A Froebelian journey
From Froebel to Froebel (a reflecting on the Froebel Travelling Tutors pilot course)

Jane Dyke

Introduction
In 1997 I left my Teaching position in a primary school, clutching Tina Bruce’s book *Early Childhood Education,* – and I see, looking back, plagiarising a lot of it – to set up my own Froebelian inspired Yellow Dot Kindergarten with the aim of inspiring potential in our children, team and the environment. The kindergarten was at its roots Froebelian (hence the choice of the name reflected Froebel’s invention of the kindergarten). Sixteen years later I found myself with 10 nursery settings, working hard but feeling something was missing. The outdoor environments were particularly uninspiring and we were struggling with ‘free flow’. I started to read more and look for inspiration visiting nurseries both in England and abroad.

On a *Nursery World* Nordic study tour, sitting on a mini bus with seven other early childhood professionals, I explained that I was looking for the ‘secret’ and that although Yellow Dot is a successful organisation with outstanding and good settings I felt there was something missing. Two of my newly met colleagues in the back of the mini bus looked at each other and then looked at me. ‘There is no secret. The answer is inside you. It needs to be brought out’. I felt as if I was following in the footsteps of Santiago the shepherd boy in *The Alchemist* (Paolo Coelho, 1988), to travel the world only to find the answer is at home. These two women talked to me about my roots and why I had started the Yellow Dot Kindergarten. Their eyes lit up when I told them that I had begun as a Froebelian kindergarten. They announced that I needed to return to my roots. When I told them that I had plagiarised Tina Bruce’s book and even met her at a ‘drinks do’, there was another twinkle in their eyes. Lynne McNair and Jane Whinnett knew Tina Bruce as friend and colleague and a new bond linked us together. We were connected. The following days we talked of Froebel and his principles and I felt inspired and affirmed. We talked about me attending the Froebel certificate course they led at the University of Edinburgh and I talked about them coming and delivering the course to me and my whole team. We left each other at Heathrow airport, new professional friends, linked and connected.

About three months later Tina Bruce contacted me to invite me to be part of the Travelling Froebel Tutors programme of Froebel short courses that she was developing at the request of the Froebel Trust. I could not believe my good fortune (even though I am a great believer in the
Power of Positive Thinking and the Law of Attraction). We arranged for 30 of the Yellow Dot Team to attend the course which was to be taught at Yellow Dot. My Team were intrigued; they were used to me having ideas and changing practice. We are a company that like to be always moving forward. This journey was to be different, although at this point we did not realise this. We are a fast moving, innovative senior team and we were about to embark on a slow cook process, which was to take us out of our comfort zone.

**Some Froebelian messages which quickly made sense to Yellow Dot practitioners**

After our first day’s introduction to Froebel and his Gifts we reflected on our own practice. We were encouraged to think that the Froebel approach is just that, an approach, rather than a method. The Froebelian concept of *Freedom with Guidance* resounded in our ears and resonated in our hearts. Developing play in a rich environment in ways that are meaningful and supportive and which allow children to keep control of their own play dominated our thoughts. The Froebelian approach places a strong emphasis on rich first-hand experience, a challenging, open ended play environment and informed, sensitive adult interaction.

Together with *Freedom with Guidance*, Froebel’s *Forms of Life, Knowledge and Beauty* have been our guide as we have reflected on changes or additions to our practice. We found the Principles easy to empathise with but wanted something more tangible to do. As a result we initially focussed on what we could change!

We chose to look at our nursery environments and declutter and rethink our resources based on the Gifts and Occupations. To be honest we were surprised when we focussed on our resources at how many we had and how uninspiring they were! We asked ourselves how does this resource reflect real life? Is this resource teaching, expanding knowledge, and is it beautiful? Are our resources enabling our children to make choices? Are they open ended? What do our children see when they enter the room? Can they determine what it is they want to do? Is the room cluttered and noisy, competing for attention? We had a big plastic sort out . . . and looked at our resources and how they were being used, if they were being used. We coined the phrase ‘less is more and natural is best’. We did recycle a lot of toys and equipment, some of which we didn’t even know where they had come from! We looked at everything with our new Froebelian eyes . . . thinking Life, Knowledge and Beauty, open ended, natural. We considered how the resources enabled our children to be effective learners. Did the resources underpin the Characteristics of Effective Learning in the English legally framed national *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS)?

Rethinking our environment took time and commitment, and is ongoing, it was not plain sailing as many of our Team were attached to the resources even if our children weren’t! The ‘Management of change’ was soon on the agenda. Thirty of our Senior Team were included on the course but we have a 400-plus team and we needed to rethink our communication to everyone. We soon realised we were going to be doing more than ‘tweaking’ our practice and we needed to involve all of our Practitioners if the change was going to embed. In our nurseries where the Manager was innately Froebelian and understood the principles, change was to be natural and consistent. In other nurseries where the Manager was more of a professional manager rather than a practice manager, change was to be slower and erratic. Initially our Team had thought that only the over threes would be affected by our rethinking our Froebelian pedagogy, and it took time for those practitioners working with the under threes to get on board.
The Gifts

As a result of our initial training we introduced a variety of soft spheres (Gift 1), to the Baby rooms – knitted, crocheted and hand sewn as well as bought! This was followed by hard spheres, based on Froebel’s idea of opposites. We hung spheres within Ikea crates and the children were fascinated by the movement. We went on to introduce ‘natural’ spheres, oranges, apples, grapefruits. The older babies do have a set of small blocks too, as well as packaging for posting etc (tissue boxes are great for this, as are ‘Pringles’ boxes).

With our Toddlers we introduced three-dimensional shapes through packaging and real opportunities for building, stacking, exploring the properties of shapes. Again we also introduced natural shapes particularly in our role play. We started to expand the Froebelian ‘Form of Knowledge’ through using three-dimensional language. To be honest this was a challenge initially for our Team too! ‘Start where the Learning is’ – a Froebelian phrase that we had to learn and relearn as we soon realised that we were moving too fast for sustained change. We needed to give our Team time to learn and develop their Froebelian knowledge and understanding as well as our children.

We found the Froebelian Form of Beauty is tricky when working with Toddlers. However we have seen that they do respond differently to beautifully displayed provocations and can be encouraged (but never forced) to return their play items, when modelled by Practitioners. They seem interested to see adults return things, observing the process initially, rather than participating. By the summer Term all our children (and Team) were into the swing of returning and the nursery had a more Beautiful and organised feel. This however has been quite a strain in September when we have a new cohort and the training has to start again with children and Team!

Block play today has been developed from Froebel’s Gifts 2–6. Froebel’s ‘Gifts’ of boxed sets of small blocks cut and divided in mathematically precise ways, were the original version of today’s larger ‘unit’ blocks and ‘hollow’ blocks. Froebel intended the blocks to be used for children to represent.

Our modern day blocks give lots of opportunities and are made up of a whole unit, half unit, quarter and eighth with blocks then split down the middle and at diagonals. With our over threes we have ensured that they do have correct unit blocks. We were bewildered and frustrated to discover that not all block sets are actually mathematically correct!

Froebel saw the wooden blocks as bringing together all areas of learning. They can promote imagination, creativity and symbolic thinking, mathematical and scientific concepts, understanding of pattern and design, language development, story-telling and singing as adults.
and children create stories and songs around the block creations. During some of our recent Block Play Meetings we have completed observations on someone playing with a set of blocks and the Team involved all agreed that all areas of learning and development could be clearly observed.

Block play has been hugely important in developing the Characteristics of Effective Learning from the English EYFS (curriculum), the ‘how children learn’ areas. Perseverance and concentration, willingness to think and solve problems, to use ideas from experience, be able to modify them and learn from mistakes are all characteristics of learning that have been developed. Similarly children developed sensitivity to others’ needs, a better awareness of their own and others space and an ability to negotiate and make compromises. This self-regulation, the ability to manage difficult emotions and impulses and to think before reacting, is a key Froebelian principle that we are helping our children to develop.

Really rich block play does not just happen; the role of the adult is crucial. Froebel argued that we need a proper understanding of the learning potential of blocks and the developmental aspects of block play. In our nurseries this needed to be facilitated; our Practitioners needed to be given the opportunity to play themselves so that they could appreciate the possibilities!

In a Froebelian approach we should value children’s own play with blocks including recognising and enhancing schemas. We should interact sensitively; carefully observe and tune in to a child’s intentions; actively listen and show interest and respect for children’s constructions rather than instruct, build structures for children to copy or impose adult-designed tasks. As with everything Freedom with Guidance should be applied and clear basic rules be in place so that all children have the freedom to build but do not feel boundaryless and insecure.

Since introducing the Gifts to our children we have noticed a different level of engagement in their play. The block play particularly has become a firm favourite and is in use most of the day. It has been important to get the balance between adult interaction and letting children find things out for themselves. This allows for the adult to model the thinking that goes on behind assembling different structures and use the language associated with block play. Initially we had a mixed reaction from our Team and, to be honest, our accountant, as they are pretty expensive! We needed to reorganise our rooms to allow dedicated space for the blocks. The Froebel training and Top Tips Charts that staff developed have helped the Team to feel more secure and allow the children to develop their play. Returning the blocks to a Form of Beauty was also quite difficult initially and needed to be reinforced with both the Team and the children, with appropriately different strategies for babies and toddlers, where adults model the returning, and toddlers may join in a bit, whereas older children are expected to join in with the adults. Froebel’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of life</th>
<th>Using the blocks to create and represent things and events in the world around them.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forms of beauty</td>
<td>Where the focus is on the appealing quality of the patterns, order, symmetry and look of creations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of knowledge</td>
<td>Exploring mathematical forms and scientific concepts such as shape, size, area, stability, balance, maps, architecture, engineering and storying.</td>
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Figure 39.2 Unit blocks resonate with the original gifts

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principles of unity and respect are key, and as we have begun to embrace them we can see the
difference in our children and our practice.

The Occupations

Helen Tovey’s book, *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*, Chapter 5, ‘Resources
and how they are used’, really inspired us. Helen writes, ‘The Occupations were particularly
important for developing an understanding of two and three dimensional materials, for solving
problems and developing physical skills and for representing, expressing, communicating and
being creative’ (Tovey, 2013: 48).

A Froebelian approach provides a wide range of open ended resources which, if we were
honest, we didn’t really do all of the time! We were excited by the Occupations and keen to
introduce them into our practice.

Reflecting on our practice we found that we were quite erratic with our efforts. Some of
us offered children clay occasionally, probably in November around Diwali and in the summer
term when the children were approaching school age, but there was no continuity of experi-
ence or chance to really develop skills. (Our focus in reality was outcome based rather than open
ended.) Clay and woodwork were certainly not part of our continuous provision. We started by
introducing clay as it is quite cheap to buy and doesn’t need too many extra resources. Froebel’s
Forms provided the framework for our developments.

In relation to the Forms of Life and Knowledge, we talked to the children about where clay
comes from and showed examples of what clay is used for, such as cups, bowls etc. We changed
our role play sets from plastic to china and even went to the New Forest on a coach trip to dig
out our own clay. We encouraged the children to explore the clay through their senses and also
by adding water. We explained how to look after the clay so that we would be able to keep it
and return to it on other occasions with a view to it becoming part of our continuous provision.

![Figure 39.3](image.png)

*Figure 39.3* There is interconnectivity in Froebel’s Forms of Life, Beauty and Knowledge.
Thinking about the Forms of Beauty we introduced other natural objects and explored printing using shells and sticks, making wonderfully detailed prints in the clay.

We introduced wooden parquetry shapes in the Froebelian Occupations, which come from the flat surfaces of three-dimensional shapes. The shapes we chose to introduce were equilateral triangles, right angled triangles, circle, half circle, square and rectangle. Some of our children have found delight in exploring shapes in this way, creating patterns and pictures. Being exposed to the shapes and handling them more consistently has enabled the children to develop their knowledge of the properties of flat two-dimensional shapes and encouraged mathematical language development. Again we needed to ensure that our team were comfortable and familiar with the properties and language associated. Historically our Teams have found mathematical language and concepts a challenge and we have had to work positively with them to develop and promote mathematical language.

Sticks and rings introduced the children to straight or continual lines. With the Forms of Life the children were keen to represent their lives in two-dimensional ways, such as a house, a box, or a star. Scaffolding their learning in this way supports self-esteem as they became more familiar with the physical properties. In relation to the Forms of Knowledge the sticks allow the children to explore mathematical concepts such as addition, subtraction, top, middle, bottom, greater than, less than as well as two-dimensional shapes. In the Forms of Beauty adults role model to the children how to make symmetrical shapes and patterns – how things can be added to and developed or taken away from and developed. The children need time and space in order to develop their ideas and explore their patterns and creations. We found the children would naturally make a square or rectangle frame and then using their new ‘natural resources’ make art work, patterns, pictures. This has now been transferred to the outdoors, where children use sticks found in the garden to make frames and collect leaves and ‘debris’ to create their own art work.

Over some months we decided to create workshops within our kindergartens to include clay, tinkering, woodwork, sewing, as well as the collage, painting, junk modelling etc. These are still a work in progress as we continually reflect and observe our children. Working through the Froebelian principles which complement the Characteristics of Effective Learning in the English EYFS is enabling our children to become much more independent learners. As we observe our children – and let’s face it ‘our work is based on observing children’ (Stella Louis, 27th January 2017) – we are continually assessing where we are and planning where we need to provide further opportunities.

The Occupations have given us a real vehicle to develop skills and learning; they are part of our lives and have given us the opportunity to provide exciting provocations which can develop all areas of the English EYFS.

Recently we took the children to the local recycling centre to find discarded electrical items. The staff at the recycling centre were brilliant with the children and let them have a real good look around. The children were able to collect a good selection of random everyday items to take back to the nursery to take apart and explore!

The Occupations have also seen an influx of parents and grandparents coming in to share and teach our children sewing, knitting, woodwork and crochet skills. The joy for the parent/grandparent and the key person, not to mention the child and their parents, when the child completed a scarf for a doll was immense. The concentration, commitment and determination and sense of achievement were palpable!

We are on a journey and change even good change takes time. Developing practitioners’ knowledge and understanding is key to embedding change. Open ended provocations, providing opportunities for children to persevere and master new skills and knowledge, are exciting
but also exhausting. It requires the team to be fully engaged. Froebel said that ‘Play is never trivial, it is serious’ (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967: 84). Tina Bruce says ‘Children choose to play. It is intrinsically motivated’. (Bruce, 2015c: 60). As we slowly tweak our practice to become more Froebelian our children are becoming more purposeful in their play. The Occupations are giving the children more opportunities to be inventive and imaginative in their play, the opportunity to develop problem solving, reasoning and numeracy as well as physical coordination and how to manage risk safely.

**Froebel’s Mother (family) Songs, Action Songs and Movement Games**

I’d never really thought about where children’s songs had come from; hearing that ‘Pat a cake’ had come from Froebel, who had created the concept of Finger Play, Action Songs and Movement Games, seemed strangely mind blowing. I knew that Nursery Rhymes were important and that Action Songs and Movement Games were all part of ‘good practice’ and the EYFS but I hadn’t really thought about the why and the philosophy behind them. Froebel emphasised the importance of interconnectivity, summarised in the phrase ‘link always link’, and so many of his Mother Songs, Action Songs and Movement Games were connected to nature, occupations and everyday people’s jobs and roles. They were part of children’s everyday lives, giving a continual link to the Forms of Life, Knowledge and Beauty.

This way of thinking about the content of songs we all found interesting and challenging. We had not thought about whether babies, toddlers and young children (who have not experienced real life because they have only been alive for something between a few months and 60 months) might need to know about real things before they can imagine unreal things and play with ideas. Did we really know what our children were singing and listening to in our nurseries and were we really offering educationally worthwhile experiences? Were we linking our learning as Froebel suggested we should? Were we introducing the abstract before children had established sufficient of the real?

We don’t know what we don’t know and nor do our children. We had our light bulb moment when outdoors with a group of 2-year-olds. We were in the local woods and the children found a frog – great excitement! Amy, our Nature Nursery Manager, talked with the children about the frog and where it lives and asked if anyone knew what sort of sound frogs made. To her surprise and horror the resounding reply was ‘tra la la la la’. When she recounted this story to me I asked why on earth would they say, ‘tra la la la la’? Amy replied because that is what we have taught them. I was completely confused at this point! And she starts singing:

Mmmm went the little green frog one day . . .
We know frogs go (Action clap clap) ‘tra la la la la’
They don’t go mmmm ahh

We both looked at each other in complete despair but also with complete clarity! This was a very tangible experience for us and one which we shared with our Team at our Development day. The song was a popular song in the toddler rooms and enjoyable to sing but it is not educationally worthwhile in important ways because it misleads children about how frogs are in reality. So why are we singing it? Once children know about real frogs and the sounds they make, it might be fun to sing the song because the children will know it is inaccurate and an important part of pretend play is moving from the real to the imagined in creative ways and with humour. But perhaps in order to have that kind of fun, children need to know about what the Froebelian Chris Athey would have called the frogginess of frogs. Returning to the Froebelian philosophy that we need to start where the learner is, we needed to find out where we were.
We asked the Nurseries to ensure they had a Music ambassador and to find out what we were singing and why.

Over time we are embedding the principles of Froebel. Lullabies are important to babies to build attachment. The content of songs should chime with Life, Knowledge and Beauty.

Finger Plays, Action Songs and Movement Games should, as Froebel suggested, have progression:

Froebel believed that singing creates joy and a sense of community and cohesion. Within the nursery it can be an important way of creating attachments, calming and reassuring distressed children. Songs can create a rhythm to the day and can support flexible routines which give children a predictable environment. A singing voice is far more likely to gain attention and help get things done. By focussing more closely on what we are singing and why we have definitely enhanced our practice and educational experience.

**Freedom with Guidance in relation to open ended play**

‘Rich play develops when adults and children play together, respecting each other’s ideas’. When we heard Tina (16/2/2016: Pilot Froebel Travelling Tutor training course) say this we all agreed but there was also a nagging doubt that this is actually what was happening in our nurseries. The introduction of Wooden Blocks and Creative workshops was definitely redefining our open ended play opportunities and we were possibly playing alongside our children. But at best we were in the parallel play zone rather than playing together. On occasion we were still patrolling a school playtime rather than engaging with and developing play.

We are on our journey with everything provided in the indoor and outdoor environment being carefully thought through but we were struggling with the Freedom with Guidance aspect which is central to the Froebelian principles and the role of the adult as part of that. Lots of us had to and still have to unlearn things we had been doing in the past. Some of us had/ have to engage more with open ended practice, careful observations, provocation based planning rather than outcome or activity based planning.

It is interesting to reflect on our own development as Practitioners and the journey we were all on as adults. Froebel says that the adult should be ‘internally active and externally passive’, as Tina emphasised during the pilot training course. That is, carefully tuning into the child’s interests through careful observation. But some of us were feeling challenged and overwhelmed with finding ways of carrying out all this observation and reflection while actually playing with the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sitting stable and using whole hands</th>
<th>Open shut them</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sitting stable and using separate fingers</td>
<td>Tommy thumb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing the midline…</td>
<td>Wind the Bobbin up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the whole body…</td>
<td>Heads and shoulders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding movement with the whole-body</td>
<td>Dingle dangle scarecrow</td>
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*Figure 39.4  The Forms of Life, Beauty and Knowledge in songs*
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children. Some of us needed to hear that observation doesn’t always involve standing back and
recording. Taking note doesn’t literally mean writing down. Knowing and understanding your
key children through actively playing with them is more important and valuable than writing
copious notes and observations. Yes, there may be a minority of children who need more care-
ful recorded observations, but most children need an active, supportive, encouraging, enabling
adult to play with.

We need to learn that children need a rich environment to flourish, but they really need
sensitive adults to ‘observe, support and extend’ their play (Bruce, 1987: 65). ‘What children can
do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point in the child’s education’ (ibid: 45).

Freedom with Guidance in relation to challenging behaviour

The Froebelian notion that behind every bad act of a child is a good intention was initially
difficult to assimilate for many of our team and we are still working on this with some. The
Froebelian approach starts with observation in order to understand and therefore develop posi-
tive aspects of children’s development. Starting where the child is and understanding the why
behind an action is how we have tried to move forward rather than reacting to the negative
or challenging behaviour with our expectations. Unpicking negative behaviour and trying to
understand or identify the good intention on occasions has been challenging in itself. To be
honest it takes practice and like anything practice takes time and commitment. We are on a
journey and as Tina said at the beginning of the pilot Froebel training course, it is definitely
slow cook. We added that learning about Froebelian approaches to early childhood education is
definitely not microwave.

Taking the time to understand negative behaviour in order to be able to talk it through
and analyse with the children what went wrong has improved our key person relationships, as
our attitude towards what were previously regarded as challenging children has softened and
developed with a greater understanding of their perspective and intention behind the seemingly
negative behaviour. A focus on schemas has been particularly beneficial for some of our team
and helped us to communicate more sympathetically with Parents. Stella Louis’s book Schemas
for Parents (Louis, 2016) has been particularly beneficial for Team and Parents giving a very tan-
gible way of helping Parents to understand their children’s behaviour, opening up shared com-
munication and therefore shared resolutions.

We are now also using this approach with our Team, trying to properly analyse rather
than pay lip service to the notion of starting where the learner is. As a result we have intro-
duced a much more robust induction programme including an introduction to Froebelian
practice. In all of our support and development we now link back to Froebelian principles
and practice.

As a Group we like to be improving all the time; I encourage our Team to find ways to
work smarter rather than harder. Generally our Team members are dedicated, committed,
hardworking people, who want the best outcomes for our children. Our Froebelian journey
has had elements of frustration and continues to develop, as there is no microwave quick fix.
The Froebelian approach is a slow cook, long term view, an investment into our society for
the future.

At Yellow Dot we discourage the use of the words no, not, don’t. Instead we encourage our
Team to think about what we want the children to do rather than not do. We call this the Law
of Attraction; we want our Team to articulate to the children what they would like to see in their
behaviour: ‘Please can we walk in the corridor to keep safe’, rather than ‘Don’t run’. ‘Please keep
the sand in the sand tray so there is plenty to play with’, rather than ‘Don’t spill the sand on the floor’. We want our Team to have high expectations of the children and therefore to attract positive behaviour rather than challenging. This change of attitude has taken us time to embed but I do believe has had a very positive outcome on our children’s behaviour and our Team morale. Living and working within a more positive approach, where children are encouraged to behave positively rather than being reprimanded, has enabled our children to understand rules, routines and boundaries rather than doing as they are told.

**Freedom with Guidance in relation to returning materials and equipment to defined places**

The concept of returning materials and equipment previously highlighted in the chapter has been instrumental in developing positive behaviour. Before our Froebel training we would ask the children to tidy away. This would invariably meet with some resistance and a general thought to clear everything away so that tables and floors were literally cleared, with everything out of sight and out of mind. Everything was shoved in a spare drawer or cupboard! We now ask children to return the toys and equipment ready for carpet time, lunch or singing etc. We are working on everything having a place to be returned to ready for it to be used again. This may sound quite subtle but it really is amazing the difference it has made. The rooms are now less cluttered and more organised with an element of Froebel’s Form of Beauty. The children are able to successfully return toys and equipment because they have a home. Ideally we would like to be at the stage where we are returning things as we finish with them but this is a work in progress and improves as the academic year progresses!

I was delighted to hear Tina, in the training sessions, talk about intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, resulting in child-initiated, self-directed activity, is valued. I first read this in 1987 whilst reading *Early Childhood Education.* ‘Children and adults learn from each other and enrich each other’s lives’ (Bruce, 1987: 11). These words I plagiarised from Tina’s book and for 20 years have been included in our Yellow Dot leaflet! We have never promoted extrinsic motivation, reward charts or stickers etc and I was naively feeling quite smug when we were talking about this concept. However I was rudely awakened from my smugness when I was informed by my Team that if I looked more closely some of these had crept into some of our Nurseries. To be honest some of our Team have found this concept of intrinsic motivation very challenging, particularly people who have joined us more recently. I am committed to developing self-discipline and honestly believe that we are doing our children a tremendous disservice by promoting extrinsic motivation. Long slow cooked casseroles are so much healthier, delicious and sustaining than a ‘plastic microwave meal’, but they do take more time! Just as children need to understand boundaries so do Team, and stickers and charts are stepping over the line in my world. Froebel’s concept of *Unity* is important and all the Team in all the rooms need to be modelling and building upon positive, intrinsic behaviour management. We all need to be sensitive adults helping children make sense of their world, articulating for them to help them internalise the external, making the outer inner, as Froebel emphasises.

A Parent visiting one of our Nurseries this week emailed the Manager to say:

The setting was very calm and I believe that is a place where I feel Edan would flourish and be comfortable within. I was really impressed with the way that children are allowed
to ‘think’ for themselves and decide what they want to do whilst still being guided towards their individual learning goals.

I have to say a wave of joy came over me as I read this. We have been on a nearly 2-year adventure with Froebel. It is difficult sometimes to see how far we have come or sometimes where we are going. But this new potential parent has seen us with new eyes and can see where we are now and I know we are a long way from where we came from.

Nature and learning out of doors

Froebel created the first kindergarten, a garden nursery! It was a place ‘where children could develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults’. Helen Tovey, renowned Froebelian expert, led our session on the Outdoors and stimulated our thoughts on ‘Risk’, ‘Playing in Nature’, ‘Playing bravely and boldly’ in a place where children can develop respect for and responsibility for nature.

What opportunities were we giving our children within our gardens and within our communities? Helen Tovey writes, ‘A Froebelian garden is seen as a rich learning environment, which can complement and link with the indoor area but which also offers unique learning experiences which cannot be provided indoors’ (Tovey, 2013: 62).

We are lucky enough to have reasonable sized gardens and this was one of the areas that I had been searching to improve when I started my quest for the secret shared with what turned out to be two Froebelian colleagues on the Nursery World Nordic Tour.

We found that we had a surprising amount of fairly boring plastic toys, which actually were not well utilised, possibly because they were plastic and boring and lacked challenge. We also found that we spent quite a bit of time ‘setting up’ a garden each day and then packing it away! On reflection this was because much of the equipment and toys were not really outdoor friendly and so had to be stored!

We decided to declutter our gardens with the ‘less is more’ principle and tried to take everything out of the garden which did not really belong in a garden! Our aim was not to have to set up the garden but that the garden would be natural and/or outdoor friendly.

Having decluttered we looked at what opportunities there were for playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically. What opportunities are there for ‘risk taking’? A Froebelian approach encourages opportunities for positive risk taking and adventurous play outdoors. Froebel argued that children who have experienced risk and challenges in their play were safer than those who had been protected and discouraged from challenging themselves.

To climb a new tree is . . . to discover a new world; seen from above everything looks quite different . . . a child who lacks experience will not know his own capabilities and is more likely to encounter danger.

(Froebel, in Lilley, 1967: 126)

How open ended were our toys and equipment? In reality not very! Helen Tovey (2013) advocates open ended materials, play props and ‘loose parts’ and ‘support from adults who value such play . . . So that children can create their own imaginary world’. Crates, planks, ladders, outdoor blocks, builders trays, guttering, stones, sticks, branches, tractor tyres, planters have replaced our ‘brightly coloured boring plastic toys’! Pallets are the king of recycling they can become – climbing towers/flower boxes/tool storage/mud kitchen shelving!
I have to say that from a practitioner point of view this was not an easy change for us all. Some of us are deeply suspicious of more risky play and we are still on a journey with finding the balance.

In one garden, having talked about the changes we were making, the children asked if they could have a sandpit. Pre-Froebel I would have arranged for the Handyman or contractors to come in and build the sandpit. Froebel's Forms of Life, Knowledge and Beauty are now ringing in my ears along with Freedom with Guidance. So I asked the kindergarten team to talk to the children from their experiences how we would do this. They said that we needed real spades to dig a deep hole to fill with sand. And so we bought real tools for the children to dig their sandpit. The ground was pretty hard and so we discussed with the children what we could do, they decided to make the ground wet to make the ground muddy so it would be easier to dig. The Team joined in too and occasionally forked over the soil to make things a little easier. We bought a trailer to transport the earth to the flower beds and used lots to build up the sides. Every week construction would stop as a worm was discovered, excavated and rehomed. A whole week went by as ants were studied. The project started in August and was still not finished when the kindergarten left for school. Having a large hole in the garden I would never have believed could be a thing of beauty – but it is! Froebel was very keen for children to understand how ‘real life’ worked, how people had skills and occupations and how we are all interconnected. Digging our own sandpit helped the children (and Team) to appreciate the different roles we have and the need for specific tools to make tasks easier, for skill and strength and perseverance!

We started with our gardens and then looked outside into the community. Froebel said that, ‘Teachers should regularly take their classes out of doors – not driving them like a flock of sheep or leading them like they were a company of soldiers’ (in Lilley, 1967: 146). When we heard this we nervously laughed, somewhat embarrassed! We could all too easily imagine 250 years later a similar sight! Some of our nurseries were regularly accessing places of interest in the community which energise and enthuse – not only the children but also the Team. Language and communication is incredibly enhanced by such trips and engagement with Parents is also enhanced as the children are keen to tell of their adventures. Slowly over the time we have been less attached to our ‘walking rings’ and when appropriate are walking alongside our children interacting as family, rather than regiments. Trips out of the nursery are now a weekly occurrence; we are getting out and about in our community, walking, by bus and train.

Every nursery now has the opportunity to access what we call the third space: a place where children can authentically play in nature, experience risk, play boldly and bravely. Pre-Froebel we would have probably accessed these spaces a few times a year but now they are also at least a weekly excursion. Our children are developing their collaboration skills, managing and assessing risk. Children and Team are helped to overcome their fears. We have engaged with local Forest Schools and developed our own Nature Nursery where we bus our children to spend the whole day ‘playing in nature’. We now have two sites of Nature Nursery and this September we started our Beach Nursery. Every Wednesday we take 12 children to the local beach (a 30-minute drive). We spend the day playing in nature. The Froebelian training has opened up the outdoors to become a rich learning environment which is developing with the seasons.

I believe that we don’t know what we don’t know and when we started on this project we didn’t know where it was going to lead us. Now we know there is a lot to learn. Our fast moving innovative team were slightly derailed and we had to rethink our approach to a slow cook approach. Managing change through 400 Team members is an ongoing challenge but we are making progress. Really being mindful of Froebel’s principles rather than playing lip service to them has taken us time to comprehend and enact. Our Group Manager is now half way through her Masters degree which has a strong Froebelian component at The University
of Roehampton and the continuing support of Froebel friends and Froebel networks has been encouraging. I know we have a long way to go, but it is a journey and journeys are best enjoyed each step of the way, appreciating today where one is, looking forward to tomorrow but wallowing in the present.
Part V
Re-articulating research and policy
Part V introduction

Sacha Powell

The chapters in this handbook have drawn on scholarship, research and phronesis to offer sometimes diverse interpretations of Froebel’s legacy for early childhood education. But there are golden threads that bind them in a rich tapestry that Friedrich Froebel and his followers began to weave two hundred years ago. This tapestry records changing political, social and cultural climates over the years; the voyages and meetings of Froebelians around the globe; and the trials, tribulations, successes and celebrations en route. That this tapestry continues to be woven is testament to the enduring appeal of Froebel’s principles for the twenty-first century. Every stitch conveys his belief in the extraordinariness of each young child and his conviction that young children flourish when they are in the company of adults who are willing to see, attend to and defend that perspective. This determined focus on the child as simultaneously unique and connected is developmentally holistic, culturally sensitive, ecologically valid, and historically, genealogically and spiritually attuned.

The diverse interpretations in situ make the Froebel story a diffracted one with relevance and resonance across time and place with connections in between. It begins with and renews through each child’s lived and imagined experiences. This is a far cry from the tendency to translate the child into outcomes and children into aggregated datasets, although arguably both rely on a Romantic view of the child as ‘becoming’. But in Froebel’s case, the focus is child-centred and the child is striving for existential unity rather than the economic productivity that characterises the goals of neo-liberal education policies. For Froebelians, a child is always connected, always in relation. For Froebel this included the Divine and, for many educationalists, Froebel’s religious doctrine has proved problematic as it did ultimately for Froebel himself. Best (2016: 6) notes that, ‘Sometimes . . . God seems to be equated with Nature; at other times, it is through Nature that God is revealed to the world. Whether God is another name for Nature or vice versa matters little, since in Froebel’s view there is a unity to all things.’ Froebel’s view of the child is unapologetically Romantic – a view that has been criticised for idealising childhood innocence and, by default, demonising children who do not fit this picture (Kehily, 2015). This
is a challenge that contemporary Froebelians embrace and some of the chapters in this book show how Froebel’s beliefs are translated for current contexts where the diversity of children’s cultural lives is respected.

So while Froebel’s philosophy continues to elicit debate, it is a rich source of provocation for important philosophical and political questions we should never stop asking ourselves, such as ‘What is childhood for? Who or what is education for?’ These have been the source of contemplation for the authors in this book. In their own way, each has attempted to rearticulate Froebel’s principles for the twenty-first century while holding on to his golden threads: the child is never learning and growing in isolation but is always within a complex web of connections and this has important implications for how we perceive and provide early childhood education. Contemporary philosophy has begun to explore an emerging worldview – an ‘integral’ perspective – that seeks a meta-narrative for diverse epistemologies (Yiangou, 2017). This book acknowledges that there are multiple interpretations of Froebel’s philosophy and these are connected to different ways of understanding knowledge and being. Collectively, these interpretations continue to challenge alternative educational philosophies, and individually they advance the scholarship of those who consider themselves Froebelian. We do not claim that the book achieves an ‘integral’ meta-narrative that can answer all the difficult questions and it does not try to offer a single Froebel story. Rather, it attempts to show that the authors have come together in the spirit of an inclusive worldview that represents pluralistic interpretations of Froebelian ways of being. This is prompted by important questions about children and education and sustained by core themes – the golden threads of a complex Froebelian tapestry, which have been used to sew many ideograms. These themes are re-articulated for contemporary policy, research and practice in the pages that follow.