How do twenty-first century teacher trainees connect their practice to Froebel’s pedagogic principles?

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The case study presented in this chapter was grant funded by The Froebel Trust. It examines how contemporary teacher trainees at the University of Roehampton, London’s Froebel College have supported and questioned their practice in relation to Froebelian principles. Coursework (2011–15) from 33 teacher trainees in the early childhood specialism of the BA Primary Education course (that leads to Qualified Teacher Status in England) is used to tell the story, in the words of contemporary teacher trainees, of modern connections to the pioneering legacy of Froebel in the twenty-first century.

Friedrich Froebel’s educational principles were the basis of the founding of the Froebel Educational Institute (FEI), established in 1892 in London (Weston, 2002). Froebel College (part of the University of Roehampton) is a centre for early childhood teacher training and more recently for students interested in early childhood studies from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

Looking at contemporary teacher trainees’ articulations of pedagogy can help thinking about how Froebel’s educational ideas have been interpreted in modern times, giving a tool for considering how Froebelian principles might have currency today. The first author of this chapter (Suzanne) was the tutor for the module from which the data for this chapter is drawn. The second author (Lucy) did not teach on the module, was a PhD student at the University at the time of the research study, and joined the project to assist in data analysis and writing. Findings from an earlier phase of this project have been published elsewhere (Flannery Quinn and Parker, 2016).
Early childhood pedagogy and practice in the BA primary programme at the University of Roehampton (2011–2015)

From 2011–2015 early years specialist teacher trainees learned about the historical context of Froebel's ideas through lectures, readings and access to the Froebel Archive. They were introduced to principles and practices of early care and education that have been derived from Froebel's legacy, such as the importance of recognising the unity of a child's experiences with nature, self and spirit; the essential qualities of play; and the need to engage in teaching and learning activities that are first-hand, relevant and enjoyable for children and teachers. Trainees also gained an appreciation for the practical and symbolic value of Froebel's Gifts and Occupations through hands-on activities.

Froebel's legacy forms the foundation of the early childhood specialist module that the students take in their second year, and from this foundation, students also think about a range of pedagogic ideas, with lectures on a range of pedagogic themes:

- Pedagogy of Unity: Froebelian principles (readings from Bruce, 2012a; Froebel, 1826b, 1912, 1887)
- Pedagogy of purpose & belonging: Relationships (readings from Dunn, 1993, 2004; Elfer and Selleck, 2011)
- Pedagogy of play (readings from Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 2005)
- Pedagogy of place: Contexts and identities (readings from Carter, 2007; Edwards et al, 1998; Read, 2007; Ruitenberg, 2005)
- Pedagogy of nature (readings from Bruce, 2012a; Froebel, 1826b, 1912; Maynard, 2007; Tovey, 2007)
- Pedagogy of heart: Advocacy and courage (readings from Freire, 1970/2000; Moss, 2007)

As part of their overall programme, trainees take modules in subject area teaching related to the National Curriculum in England, undertaking school based teaching experience of approximately eight weeks in nursery or primary schools in London. They learn about current practice, including the guidelines of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 in England, as well as local policies and practices with regard to early education. The teaching experience occurs mid-way through the academic year, so that trainees begin their module work at the university in the autumn for approximately five weeks, have a school placement for eight weeks in the winter and then return to the university to continue work in the module for the spring term.

The assessment for the early childhood specialist module in year 2 is designed to help trainees make connections between coursework at the university and practical school placements, with a focus on pedagogy and practice. The assignment for the module is the construction of pedagogic documentation panels that include six photographs and approximately 2000 words of narrative writing displayed on 2 pages of A4 (poster sized) card. The content of these panels is related to any learning situation that the trainees have experienced in their school placement that they have decided to document and reflect upon for the purpose of enriching their own understanding of their pedagogic values and practices. The photographs trainees use come from their own teaching experiences, only when permission has been granted from the children, the schools
and the parents and guardians of the children. Many of the photographs are not of persons, but of the learning environment or materials.

The assessment is embedded into the pedagogic approach of the teaching on the module (Holly, 1986), with support from the module tutor. In the autumn term, the trainees learn about pedagogic documentation in the lectures and seminars, using the techniques in their school placements in the winter, and continuing to refine the development of their pedagogic documentation panels in the spring during the taught sessions at the university. In the spring term, the tutor works with the trainees to facilitate discussion about pedagogy and practice, using the photographs and examples of pedagogy that will be part of the documentation panels. The tutor also helps the trainees make sense of their experiences in relation to academic literature, particularly the module readings. Trainees are encouraged to undertake research and reading on the focus of their documentation once they have decided what it will be.

The pedagogic documentation panels help trainees tell the story of a learning situation and relate this to their pedagogic beliefs, reflecting upon and articulating their pedagogy. The rationale for this practice is that:

> documentation serves as a mirror because what we choose to document reveals and reflects back to us what we consider important, as well as helps us to see ourselves as educators within the educational relationship. (Tarr, 2010: 12)

With this in mind, an examination of these documentation panels can give a glimpse of how contemporary teacher trainees experience their teaching placements, how they articulate their pedagogy, how they question practice, and how they support their ideas and develop their understanding with references to academic literature. This is aligned with the marking criteria for the students.

**The method of the current inquiry**

In order to gain an understanding of how Froebelian principles are articulated in the contemporary context of early years teacher training at the University of Roehampton, panels examined the pedagogic documentation produced by 33 teacher trainees in their second year of study. All of the teacher trainees whose work was used in this inquiry were made aware of the purpose of the project (Flannery Quinn and Manning, 2013), giving informed consent for analysis of their work for the purpose of the inquiry. They were informed that they had the right to withdraw their participation while data was being collected, but none did. All analysis was completed after marks were submitted to the University exam board, with a clear distinction from the marking process. Careful consideration was given to respect the identities of the participants, with reports from the data using pseudonyms.

Documents were read noting each direct reference to Froebel within the student work. Themes linked to Froebel were identified through recurring topics and themes. Trainees made direct reference to Froebel in 22 of the 33 pedagogic documents that were a part of the sample. References to other sources also occurred throughout the work, often reflecting the reading list for the module, and the references used in the lectures. It is worth noting that other common references to approaches to early education were related to the Reggio Emilia approach, the pedagogic theorist Lev Vygotsky, developmental scientist Jean Piaget, and to the concept of Sustained Shared Thinking (with reference to Iram Siraj-Blatchford). It is important to consider how Froebel’s ideas resonate with a range of theoretical perspectives in the pedagogic...
articulations of these teacher trainees. Excerpts selected illustrate how trainees made reference to Froebel (through both primary and secondary sources) and how these references stand alongside and overlap with other academic literature and references to the statutory curriculum in England.

The stories of contemporary trainees: connections to Froebel

A selection from the student narratives offers a glimpse of the way contemporary teacher trainees make connections to Froebel, but also how Froebel’s ideas are used sometimes as justifications for pedagogical decision making and at other times to raise questions about contemporary practices.

Froebelian concepts that overlap and clash with contemporary discourses on play and child development: uncovering some paradoxes

Agnes’ teaching experience was in a nursery class. For her documentation project, she presented a series of photographs documenting her pedagogical decisions and values related to what she sub-titled as: outdoor learning, active learning, learning through play, and the learning environment. In the section she titled learning through play, she reflected on her experience with children using a variety of open-ended learning materials. She captioned a photograph of the children playing with a variety of open-ended materials with a quote from Froebel about play, and about the experience, she wrote:

‘Play, then, is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child’s soul’ (Froebel, 1826). I agree with Froebel that play allows children to express themselves. If they find it hard to verbally or physically express themselves then they may be able to find this in their play. I find that children’s self-initiated play allows them to learn through trial and error . . .’

(Agnes)

Agnes’ narrative shows us that she is thinking about Froebelian principles with regard to the value of play. She justifies play as a means to help children to express themselves. The connections she makes between play and expression are made through the concept of ‘learning through play’ and the open-ended materials that were provided in the nursery. She justifies the use of the resources, which she understands might not be something all practitioners would value. In her passage, she alludes to the Piagetian concept of schema in her passage, without a specific
Twenty-first century teacher trainees

reference, and without a clear indication of her understanding of the concepts related to that particular theoretical perspective. Here we see Piaget’s constructivist perspective overlapping with Froebel’s ideas about play. References to Piagetian concepts as well as Froebel’s ideas was not uncommon throughout the sample.

Other overlaps with child development theory occurred, particularly in reference to Vygotsky’s pedagogic ideas. In a documentation of a cooking project, Aisha writes about helping the children to make connections and learning through social interactions. She makes direct reference to Vygotsky and Manning’s article about Froebel (a module reading) in the following passage:

As a teacher I would like my class to have a sense of security and belonging when they are in our classroom. They should be able to feel comfortable to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings with their friends, peers and adults within the class. (Read, 2007) The children would also be encouraged to use their knowledge to think critically and would be given many opportunities to do this, I would also like this to lead them into making connections. Children will be encouraged to identify these connections using the scaffolding technique. This promotes the ideas that we learn through social interactions and that children can be encouraged to reach the next level of attainment with the support of a more knowledgeable other. This is an essential role for a teacher as they must guide the children through activities which may lead to linking their experiences (Vygotsky, 1978; Manning, 2005).

(Aisha)

Aisha is justifying her practice of involving a group of children in a hands-on cooking activity by explaining that the children will benefit from social interactions. She also acknowledges that it is important for teachers to get to know learners, so that they can provide ‘efficient’ support, as she explains:

Froebel identified key principles to take into account when children are developing. ‘He emphasized children’s uniqueness in their learning styles; their ability to learn through play; their need to construct meaning from the objects they manipulate; and the idea of using adult guidance to aid in a child’s discovery and learning’ (Manning, 2005: 373). This supports the idea of knowing your class as individual learners so that you can identify the learning style best for them and efficiently support them within their education. It is also essential to combine all the principles therefore the children can work to their best of their ability and progress in their physical, emotional and intellectual skills at a steady rate.

(Aisha)

Aisha’s narrative reveals how, in her mind, Froebel’s principles sit alongside current ideas for children to make ‘progress at a steady rate’ which were discourses within the version of the EYFS that was in place at the time she wrote her narrative, and are still prevalent in the current version (DfE, 2012, 2017a). The pressures of accountability and school readiness that underlie the notion of efficient support of children are not examined by this trainee. This is a topic of current interest within the field that is gaining attention and momentum (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). In her documentation, Aisha presents a paradox: she writes about the importance of getting to know children because they are unique, and the role of the adult is to provide guidance to aid in the child’s discoveries, ideas she attributes to Froebel (citing Manning, 2005), yet she suggests that getting to know the children as learners will help them to progress at a steady rate – not because
relationships are important in their own right, nor because learning things or having meaningful experiences (such as cooking) might be valuable in their own right, for the children. However, in her documentation panel, she has not considered this as a paradox.

Not all of the trainees left these issues unconsidered. Jasmine’s documentation raised critical questions about contemporary practice in her placement, and in her narrative, we see Jasmine using Froebelian principles to justify her critical position in relation to the constraints of current practice. Describing an arts-based activity she had planned for children in a Key Stage 1 class, during which the children made masks and painted them, she wrote:

Unfortunately, I was restricted in terms of how I was expected to deliver the experience to the children. Rather than providing them with an open ended task, full of choice, experimentation and pleasure, I was instructed to ensure that the children only took part in small groups of five at a time, using only one colour and while quiet to ensure that the other children could take part in a different activity on the carpet uninterrupted. I failed, and still do fail, to understand why these limitations were in place and what purpose they had. When attempting to identify the positive outcomes of this experience I felt conflicted, as I found it so difficult to classify these. I therefore considered the basic aims of the lesson in terms of the Primary National Curriculum (2013), which states that as a result of art and design, children should be taught ‘to use drawing, painting and sculpture to develop and share their ideas, experiences and imagination’ (DfE, 2013b: 177). Subsequently, although the children were previously given opportunities to share their ideas, I believe that the confines of the classroom have taken away from the true aim of the lesson and feel that this became a restrictive, as opposed to an enabling, environment. I feel the children would have thrived from a more playful experience which would have allowed them to explore their individual ideas within an environment which appreciated and encouraged complete imagination and creativity, through the use of any materials and resources that they felt fit. In support of this, Duffy (2006) confirms the innate human need for creation and cites Froebel (1826) who ‘associated creativity and imagination with the inner life of a child’ (Duffy, 2006: 4). If the necessity of creation and imagination within practice are therefore given profound significance, then why are they not always advocated within settings?’

(Jasmine)

Jasmine’s narrative demonstrates how she was able to develop a line of questioning regarding contemporary practice by drawing on Froebel’s ideas, as interpreted by Duffy (2006). She went on to acknowledge that the pressures on schools come from the broader systems that operate as means of ensuring accountability. To explain this, she draws on Bronfenbrenner’s Human Ecological Framework (1979), suggesting that as a teacher, she is working within a system of ‘people, services and beliefs that have an undoubtable (and negative) influence on an individual’ (Jasmine).

Froebelian concepts that nurture a valuing of nature: strong currency in a time of looming environmental crisis

Many of the trainees gave examples of deep reflection upon practice in relation to outdoor learning and experiences in nature, which are ideas that resonate with Froebel’s original writings, as well as interpretations of Froebel in contemporary practice. This is illustrated in Gaile’s narrative:

Froebel questions ‘why does man; wandering through the gardens and fields, meadows and groves, fail to open his mind, refuse to listen to the lesson which
nature silently teaches us?’ (Elfer 1912b: 33). On reflection, his ideas have made me realise that we take nature for granted and really do not spend enough time exploring and learning about the world we live in. Maynard points out that nowadays this is due to busy lifestyles, safety worries and increased time spent on electronic games (2007). Children are missing out on ‘being’ children and the outdoor environment gives them the chance to express themselves as well as providing health and developmental benefits. It is therefore part of my pedagogy to make sure I provide opportunities for children to get outside where they can engage in active learning, thus allowing them time to investigate and explore using their senses. This means taking lessons outside as it ‘offers the space and greater degree of freedom to try things out, to explore and experiment without the constraints associated with an indoor environment’ (Tovey, 2007: 13) as well as allowing for free play. Like Froebel, I believe the freedom to explore and play games in the outdoors is vital (Bruce, 2012a). It allows me as a teacher to see children in a different light, providing me with opportunities to plan and extend learning, and not restricting outdoor opportunities to play times and PE lessons.

Similarly, Gretchen writes about her placement experience in a school that is close to a major airport. In the introduction to her documentation she writes about the community ethos of the school and how they came together to protest the construction of a third runway at the airport that would compromise the village that the school serves. In her narrative writing, she also makes connections to the values she has for the outdoors and also with links to discussions we had in the group dialogue sessions about our pedagogic documents at the university. She writes:

Froebel believed that children not only need to feel a sense of unity within their family and community, but also with the universe (Bruce, 2012a). Froebel spent a lot of time in his garden when growing up, and saw the majesty of nature when studying forestry and this is most likely the reason why he holds unity with the universe so highly (Bruce, 2012a). I was posed the question [in the group dialogue session] ‘do you think of yourself as someone who lives inside and goes out or are you someone who is living outside that goes in?’ I had never really thought about this before but realised that it was a sad prospect that as human beings we live in an awe-inspiringly huge world and yet I spend most of it confined within 4 walls that are usually no longer than 7 meters each. I realised that it was my early home and school life that had conditioned me to be an inside person, neglecting the beautiful nature that was all around me ... in the 21st century when global warming is in the headlines at least once a week, I think we need to support children to develop a unity with nature so they feel compelled to look after the earth in years to come.

These examples demonstrate how nature and outdoor learning experiences are powerful pedagogical tools of reflection for the trainees. These ideas are rooted in Froebelian principles, but have also found resonance throughout history in Pioneers such as Rachel and Margaret McMillan, whose work intersected with the Froebel movement in England in the early twentieth century. What is equally powerful about the notion of nature and the outdoor environment, is that most of the teacher trainees saw outdoor practice (or at least the provision of outdoor spaces) in the schools that they worked with. Lyne describes the provision in her placement with great enthusiasm, writing:

My placement made good use of their outdoor environment and had fantastic resources and facilities for the children. There was a large field with lots of trees and a sensory garden
which the children loved spending time in. This links to Froebel as he believed the key aspect in kindergarten was the ‘garden’ which was evident from the kindergarten in Blankenburg which was surrounded by lots of green and countryside providing opportunities for direct observation of the natural world (Bruce, 2012a). When planning activities and setting up the outdoor environment I provided a range of different resources for the children to use which encouraged opportunities ‘for gross motor play, for investigations, for gardening and using much of the equipment from indoors’. During their time in the outdoor environment they were able to make choices as to what equipment/resources they would like to explore and who they wished to play/work with. ‘Children need opportunities to experience a wide range of activities, to play alone and with others, to be private, to be active, to make choices and decisions for themselves’.

We can see that Lyne was pleased to find generous outdoor provision, which she links to Froebel’s kindergarten in Blankenburg. She goes on to explain how she was able to make pedagogic decisions in her planning for a range of activities in the outdoors. Similarly, Rana draws on Bruce’s beautiful articulations of the value of adventurous play. In her documentation panel, under the sub-heading of ‘making the outer – inner’ Rana wrote:

One of the benefits of the nursery environment provided was open-ended access to the outdoor environment. This allowed the children to embrace the environment as a whole for ‘challenging, adventurous play [that is] flexible, open-ended, provocative and rich in potential for exploration, discovery, imagination and wonder, [. . .] which allowed the opportunity for children to experience uncertainty and unpredictability to venture further than they have gone before and create their own voyages of discovery’ (Bruce, 2012a).

Rana went on to explain that using the documentation as a tool for reflection, she has identified that she wants to develop her own outdoor pedagogy more so that she can promote children’s growth ‘emotionally and academically’. In her documentation, Coline used a photograph of the large outdoor space that was available for the children to use throughout the day, with a large vegetable garden and propagators for starting plants. She explained that she values nature and the outdoors, and found nature and outdoor learning to be an attractive aspect of teaching work, which she links to Froebel. She wrote:

Nature has a large influence to my personal life as I love to be out interacting with nature when I was a child both at school and at home. Also this links with Froebel whose work I admire and am able to understand due to my own experiences and beliefs which match. Providing I am professional at all times there is no reason why I cannot bring my personal experiences as a learner with nature into the classroom and share with the children.

Coline’s narrative also gives us a glimpse at her thinking with regard to wanting to be a professional, and being able to blend the personal and the professional. Issues of the personal and the professional in early childhood teaching work, particularly for women, have been issues of debate and concern since Froebel’s time (Allen, 1982, 1988; Read, 2003) and continue today (Elfer, 2012b; Page, 2011; Taggart, 2011).
Parts of a whole? using Froebelian principles to justify and question contemporary practices

Our look at contemporary teacher trainees’ articulations of pedagogy can help us to think about how Froebel’s educational ideas have been interpreted in modern times, and can give us a tool for considering how Froebelian principles might have currency today.

I consider my pedagogy to be a collection of individual values, like pieces of a puzzle. These principles fit together in order to establish the whole.

(Sally)

Our inquiry has highlighted some of the contemporary issues that early childhood teacher trainees at the university of Roehampton’s Froebel College identify as linked to Froebelian Principles. As in our first study, we find topics of play, the natural environment and unity and connectedness to continue to be used in relation to Froebel (Flannery Quinn and Parker, 2016). In this chapter, we have also highlighted how references to Froebel also sit alongside more contemporary pedagogic theories (such as Vygotsky’s) and developmental sciences (such as Piaget). This is not surprising, as these are components of the contemporary teacher training programme, and could be thought of as the ‘pieces of the puzzle’ that Sally describes in her pedagogic metaphor. These are pieces of a puzzle that seem to fit together well, to help trainees articulate and justify their pedagogy. The puzzle of pedagogy is not a simple one. As Jasmine explained,

In terms of my pedagogy, . . . I have uncovered the apparent pressures that factors such as culture, government, society and professional expectations have had on my practice and the unfortunate negative implications this has resulted in, on my ability to demonstrate and apply aspects of my pedagogy. . . . [I see how] pressures from the wider environment are restricting my ability to apply my pedagogy and constraining me to include features of restrictive practice that I do not support. The [pedagogy] that I, and possibly other practitioners, are trying to use in order to establish effective practice is therefore hindered by the educational targets and professional expectations.

(Jasmine)

Teachers and teacher educators might ask themselves how they can help trainees and experienced teachers like Jasmine to resist the hindrances of both educational targets and professional expectations that are causing her to engage in ‘restrictive practices’ that do not support the creativity and imagination of the inner life of the child that she associates with her own thinking on effective practice, and attributes to Froebel’s ideas.

Pressures of accountability, educational targets and professional expectations are not new problems, and we cannot be so bold as to suggest that Froebel’s pedagogic principles alone could help teachers or trainees to resist what they perceive to be restrictive practices. However, we believe it is fair to suggest that Froebelian principles, as a component of a meaningful teacher training programme, with time and space to contemplate historical perspectives (considering the past, present and future), can give tools to teacher trainees to help them think through these puzzling complexities.
Part IV

Sustaining and handing on the Froebelian approach to early childhood education in ways fit for purpose in a variety of cultural contexts across the world

Part IV introduction

And where similar minded persons meet in similar endeavour, and their hearts find each other, then either the work already begun by one is extended or the work begun by one becomes a common work.

(Froebel, 1887: 107)

Part IV acknowledges some of the Froebelians taking forward Froebelian practice. This includes those working in colleges, schools, networks or as practitioner orientated authors. Each generation of Froebelians since the 1900s (Hadow, 1933) has needed to find its own ways of expressing what feels to be important in early childhood practice. Since the global spread of Froebelian work from Germany, the original Froebelian language has been used both negatively to constrain practice and positively to illuminate it. In the UK currently there is developing resurgent use of the original Froebelian language but it is used diffractively so that it encounters obstacles and challenges, necessitating turns and jolts, as well as finding hidden and lost treasures deserving of attention and causing useful opportunities for developments in both practice and research work. Whilst there are no simple answers in early childhood practice, key messages are present in the Froebelian approaches of today across the world. These will be gathered together in Part V for the consideration of policy makers in particular.