
  logically predisposed to express emotions for babies in precisely the same way as a baby’s
  parents, although Gopnik (2009) has argued that all humans are biologically primed to
  respond to infants.

The second issue concerns Froebel’s view, his intentions and his careful instructions for singing
with babies, which may appear to contradict his express belief that learning must begin with the
child. But the following quotation from Froebel’s work, ‘The Education of Man’, illustrating his
principle of opposites in unity, may help to shed some light on this conundrum:

> All true education in training and instruction should, therefore, at every moment, in every
demand and regulation, be simultaneously double-sided – giving and taking, uniting and
dividing, prescribing and following, active and passive, positive yet giving scope, firm and
yielding.

*(Froebel, 2005 [1898]: 14)*

It is perhaps in this mutuality of engagement that Froebel’s work has particular and contempo-
rary significance. Embedded firmly within managerialist agendas, micro-managed and, in some
cases, filmed through CCTV in their everyday routines with babies, it is difficult for nursery
practitioners to develop or sustain a sense of voice; or feel ownership or allegiance to a particular
theoretical perspective, or philosophy, particularly if this diverges from the dominant approach.
However, supporting practitioners who work with babies to engage in noting and noticing
behaviours, in moving from being attentive to attendant (Goouch, 2010) in their work with babies, helped in personally redefining roles and claiming expertise in the care of babies:

*I think it’s just sort of the way you sing to the children and watching others sing to the children as well, and even if they’re not singing, they’re doing the actions and it’s just little things like that really, I suppose . . . the more I knew about it the more I kind of looked out for it more as well*'

‘You see more effects; you realise the importance of singing. You kind of watch other people singing and see it how the children see it.

*(Participant interview)*

We have become concerned about what we now describe as the ‘performance of care’ and what that might mean. Although childcare is frequently seen as ‘a service industry’ (Holloway, 1998: 30), those engaged in the service are perhaps inevitably entwined amongst competing demands and conflicting roles, serving in fact many masters. In the complex debates about professionalism and loving encounters with babies in out-of-home care, practitioners find themselves anxiously treading what they describe as an invisible line between not duplicating a maternal role or attempting to recreate or mirror the emotional bond between a parent and a child, nor becoming a task-driven technician. This was particularly evident in the discussions about whether or not ‘special’ songs or lullabies from home should be shared or replicated.

They seemed to prefer that their care should be seen in relation to that of parents, which is subtly different.

Considering their roles, responsibilities and practices in relation to the words and work of Froebel offered the practitioners in this project a way of sitting outside this dilemma and looking in at their world. Singing was used as both a pedagogical device and a dialogic prompt to enable the participants to reflect on the theoretical underpinnings of their work with babies.

The practitioners who formed the group had no prior knowledge nor stated interest in Froebel but they all expressed a keenness to learn more: ‘what I feel I’ve got from the Froebel project is a personal, you know, a new knowledge for myself, and I do feed back to my colleagues but it felt like a personal knowledge trail’. One participant has subsequently enrolled on a part-time childhood studies course: ‘I’ve got a presentation coming up and I’m going to be talking about the importance of singing with babies . . . I think Froebel will be mentioned!’ *(Email correspondence)*.

Various aspects of his work formed an impression on them; for example, they were interested in his promotion of women as teachers, his focus on the outdoor environment and especially in his interest in singing. In one example, the participant said, ‘Froebel’s songs had a message, you don’t always have to dumb things down . . . His songs were very detailed’ *(Participant interview)*.

Singing in this project also reflected the personality of the participants, their personal experiences and personal preferences.

*It’s kind of like talking to yourself I suppose . . . I think it’s a good feeling to do it because you can express your emotions a lot more.*

*I was singing the Bee Gees ‘Staying Alive’ and the little girl I was singing it to . . . picked that up . . . So I think it is how you sing it and how you make it. I mean I could have sang that really boring and rubbish, but I think it’s if you put actions to it or expressions then they take it in a lot more, just sort of by copying your face, sort of thing.*

*(Participant interviews)*
While the Bee Gees may not have been quite what Froebel had in mind, he was not prescriptive in the use of his Mother Songs: ‘those songs which arise or which come to mind on impulse of the moment, and amidst special circumstances, are always the best’ (Froebel, 1891: 62).

The project clearly had an impact, both personally as reflected above, and in adapted practice:

The stereo was broken, we had new babies. I started singing, other girls too, our (12) babies stopped crying and calmed down. I’ve always sung but it highlights it.

You are cut off in your own little nursery bubble and it is nice; those sort of sessions show that actually you are all doing the same thing but kind of you . . . I mean in an ideal world you’d go and see other baby rooms, but of course you never can.

(Participant interviews)

Conclusions

The philosophical underpinning provided by Froebel’s work offered a point of reference, without which practitioners in nurseries are simply reliant on national policy documents, business models and regulatory bodies: ‘You go by Ofsted most of the time’ (participant interview). As a consequence, roles, relationships and issues of identity are often diversely constructed, unequally distributed and invisibly monitored to ensure compliance. Headlines from the discourse can be rehearsed and re-visited, for example, parent partnership, babies’ best interests, but the bigger picture in terms of a research informed, theory driven, field of practice requires investment and commitment – from both employers and employees – to ensure a level of affect in roles and relationships with individual children.

In this project, we were struck by the ideological tug-of-war in relation to the impetus for care (economic and early interventions) and any theoretical approach to the care of babies. For example, does the day-to-day care of babies require only the delivery of a practical service or is ‘affect’, or warmth of encounter a necessary aspect of the work? If it is, then how is ‘warmth’ taught, modelled, regulated and judged? Or is a warm relationship simply assumed? The ‘performance of care’ seems to require a subtlety in modes of behaviours, relationships and responses. However, ‘performance’ in the context of baby room practice is frequently and narrowly defined as, for example, being jolly; singing to babies; making them happy.

While singing is part of the assumed agenda in baby rooms, the rationale is not clearly understood, nor clearly articulated. ‘Good’ songs are those that have been inherited in the nursery, or remembered from childhood and the ‘good-ness’ of singing is perhaps, without careful and critical reflection, part of an idealised notion of baby room practice or appropriated to fulfil EYFS outcomes. The complexity of the work of practitioners in baby rooms cannot be underestimated. Perhaps by nudging forward a pedagogical device (singing) and attempting to raise the level of affect in this way, as researchers we are also guilty of inscribing practice, and practitioners as palimpsests, ‘tablets on which successive scripts are written’ (Bryan, 2004: 142), rather than allowing an intuitive, affective and responsive practice with babies to emerge.

Finally, at the conclusion of the first phase, we asked the question ‘What good is singing?’ and additionally:

- Can the ‘increased engagement’ that occurs during singing be described as intimacy?
- To what extent does singing further the managerialist agendas over and above more principled approaches to the education and care of babies, such as that advocated by Froebel or vice versa?
- Whose songs belong in the nursery and whose songs are excluded (and why)?
As discussed above, our use of the term ‘intimacy’ in relation to the care of babies created a storm of protest. However, almost more importantly, is that ‘closeness’, ‘stillness’ and being ‘in the moment’ with a baby seemed to be rare events, with participants appearing anxious about being seen themselves as inactive, not working. This project helped to legitimise the practice of ‘lulling’ a baby other than when sleep was imminent. In this project, participants were able to hold singing and songs up for examination, considering and articulating the benefits that could often be ‘read’ in the faces of the babies in their films, with one participant commenting ‘singing, it helps them to thrive’ (participant interview).

Supporting practitioners in seeing for themselves the benefit of singing with babies, through the lens of Froebel’s principles, ideas and songs, in part began the process of adopting practices, not because of Ofsted, managerialist agendas or EYFS outcomes, but simply because they were able to recognise the benefits in the faces of the babies with whom they sang, which in turn injected a ‘feel good’ factor into what for some seemed to be less than positive work experiences. Legitimised too, was the practice of singing when the mood took them – ‘its almost like talking to yourself’ and to make light of tasks that must, at times, appear thankless. While ‘Row, row, row your boat’ was often at the top of participants’ ‘hit list’ of songs in baby rooms, the project helped them to look beyond the obvious, to introduce songs from their own histories as well as from contemporary cultures, while attending to babies, their interests, their cultures and their responses to song.

The project challenged participants to use songs and singing, vocalisations and motherese, to support the mutuality of engagement promoted by Froebel. Above all, the participants were helped through discursive opportunities, centred on pedagogical enquiry and reframing, to look at the babies, to notice expressions of emotion, and to better understand ‘inter-action’.

We borrowed Froebel’s own words to provoke critical reflection and dialogue in our project and we leave the last words to him.

Man . . . should therefore be looked upon not as perfectly developed, not as fixed, as station-ary, but as steadily and progressively growing, in a state of ever-living development.

(2005: 17)

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the generous grant funding provided by The Froebel Trust and for the time and energy that participants committed to the project.