The experiences and pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices of students at Froebel College

Kate Hoskins, Sue Smedley

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This research used a life history interviewing approach to understand what was specific about child centred Froebelian training in the 1950s and 1960s at Froebel College. It explored how we can develop and nurture teachers committed to Froebelian ideals and values for teaching and early years education in the future. In meeting these aims, the project data explored the possibilities and challenges associated with taking a Froebelian pedagogic approach in early years settings. The research interrogated the educational experiences of a small cohort of students who attended Froebel College in the 1950s and 1960s to consider how these experiences impacted on their pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices.

The project data highlighted the participants’ perceptions of the importance and distinctive features of child centred learning. The data has also examined how to protect and extend Froebelian philosophy in practice and to reflect on the value of doing so.

The project considered how contemporary education policy could further utilise Froebelian ideals and values in terms of teacher training and early childhood education provision in the UK. Dissemination of the findings to academics and practitioners has the potential to directly influence pedagogic practice.

This qualitative study explored the participants’ lived experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) from their perspectives. Qualitative methods enabled exploration of the participants’ experiences of Froebelian training and of enacting Froebelian education philosophy in a range of early years settings. The primary research tool was interviews informed by a biographical life history method. This method involved conducting semi-structured interviews comprised of open ended questions to see how the participants ‘subjectively remember and understand significant events of their lives’ (Rubin and Babbie, 2009: 220). Taking a life history approach provided participants with the space to discuss the issues important to them, within the context of the wider topic under investigation.

* This research was given a small grant from the Froebel trust. Research team: Dr Kate Hoskins, Professor Kevin Brehony and Dr Sue Smedley. During the development of this research Kevin Brehony knew that he was seriously ill and so was unable to see the project through to completion. Kate Hoskins valued Sue Smedley’s input as a researcher on the project.
The research complied with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) revised ethical guidelines; the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) ethical guidelines; and the University of Roehampton’s (2011) ethical guidelines. The ethical concerns relating to conducting qualitative interviews included issues of confidentiality and anonymity in terms of protecting the participants’ identities and obtaining informed consent. Participants were made aware that they could choose to withdraw and or not answer questions during the research process. All of the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed to allow for thorough and rigorous data coding and analysis. The transcripts enabled identification of patterns within the sample and to construct accounts of the participants’ experiences of their education and subsequent professional practice. The initial coding of the data was informed by Strauss’s (1987) (see also Strauss and Corbin, 1990) techniques and enabling identification of emergent thematic data categories and concepts.

**Froebel participant demographics table**

The plan was to access and interview 12 participants. However, in the process of conducting the interviews, because data saturation occurred after 9 participants were interviewed, no more were sought. The sample details are set out in Table 27.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudo-nym</th>
<th>Social class</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Private/state schooling</th>
<th>Mother’s occupation</th>
<th>Father’s occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Small girls’ school in the country – formerly a private school</td>
<td>Full time mother and housewife and then a Teacher</td>
<td>Medical masseur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Girls’ secondary grammar school (primary not mentioned)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Army then teacher then head teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Private boarding school</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Private primary school and girls’ grammar secondary school</td>
<td>Housewife and mother</td>
<td>Lecturer in Botany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Independent school</td>
<td>Voluntary and charity work and full time mother</td>
<td>Underwriter, Lloyds London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Independent girls’ school</td>
<td>Nurse/nanny/ then full time mother</td>
<td>Ran the family coal business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Una</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Private primary Grammar secondary</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The experiences and pedagogical beliefs

Key findings

The data has provided fascinating life history insights into the participants’ family background and experiences of training at Froebel College and their subsequent career journeys. The key findings are organised in relation to the research questions that follow.

What was the educational experience of a small cohort of students who attended Froebel College in the 1950s and 1960s?

In addressing this research question, the education legacy of Froebel College was explored and the researchers considered how Froebelian training in the 1950s and 1960s resonated with the participants’ family background, habitus and dispositions in distinctive ways (Bourdieu, 1977). The data shows some similarity in the sample in terms of family backgrounds and private or selective state education pathways. The participants’ similar childhood experiences, which were inflected with accounts of freedom, autonomy and opportunities to engage with nature, reflect a synergy with Froebelian principles and philosophy. The resonance between childhood experiences and the pedagogical approach advocated by Froebel highlights the dispositions they benefitted from within their family milieu. The data support the argument that arriving at Froebel College must have felt like coming home to these women.

All of the women in the sample benefitted from supportive, privileged families where the emphasis was on providing an education for girls that could enable them to have a respectable career, and teaching fitted the bill. The family habitus and dispositions reported here evidenced a strong middle class orientation with an emphasis on informed support and enabling educational opportunities.

The data reveal a gendered story around the growing acceptance of women obtaining paid employment. The participants were assisted by the historical context in terms of the social and political landscapes that framed their early years and educations, in particular the liberal and progressive landscape that slowly began to emerge after the Second World War. Whilst their experiences were arguably circumscribed by gender ideology about the appropriate and suitable forms of education for a girl, their privileged class backgrounds gave the majority of them the opportunity to pursue a high status, reified education and subsequent professional career not available to many working class girls.

How did these experiences impact their pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices?

The women’s narratives were explored as Froebelian student teachers and their remembered constructions of their experiences. Using an analytical framework underpinned by theories of

<table>
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<th>Father’s occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>Attended state primary until 8 then private until left school</td>
<td>Full time housewife</td>
<td>Bank Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>White, British</td>
<td>State school until 8 followed by C of E direct grant grammar school</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>Research chemist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
identity and language (Bakhtin, 1986; Britzman, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), their stories are shown to shed light on the women’s engagement with and commitment to Froebelian ideas (1885, 1887, 1896a) and their sense of identifying with what the college stood for.

The women’s stories illustrate a version of professionalism, located in time, place and culture, which incorporates contradictory elements of self-belief and self-effacement. In reflecting on their identities as Froebelians, their stories enact an understanding of politics and advocacy which demonstrates professional autonomy.

Unexpectedly, their stories also show some difficulties with articulating Froebelian principles, and instead express an emotional attachment. That emotional engagement, rather than being seen as an inadequacy, is argued to be a central strand in developing a hopeful, motivating and enabling professional workforce. Such a workforce is all the more important today, in the light of current increasing statutory pressures towards performativity, regulation and control in early childhood education and care.

The work has been disseminated in the following publications and conference presentations:

Bibliography


