The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice
Re-articulating Research and Policy
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Publication details
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Published online on: 01 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Suzanne Flannery Quinn, Sue Greenfield. 01 Aug 2018, Living with children from: The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice, Re-articulating Research and Policy Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

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Living with children

A Froebelian approach to working with families and communities

Suzanne Flannery Quinn and Sue Greenfield

Let us live with our children: so shall the lives of our children bring peace and Joy to us; so shall we begin to be and become wise.

(Friedrich Froebel, 1885: 53)

For Froebel and those inspired by his ideas and legacy, the care of young children is based on the guiding principle of unity – that all people are connected to each other, to nature and ultimately to a higher being. According to Froebelian principles, the role of the family in the care of the young child is of prime importance. It is within the family that a child grows in consciousness, develops relationships and learns to live a life of purpose. Froebel believed that the role of those who care for children (whether as parents or professional caregivers) is to recognise the strength of the child and the family, and to act in the spirit of community to help the child to feel secure and confident enough to take risks, to have meaningful experiences and playful engagement with the natural world, to pursue ideas that are worth imagining and knowledge that is worth knowing, and to feel part of ‘the whole’ (family, community, nature and God). Froebel regarded the family as the primary social context in which an understanding of the self in relation to others begins. He also recognised that families are supported by communities, within which we are all called to ‘live with our children’.

What are the characteristics of a Froebelian approach to living with children?

In childhood there is a four-fold development of life – the child’s own inner life; his life in relation with parents and family; his life in relation, common to him and them, with a higher invisible Being; and, especially, his life in relation with nature, regarded as endowed with life like his own.

(Froebel, trans 1912: 50)

A Froebelian approach recognises the child’s inner life as natural and ‘in relation’. Within this idea, the child is natural, she is a part of nature and her earliest natural contacts are those she
has with her caregivers. A Froebelian approach recognises the importance of early attachment relationships, and places a value on playful experiences that occur in nature. The idea of living with children is based on the premise that human experience occurs within an environment of natural and human resources. The strengths of children and their families are thought of as supported by dynamic and interrelated relationships within the natural environment, in ever widening circles, similar to the ideas expressed in ecological models of human development which suggest that individuals are influenced by the various systems in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; von Bertalanffy, 1976). The environment can either support or constrain human experience and development. A Froebelian approach would suggest that support comes in the form of environments that enable natural human contact (particularly skin-to-skin contact between infants and their parents) as well as contact with the broader natural environment (in the outdoors). The manner of human contact is often described as ‘play’ by Froebel – in what he believes is the ‘highest expression of human development in childhood’ an expression of the soul (Froebel, 1912: 50–1). For Froebel play is a natural activity of young people, in their engagement with people, with objects and with nature. For those inspired by Froebelian principles, a life with children is a playful life!

Froebel’s ideas were based on the belief that children are growing into consciousness and that adults should guide children gently and positively. For Froebel, a trusting attachment between family and infant is essential. A component of this trust involves close physical contact. This is evident in Froebel’s Mother Songs (Froebel, 1920), which are songs and games for parents and children that are focused on family relationships, nature and the roles of the members of the broader community. These songs were composed with the intent to encourage parents (particularly mothers) to help the child to recognise the unity of human connectedness, and also provide a playful context for human contact (see Chapter 23). He writes that ‘through movements she (the mother) seeks also to make him feel his own inner life. Here the manner is of great importance. By regular rhythmic movements accompanied by rhythmic sounds she leads him to this self-consciousness as she dandles him in her arms’ (Froebel, 1912: 53).

Froebel believed that all of our experiences leave an impression on our senses, and that the child’s spiritual life grows from his or her early sense experiences. Froebel’s Mother Songs are reminiscent of the instinctive closeness of the skin to skin contact seen immediately after childbirth in many parts of the world as the infant is placed naked against the mother or father’s skin, near the chest. This natural skin to skin contact has been shown both to calm the infant and to control the infant’s body temperature, increasing oxytocin levels in the maternal blood. Oxytocin is a hormone that stimulates uterine contractions and the ejection of breast milk and it has been suggested that this has an impact on the duration of breastfeeding (Gabriel et al, 2009; Bigelow et al, 2014). The touch of the skin informs the baby about his/her surroundings and about the carer who is holding her and introduces both baby and carer to the chance of a lasting relationship.

Natural contact between caregivers and infants can also be supported through practices such as massage. Infant massage is frequently used as a means of further stimulating the relationship between parent/carer and baby by reducing of stress hormone levels (Underdown et al, 2006). This was initially used in pre-term baby units where babies were in incubators. These babies had much reduced contact with people because they were connected to wires and tubes and cut off from their surroundings by the incubators (Murray et al, 1996). Infant massage was so successful as a means of encouraging the relationship between parents and baby, that it was tried with other babies too. It is now much used and is a helpful way of supporting the emotional and social relationships between parent/carer and baby. It is also used with mothers who are suffering from
postnatal depression as it encourages eye contact and skin contact between mother and baby (Miller et al, 2006; Murray et al, 1996).

Froebel's ideas suggest that a sense of belonging is supported by nature – in the nature of our human contact, and in a natural environment (such as outdoors), purpose can be found through play. Much of our contemporary understandings of children's early development have grown from Froebel's recognition of play as a natural and beneficial activity for children as well as people of all ages (Aasen et al, 2009; Athey, 2007; Bruner, 1983; Elkind, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 2005). Current research has clearly demonstrated that play supports cognitive development, physical growth, emotional understanding, and early learning (Bundy et al, 2009; Lockhart, 2010; Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Walsh et al, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, play is thought to strengthen social and family bonds, and is considered to be essential for human flourishing (Ginsburg, 2007).

Contemporary practices and contemporary questions: what are the challenges of implementing this approach?

The emphasis on the role of the family established by Froebel's ideas can also be seen in a range of contemporary theory and research that recognises the importance of families in child development and the reciprocal nature of the parent-child relationship (Belsky, 1984; Conger et al, 2000; Cowan et al, 1998; Kim and Ross, 2009). While research, theory and political discourses all seem to fully support Froebel's ideas, there are constraints on implementing an approach to living with children that encompasses a sense of unity and belonging. These constraints are generally rooted in economic concerns that challenge families, communities and governments. The constraints can be challenged by a strengthening of resolve and a commitment to care for and live with others.

Contemporary lifestyles, which are often driven by challenging economic circumstances, may require the support of professional caregiving for young children. The role of professionals is optimally to work in partnership with families so that connections between children's experiences within their families and outside of their families are strengthened (Anning, 2002; Fumoto et al, 2012; Knopf and Swick, 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Whalley, 2007).

Contemporary policy in the UK has aimed to support these connections (Collins and Foley, 2008; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Melhuish and Hall, 2007; Nutbrown, 2012). The need to involve parents in their children's learning has been an important feature of government policy in the UK for many years. The new Labour government in 1997 saw it as a significant item on their agenda and they introduced the Centres of Excellence programme (DfEE, 1997). This initiative and the development of Sure Start also recognised the importance of parents in their children's learning (Weinberger et al, 2005) and the Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2011) further emphasised its importance.

But it is clear that more can be done to make sure that the roles of families are fully considered within child care and early educational settings. Findings of the EPPE study are that outcomes for the child are better when home and school work together (Sylva et al, 2010), but we also know that it is not all families who attend or participate, rather it is mostly those who feel like they fit in (Nalls et al, 2010), which further emphasises the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging. Most of the settings follow school to home transmission model which provides information about the way settings work, but gives parents little say in this (Dreissen et al, 2005; Robson and Smedley, 1996). A Froebelian approach would be more inclusive, and offer a genuine impetus for welcoming and belonging. Froebel's notion of parents, carers and educators working in 'harmony' sees the family as important actors in children's learning, assisting in promoting children's autonomy and self-esteem (Froebel, 1885; Tovey, 2013).
Clearly, the structure of families has changed since Froebel wrote Mother Songs in the mid-1800s in Germany. Society has grown more complex, and families have adapted (Crompton et al., 2007; Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2008b). Family structures and family functions have always varied according to environmental, economic and cultural changes (Pilkauskas, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2007) and the role of the family is still very strong in most neighbourhoods and cultures. The strength of family bonds has been found to be related to positive child outcomes (Carlson et al., 2011; Garrett-Peters et al., 2011), and the strength of these bonds can be supported by professional caregiving services that recognise the family as a system (Brotherson et al., 2010; Trivette et al., 2010). Supportive environments, such as well-designed buildings and common areas, can encourage greater community strength (Read, 2007; Hanley, 2007; Moss and Petrie, 2002). Still, some environments, particularly in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, might discourage people from taking care of their environment and may not support the spirit of working together for the benefit of the community (Hume et al., 2005; Kohen, Leventhal et al., 2008). Unsupportive environments do not communicate a sense of hope, nor purpose, nor do they convey to children that they belong.

Froebel’s central message was one of unity, in connection with nature, which was seen as a mirror for the child’s unfolding spiritual life. Yet, natural environments are disappearing and parents are more and more worried about allowing children to leave their sides to play without adults (Burdeette and Whitaker, 2005; Clements, 2004; Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001; Kimbro and Schachter, 2011); this is especially relevant for children in low-income areas (Timperio et al., 2005; Weir et al., 2006). Further, outdoor play areas do not always contain natural features but rather have tarmac and brightly coloured static play equipment (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006; Waite, 2010), which does not support children’s contact with nature. The lack of inclusive and welcoming environments for families with young children is perhaps a reflection of an individualistic, consumerist society where people are concerned for individual needs rather than collective ones. Further, a culture of blaming parents, rather than supporting them, is evident in contemporary discourses.

Supportive practices would involve consultation with children and families in an effort to better understand the values and desires that they have regarding the care of young people. It can be considered a professional responsibility to work in partnership and with an understanding of community values (Whalley, 2007). A Children’s Centre can become the centre of the community and provision can change as needs change. This was the intention of Sure Start when centres were initially set up, and is an approach that would serve to foster inclusion, belonging and a solid foundation for children’s growing sense of unity between their own identities and those of others.

Children begin to develop their identities even before they are born and this development continues in their families and later in the institutions and communities that they experience. Vandenbergroek’s (2001) views emphasising the importance of building ‘real and symbolic bridges’ between early years settings and homes and families are reminiscent of Froebel’s idea that the kindergarten – as a unique place for children to experience their nature and play – should be part of the community and that we should ‘live with our children’. This is still seen as essential if children are to develop a sense of belonging which in turn will provide a sense of purpose in everything they do.