The Froebel networking tradition and kitchen seminars

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Froebel networks

This year’s “Froebel Networks Gathering” continues a long tradition of networking amongst Froebelians in the UK which can trace its origins back to the formation of the Froebel Society in 1874. Miss Beata Doreck held a meeting at her house in November of that year ‘to bring into communication all who are occupied or otherwise interested in Kindergarten work, and to extend a knowledge of the system both in its theory and in its practice’. The following month The Froebel Society for the Promotion of the Kindergarten System formally opened for membership. Earlier that year, Beata Doreck had been elected, jointly with Francis Mary Buss, as first female Fellow of the College of Preceptors, itself being founded some two decades earlier as the first professional body for teachers, pioneering formal training and examinations for the teaching workforce. The newly formed Froebel Society was closely connected with the College of Preceptors, sharing its facilities for meetings as well as many of its members who were leading proponents of the Kindergarten System. Like the College of Preceptors too, the Society was determined to set up professional training in the kindergarten approach and in 1887 created the National Froebel Union to be the examining body of the newly introduced kindergarten training. In 1900 the Society moved into its own premises, adjacent to the College of Preceptors, at 4 Bloomsbury Square, London. The Society listed the methods by which it hoped to achieve its aims, to include lectures, public meetings, publications, specimen illustrations of kindergarten work, a register of kindergarten teachers, the establishment of a model kindergarten, and the formation of training classes. It also established its role as a ‘membership’ body, through subscription, for all those interested in the promotion of the approach, communicating with its members through the publication of a Journal which, from 1891 to 1939, was entitled Child Life. Acknowledging the independence of the views of its members, the Society recorded in its minutes that Child Life was to be a ‘medium of communication’ among the subscribers of the Froebel Society, ‘but’, it added, ‘the journal is in no other sense the organ of the Society.’

The Society reunited with the Froebel Union in 1938, becoming the National Froebel Foundation. Membership remained strong until the beginning of the 1960s, when NFF examined...
teaching courses were replaced by a new mandatory three-year teacher training syllabus with no separate NFF input. NFF Certificates were gradually withdrawn from 1962, and in 1975 the last NFF examined certificate was awarded in Manchester. No longer having a responsibility for approving syllabi, setting examinations and issuing teacher’s certificates and, consequently, the loss of new teachers referring to themselves as ‘Froebel trained’, the organisation ceased publication of its journal in Autumn 1974 and in November 1975, the Governors of the National Froebel Foundation held their final meeting, the charity’s affairs being handed over to a Board of Trustees.

However with the resurgence of interest in Froebelian Education over the last 15 years, and the reintroduction of ‘Froebel training’, through Certificate courses at Edinburgh and Roehampton, the NFF trustees re-established its founding role to ‘bring into communication’ practitioners and others interested in Froebelian education through a new e-Network and an e-Newsletter, the Froebel Network. However, in 2012, the Trustees of the NFF resolved to amalgamate the charity with the Froebel Educational Institute (FEI), forming a new charity, The Froebel Trust. In order to maintain the momentum of the practitioner Network, the former Trustees of the NFF agreed that the Froebel Network should continue as an independent organisation.

The Froebel Network therefore continues its role as a membership organisation for all those interested in Froebelian education in the UK, providing its members with the opportunity to stay in touch, share news, training opportunities and conferences and to promote good practice. The Network keeps in touch by email through a newsletter and interim updates and also has a growing Facebook community.

**Participation in networks of Froebelian communities of practice: the Froebel Kitchen seminars**

From 2008, a group of headteachers, advisory staff and University tutors were invited to join Froebel Kitchen seminars at the home of Tina Bruce, encouraged by Maurice Craft and visited by the then Chair of the Froebel Trust, William McIntyre. These gatherings were attended in a sustained way such that a cohesive group emerged, whose members have become active in the Froebel Network and its widely disseminated newsletter with a commitment to looking at the legacy of Friedrich Froebel in the context of its practical implications today. Some helped Tina Bruce in developing the syllabus and practical aspects of delivery of the short Froebel courses. Several trained subsequently as Froebel Trust Travelling Tutors (see Chapter 38).

It has been heartening to see other groups of this kind developing in different parts of the country. It needs people who are committed to exploring Froebelian work today and taking it forward appropriately. Sharing food has been an important element as well as the preparation in advance of the person who has agreed to lead a session on some aspect of Froebelian approach. Those who attend say it helps them because it provides a space in which to think, be challenged, rearrange assumptions which do not hold fast when reflected upon, be reaffirmed in ways which bring progress in practice, articulate the often hidden and buried Froebelian thoughts that the group members hold deep inside them but cannot easily articulate or may not even be aware that they hold. It helps members of Froebelian communities of learning to realise what they know, think and feel and to bring their knowledge and understanding to a more explicit, better articulated level, with more awareness and clarity about their thinking and feelings on what helps children to flourish as they develop and learn. They are then better at leading and tutoring colleagues in exploring Froebelian approaches to education.
The roots of the Kitchen seminars: the centre for early childhood studies

The Kitchen seminars arose from the earlier tradition of study days established in the mid-1980s by Tina Bruce and Greg Condry at the Froebel College, now part of the University of Roehampton. They founded and directed, with the encouragement of the Principal, Gill Redford and the Dean of the School of Education, Professor Marten Shipman, the Centre for Early Childhood Studies. This offered programmes which prepared professional people for work with young children and encouraged personal and academic growth. The College prospectus, Froebel Education Today (circa 1985) states its specific purpose was, ‘to act as guardian and critic of Froebel’s educational philosophy’.

Students of the Centre were introduced to Froebelian principled practice informed by current theory and research. They were encouraged towards an awareness and understanding of the importance of historical developments in early childhood learning which included the work of Froebel, whilst taking account of the central issues in the field today. The Archive was housed in the Centre, which was later located within the University of Roehampton Special Collections, where it continues to provide specialist resources for the study of the history of Froebelian education and care for young children (see Chapter 3). An example is documentation and photographs of the Redford House Workplace Nursery for staff and students of the University and Queen Mary Hospital, which offer examples of good practice.

Students of postgraduate and undergraduate studies on initial teacher training or qualified professionals on INSET courses could join certificate, diploma and higher degree courses in early Childhood Studies. Tutors maintained links with overseas universities and colleges and hosted visits from students and experts. The Centre was committed to a programme of developing research and the Froebel Nursery Blockplay Collaborative Research Study (see Chapter 13) was an example of this which continues to influence practice today.

For several years, five evening lectures per year were arranged at a low cost, working with the National Children’s Bureau (NCB). Two were at the NCB and three at the Froebel College. About 250 people attended each seminar. Study days on Saturdays were organised for the benefit of past in-service students and the wider community. A crèche was provided.

The Kitchen Seminars were a continuation of these traditions. The Edinburgh Froebel Network (see Chapter 35) is a flourishing current example of the combined approach of conferences, Froebel courses, follow-up master classes, study days and collaborative development projects.

Long live networks!

In 2015, the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities was invited by the Froebel Trust’s Education Committee to undertake an evaluation of the impact of the Froebel Trust-sponsored courses and conferences. As strategic partners of the Froebel Trust, the Universities of Roehampton and Edinburgh and Canterbury Christ Church University offer a range of on-going CPD events including postgraduate certificate or diploma courses and annual conferences (see Chapters 35–37).

The evaluation team analysed feedback from delegates who had attended conferences over many years and completed evaluation forms at the time; they invited responses to a bespoke survey and conducted telephone interviews.
The evaluation showed that these opportunities to network with colleagues were vitally important for sustaining the legacy of earlier generations of Froebelians as well as for introducing current research, generating new concepts and applications for practice and creating a sense of community. These networks were particularly valued for sustaining professional integrity in the context of educational policy directives that were often felt to be at odds with educators’ principles.