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The Well-Being of babies, children under three and staff leaders in daycare

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Introduction

Increased research attention is being paid to the role of emotion and children’s Well-Being in early learning and development. This chapter shares in brief work the author has been conducting with others, much of it supported by the Froebel Trust, concerning the Well-Being of babies and children under three in nursery.

‘Well-Being’ and its meanings

Much work has been done on defining ‘Well-Being’, although it is a complex notion engendering different understandings in different contexts and by different stakeholders. Nevertheless, in early childhood, both research and practice widely recognises the importance of a child’s Well-Being as a prerequisite of engaged play and effective learning. Here Well-Being is often taken to convey a child’s sense of purpose and agency, the capacity to make secure attachments with adults, gradually develop reciprocal relationships with friends and in groups and to recover fairly quickly from setbacks and disappointments.

Froebel and Well-Being

Froebel did not use the term ‘Well-Being’ but the holistic nature of early development, as an underpinning principle of Well-Being, can be seen in his philosophy:

> there can be only one principle and aim – his full development as an active, sentient, understanding person . . . These three apparently different aspects of his development are intrinsically one

*(Lilley, 1967: 160)*

Now, Well-Being is implicit if not explicit in much early years policy, including the Every Child Matters strategy, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and in Social and Emotional Aspects
of Learning (SEAL). In this sense, we might see all these documents as Froebelian, although, of course, in many other vital respects, they are anything but!

**Babies’ and under threes’ Well-Being: the long term impact of nursery**

Concern about the Well-Being of babies in nursery has been evident from first legislation on physical safety and health at the beginning of the twentieth century. But it was not until nearly the end of that century that concern turned to emotional Well-Being too. From 1988 to 1999, I worked at the National Children’s Bureau (NCB), a government funded centre for policy and practice development. That period saw the first big wave of expansion of nurseries, taking babies from three months as mothers participated increasingly in the paid labour market. NCB was bombarded with questions about long term impact: Is it bad for babies to be in nursery? Does it weaken family bonds? How does it affect later Well-Being?

Many large cohort longitudinal studies (e.g. the National Child Development Study in the UK and the National Institute of Child Health and Development in the US) have sought better understandings of the impact of nursery in later life development. However, it has been very difficult to pin down clear causal pathways over the long period from infancy to adolescence and early adulthood. Further, most researchers now accept that the question of whether nursery is harmful to babies is simplistic.

Predicting Well-Being trajectories requires a more rounded view of young children’s early experience at home as well as at nursery, and how these two worlds ‘connect’. Indeed Professor Kevin Brehony and Dr Karen Nawrotzki (2010) have argued that predicting children’s Well-Being and life chances requires attention to the ‘permitting circumstances’ of family life and effective nurseries – on attention to poverty, inequality and disadvantage in the structural conditions of society.

**Babies’ and under threes’ Well-Being: daily life in nursery**

Yet research is needed on the details of daily nursery life, immediate factors in Well-Being as well as long term impact. To explore this, Esmée Fairbairn funded a 3-year observational study of under threes, undertaken by myself and Dorothy Selleck at NCB. Focussing on one child at a time, in different kinds of nursery, we mapped their whole day. That work showed the fleeting attention received by children, often from many different practitioners in a workforce characterised by high turnover. It helped strengthen the official guidance on the provision of close relationships in nursery (now known as the key person approach). The research underpinned a practice guidance book, now in its second edition (Elfer et al, 2011).

**No such thing as a baby?**

Donald Winnicott, the paediatrician and psychoanalyst, famously said that there is no such thing as a baby. By this apparently bizarre statement, he really meant that the baby-carer relationship is so important that it is impossible to think clearly about the baby separately from the baby’s relationships with others. My deep conviction is that this applies to nursery staff too working with the youngest children. Making such close, personal relationships with babies and young children that are not one’s own, and in a professional and accountable way, makes very heavy emotional demands. Babies’ Well-Being in nursery, must in part be dependent on practitioners’ feelings of Well-Being at work.
Thinking about the Well-Being of babies and practitioners together

The Froebel Research Committee (FRC) has been generous in its support for researching this, funding the gathering and analysis of observation data on babies and children under three as part of my Doctoral Research (Elfer, 2008). This compared interactions between practitioners and under threes in four very different kinds of nursery. The research explored why nurseries varied so much in the quality of interactions with infants. It examined the role of nursery ethos — what might be described in loose terms as the Well-Being of a nursery as a whole — how does a nursery collectively think about and respond to the children and families in its care? We have seen in the media recently how much ‘institutional well being’ appears to influence whether elderly patients are treated with warm sensitive attention or indifferent detachment.

Nurseries, Well-Being and work discussion

FRC also gave financial support for the recent study on the contribution of Work Discussion (WD) groups to helping nursery staff spend more individual time with babies and under threes – the key to fostering Well-Being. The essence of WD is not about teaching textbook practice. Rather it is a serious investment of time in thinking about some of the dilemmas and challenges that rise in close interaction with other people’s children – attentive to the fine details of practitioners’ real and daily interactions with children.

The contribution of the Tavistock method of observation

Researching Well-Being in nursery is not easy. The Tavistock method of observation, developed over 60 years in the training of child psychotherapists, psychiatrists and psychologists and more recently teachers and social workers, is, however, particularly suited to accessing the emotional states of young children. This methodology has now been adapted and developed as a research tool in nursery and its strengths and limitations have been reviewed (Elfer, 2011). The method has also been adapted for use as a pedagogic tool. Its contribution as a pedagogic tool, as well as an opportunity to experience the adapted method’s use in practice, has been part of a module on Well-Being in the Earliest Years offered to MA Early Childhood Studies’ students at the University of Roehampton.

Both of these practice innovations (Work Discussion as one model of Professional Reflection and the adapted Tavistock Observation Method) have now been taken forward with the support of the Froebel Trust. In the second paper of this group of three, a summary of the contribution of Work Discussion is given. Finally, in the third paper, research evaluating the views of Heads of nurseries on adapting the Tavistock Observation Method and using this adapted version in their daily practice is described.

A Summary of an Evaluation of a Work Discussion Group for 12 Nursery Heads Aiming to Facilitate Emotional Well-Being in Nursery

Most nursery provision is now available for babies and young children from six months for up to 50 hours each week and for 50 weeks each year. The impact of such extensive out of home care depends on the quality of interactions between staff and children.

This project evaluated the experience of 12 nursery heads of a monthly ‘work discussion’ group. The aim of the group was to provide a safe forum in which the heads could discuss the
emotional demands of close daily work with young children and strengthen their support to the staff who do this work. The overall aim of the research was to explore whether the heads experience work discussion as helpful to them and whether they consider it makes a positive difference to interactions between staff and children.

Nursery, emotional Well-Being, public anxiety and research evidence

There has always been public anxiety about the long hours use of nursery for very young children. In the public mind, anxiety seems to be based on a strong cultural expectation that Well-Being is best secured in a family environment. In the research community, anxiety has been rooted in the maternal deprivation theories of John Bowlby, who published his ‘attachment theory’ in 1969.

Bowlby is widely quoted as saying that long periods of separation of a baby and mother in the first two years poses a substantial risk of mental health problems in later life. In fact Bowlby actually spoke about long periods of separation from mother or mother substitute. Attachment theory has been substantially revised in the last 50 years. Research questions have moved on from the relatively simple one of ‘is nursery harmful?’ to more holistic ones about how children’s Well-Being may be related to home experience in combination with nursery experience. In terms of emotional Well-Being, what matters most about nursery experience is children’s opportunity to make warm and responsive attachments to one or two nursery staff.

The early years foundation stage and the key person approach

To facilitate such attachments, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has made it a statutory requirement that each child in nursery should have a named ‘key person’, responsible for most of her or his daily care and comfort. This is an important step forward. However, even in nurseries who say they are committed to the key person approach and have the resources to implement it, it often does not happen in practice. Why should this be?

Early years educators have drawn on psychoanalytic theory to show that many nursery staff find the responsibility of making such emotionally close relationships with other people’s children very stressful. In particular there is anxiety about the painfulness for children of breaking attachments when staff or children leave nursery and anxiety about parents’ reactions. More recently, concern about close physical care leading to allegations of child abuse has raised anxiety further.

There is now a large body of writing in the psychoanalytic field to show how in many organisations undertaking emotionally demanding work, including nurseries, procedures and practices may evolve designed to limit the stress of this work. Collectively, such procedures and practices are referred to as ‘social defence systems’ and a good example from nursery is the following:

it’s nice to give them a cuddle but a quick cuddle’s nice, not a 20 minute cuddle . . . when I was at college I was taught about not sitting children on your laps . . . children of that age can become too self reliant on a member of staff and you go to lunch . . . you go home . . . they are still there obviously and they need to be able to gel with all members of staff

(Baby Room Leader)

The mental approach here is that rather than regulating physical contact by factors to do with the age and emotional state of the child and the needs and demands of other children at the
time, there appears to be resort to a procedural response rather than a professional judgement. The presence of a social defence system is indicated by the use of procedure as replacing thought and professional judgement.

A new training model for daycare nursery heads

Preliminary work by a child psychotherapist with a group of nursery staff has shown that through a careful process of ‘work discussion’, listening and talking through the personal feelings of stress as well as pleasure arising from close work with children, staff gradually could allow closer interactions with children whilst also maintaining professional boundaries. Such close attention to the Well-Being of nursery staff may be an essential precondition for the capacity of nursery staff to provide closer individual attention to children.

Together with a Consultant Child Psychotherapist specialising in under fives and trained in group relations, I was asked by a Local Education Authority to work with a group of 12 nursery heads using a ‘work discussion’ approach. Work entailed a 2-hour discussion, once per month, over 10 months. The agenda of discussion was to be set by the issues that these heads bring.

The aims of the work were to record and analyse the group discussions so as to categorise types of issue, how they have arisen and how they are addressed in the discussion. Heads were asked to evaluate the discussion process and whether they thought it had made any difference to interactions between nursery staff and children. The group discussion time was paid for by the LEA. The Froebel Trust funded the Evaluation component.

Outcomes

This work has been very productive in its outcomes. Alongside the report to the Trust, a full account of the work has been published in two International Journals (Elfer, 2012a, 2013) and in an international edited collection of papers on work with infants and toddlers (Elfer, 2014). This latter collection of papers arose out of an invited symposium of around twenty researcher held at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia, over the course of a week. The aim of the symposium was to bring together diverse perspectives and developments on pedagogy with infants and toddlers, including Work Discussion and the Adapted Tavistock Observation Method, and think about how these different and diverse approaches might inform one another. What was clear from the symposium is how much interest there is internationally in Froebelian principles and their application to understanding the role of emotion in early years pedagogy. Some of the developing ideas have been included in an article for Nursery World (Elfer, 2014). In the third paper of this group of three, research evaluating the views of Heads of nursery on adapting the Tavistock Observation Method and using this adapted version in their daily practice is described.

Developing naturalistic observations of young children in contemporary nurseries as a Froebelian practice during 2010

The small child, or the importance of a baby’s activities
(Froebel, 1830, cited in Lilley, 1967: 74)

This research developed, used and evaluated a naturalistic method of observation, the Tavistock Observation Method (TOM), as a pedagogic tool, in nursery. TOM is the main observation method
used by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. The ‘Tavistock’ is the largest national training provider for psychologists, teachers, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, social workers and other professional disciplines concerned with children’s and adolescents’ development and emotional Well-Being.

Observations by nursery staff working with babies and children under three are often focussed on rather specific, and sometimes narrow, learning goals. By contrast, Froebel’s observations are detailed, holistic and engaging. It is easy to imagine how motivating they would be to nursery staff in terms of their interest in and responsiveness to young children.

The aim of this proposal was therefore to support the observation practice of nursery staff by enabling them to see what Froebel saw. The intention was that staff would have a direct experience of how much detail there is to be seen, of the significance of this detail, and of how supportive this can be in guiding their responses.

Background

In the last 50 years, researchers and writers have followed three quite different and separate ways of researching babies’ development from birth – indeed, before birth – through the first three years.

The first of these is the discipline of developmental psychology. This tradition has shown the significance of young children’s attachments as a way of regulating their anxiety through a close responsive relationship with a small number of particular adults (Belsky et al., 2007). The discipline has also produced the concept of inter-subjectivity and the central role of emotion as a prime motivator in infants’ actions and responses to them (Trevarthan, 2005).

The second has been psychoanalytic theory, with its focus on how the infant experiences and develops an understanding of his own mind, through repeated interactions with the mind of emotionally close and attuned adults. A mother’s capacity to think about and understand her infant’s emotional experience – for example, distress or desire – provides an early experience for the baby of how his feelings are contained and moderated. It is this early experience, as it is internalised, that is held to be the basis, over countless similar interactions, for the infant’s capacity to understand and think about his own feelings (Miller, 1999).

The third tradition has its focus on the structure of the brain, rather than mind. It has explored the central role of early interaction in brain development through the processes of synaptic generation and pruning (Solms and Turnbull, 2002).

It is hard to imagine three traditions more different in their underpinning ideas. Yet what is common to each of them is the crucial significance of the ‘minute particulars’ (Blake, 1757–1827) of children’s interactions. Early development occurs through the way these ‘minute particulars’ are observed, noted, thought about and responded to. It is exactly this process that Froebel demonstrated.

Froebel’s observations

Froebel’s observations are vivid and detailed descriptive accounts. There is much that closely matches our modern understandings of infants’ agency as active contributors in the final detail of their interactions with others:

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
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of expression, first enters into communication with other minds. The first smile is therefore the expression of an independent human mind

(Froebel, 1830 cited in Lilley, 1967: 75)

Froebel went on to emphasise the importance of attention to the ‘minute particulars’ of the child’s initiatives and overtures:

Just as little regard is paid to the other significant expressions of the child’s life, yet they merit attention. When older brothers and sisters are busily playing with him, he is aroused to vigorous activity; the tension in his face and the trembling of his limbs show how much his spirit is striving to get knowledge and control. This it must be realised, is the expression of a mind trying to overcome the limits put upon it.

(Froebel, 1830 cited in Lilley, 1967: 76)

Throughout the book the importance for Froebelians of narrative observation as a basis for planning is emphasised. However, observations by nursery practitioners working with babies and children under three are often bland and focussed on narrow educational goals. A recent review of perspectives and measures in assessing quality of nursery provision has drawn attention to the limitations of existing observation approaches. The review highlighted the particular difficulty of capturing the crucial but minute and subtle details of interaction that are known to be so important in thinking about babies’ and young children’s experience at nursery (Mathers et al, 2014).

The aim of this research was therefore to evaluate the contribution of TOM to assisting nursery practitioners observe the details of children’s play, interactions and early learning with particular attention to their emotional dimensions.

**TOM and its roots in Froebel’s observations**

The theoretical underpinning of the method has been set out fully by Rustin (1989) but it can be summarised as a detailed, naturalistic observation presented in the form of everyday descriptive language. During the observation, no recording device is used. The observer’s aim is to immerse herself in the observation, focussing on one child and her or his interactions and responses with the environment including people and resources. The observation is written up as soon as possible after the observation. The narrative includes as much detail as possible with attention to contexts, timings and sequences, and the feelings evoked in the observer as they arise during the observation. Hence a critical feature of TOM is:

An intimate, one-to-one personal contact whose transactions are subjected to self-reflective thought of as meticulous a nature as possible.

(Rustin, 1989: 54)

This self-reflective thought is undertaken as a rigorous scrutiny of the observation narrative within a small seminar group of observers able to examine and debate possible meanings and processes as discerned by individual members of the seminar group. In this respect, it has similarities with the processes of critical reflective practice (Schon, 1983).

Various adaptations of TOM have been used in samples of nurseries and have received positive evaluations from nursery practitioners (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007). Practitioners talk about
noticing the fine details and nuances of interactions that they had previously missed. However, the adaptation and application of TOM, as an observation method inspired by Froebelian principles, has not so far been formally evaluated in nurseries and it is therefore difficult to promote it.

Inspiration for the approach and development of TOM can be traced back, through the work of Susan and Nathan Isaacs to Froebel’s own observational narratives. Kevin Brehony has argued that in Froebel’s writing, knowledge from observation always came second to ‘rational knowledge’ (Brehony, 2009: 592) (‘rationalism’ referring to the belief that philosophical reasoning is more important than empirical observation (ibid: 586)). Nevertheless, there is no doubting the inspirational impact of Froebel’s direct observations, particularly evident in the observations made by Susan Isaacs and drawing on both philosophical and empirical disciplines:

So Isaacs was in no way a conventional infant school teacher. She was also a philosopher, a psychologist, and a practicing psychoanalyst. All of these perspectives contribute to the richness of what she saw and the strength and depth of her understanding.

(Drummond, 2000)

Burman, in a reappraisal of Susan Isaacs’ legacy, says something similar:

Susan Isaacs was that rare blend of many professions: a teacher, a childhood researcher and a psychoanalyst.

(Burman, 2011: 211)

Certainly, Isaacs was not afraid to respond to children’s ideas or to record their outcomes:

14.7.25. The rabbit had died in the night. Dan found it and said, “It’s dead – its tummy does not move up and down now.” Paul said, “My daddy says that if we put it into water, it will get alive again.” Mrs. I. said, “Shall we do so and see?” They put it into a bath of water. Some of them said, “It is alive.” Duncan said, “If it floats, it’s dead, and if it sinks, it’s alive.” It floated on the surface. One of them said, “It’s alive because it’s moving.” This was a circular movement, due to the currents in the water. Mrs. I. therefore put in a small stick which also moved round and round, and they agreed that the stick was not alive. They then suggested that they should bury the rabbit, and all helped to dig a hole and bury it.

(Drummond, 2000).

Naturalistic observation has thus evolved, from the beautiful baby observations undertaken by Froebel, through the uncompromising attention to detail of Isaacs, to contemporary psychoanalytically informed observation methods such as TOM. Alvarez illustrates the power of these methods and shows what TOM could contribute to perceptions of babies and young children in nursery practice:

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)
Research questions, objectives, methods and data analysis

The proposal was for a pilot study to develop TOM, as a pedagogic practice, for use in nursery contexts. In its current form developed over the last 60 years at the Tavistock, observers learn about infant development by observing once a week, for around an hour, over a period of one to two years.

This is clearly not practicable for nursery practitioners. The aim therefore was to adapt TOM to comprise 2 to 4 shorter observations of 20 to 30 minutes each. The research posed two central Research Questions and four objectives. The research questions concerned how practitioners in different kinds of nursery might evaluate the practical demands of introducing and using an adapted form of TOM within their nursery setting and what they might say about what contribution they thought TOM made to assessing children’s thinking and learning and strengthening interactions with children. The work has now been completed by the team of three researchers (Peter Elfer, Jools Page and Sue Greenfield) and has been published so that the details of the practitioners views and feelings is fully reported (Elfer, 2017).