Introduction

This chapter brings together analysis and commentary by authors whose professional practice and research are located in the three countries of Great Britain: England, Scotland and Wales, respectively. Each country has its own statutory framework and curriculum guidance for the early childhood education and care of its youngest citizens. The authors identify aspects of these policy documents that chime with Froebelian traditions and which draw implicitly or overtly on Froebel's legacy.

The foundation stage (England) and Froebelian resonances

Historical/political context underpinning the early childhood curriculum framework

Historically, in England, the development of early childhood services has been on an ad hoc basis and has been linked to social policy, with the development of services since 1998 resulting from the New Labour Government’s childcare strategy of providing affordable, high quality childcare to enable parents to return to work.

Initially there remained a lack of overarching philosophy for the new ‘integrated’ sector, but in 2000, this was addressed with the implementation of core documents ‘Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage’ (QCA, 2000) and in the following year ‘Birth to Three Matters’. (Surestart, 2003) The integration process was not complete until the development of a framework combining the two. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008a) set in statute for the first time a set of Welfare Requirements and a set of Learning and Development
requirements, which must be followed by practitioners of care and education for children below 5 years of age. This legislation took effect from September 2008, with the Welfare requirements applying to the whole of the UK, but the Learning and Development requirements applied only to England.

The statute also included an assessment, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, which contained a set of Early Learning Goals (ELGs), some of which were regarded as being inappropriate for the age group. It was always intended that the EYFS should be reviewed after a 2-year period, to assess the impact on children’s outcomes and on those working in the early years sector.

Key elements of the curriculum/structure

In March 2011 Dame Clare Tickell published her review of the EYFS (Tickell, 2011) which highlighted that practitioners and parents felt the framework was inclusive, principled and provided clear information on how young children develop and learn, in a format that was easily understood and applied. Parents particularly valued the fact that they were given information about their child’s progress.

The recommendations of the Tickell Review resulted in a new document, the Revised Early Years Foundation Stage, which was published in March 2012 and implemented from September 2012.

To coincide with the launch of the revised document, amendments were made to the Childcare Act 2006 by Section 1 of the Education Act 2011, making free education a statutory entitlement for eligible 2-year-olds (living in households defined as economically disadvantaged). It was planned that by September 2014, Local Authorities would develop places for 230,000 2-year-olds in England (40%).

Research evidence shows that high quality early education is critical to the success of this 2-year-old entitlement, so Local Authorities in England were charged with finding the new places in settings rated good or outstanding by the inspection and regulatory body, Ofsted.

The revised EYFS therefore included new aspects to support practitioners in developing best practice for these young children. It introduced a requirement for parents and carers to be provided with a short summary of the child’s communication and language, personal, social and emotional and physical development, between the ages of 24 to 36 months.

These areas, regarded as essential foundations for a child’s life, learning and success (Tickell, 2011) are known in the Revised EYFS as the ‘Prime Areas of Learning’. These areas continue to be fundamental throughout the EYSF framework and run through and support learning in other areas: literacy, mathematics, knowledge and understanding of the world and the expressive arts and design. These areas are known in the revised document as the ‘Specific Areas of Learning’.

Another fundamental change was made to the ELGs of the EYFS Profile. These goals define the level of development that the Department for Education believes most children should reach by the end of the school year in which they turn 5 years of age. They were always controversial and felt by many practitioners to be too demanding on their time to be effective.

The Tickell Review, in order to reduce workload, reduced the number of assessment judgements from 69 to 17 by establishing for each of the 17 ELGs a simple three-point scale. This delineated a child’s attainment as working towards (emerging), achieving (expected) or exceeding the ELG. In addition, to match the increasing expectations of the level of attainment at the end of the Reception year and beyond, the pitch of the ELG for Number was raised.
Resonance with Froebelian principles and practice

Since its introduction, the philosophy of the EYFS has been unique in bringing together the fields of early childhood education with childcare for children from birth to 5 years, which in England have generally evolved along different paths. The exception to this has been the practice embedded in maintained nursery schools. Nursery schools were first established by the pioneer educator Margaret McMillan (1860–1931). She was a follower of the philosophy of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) and they provided both early education and care, without making a distinction between the two. The Revised EYFS (DfE 2012) embraces such traditional good practice by underpinning the philosophical basis of the document with working principles that need to be reflected upon and interpreted within the cultural and historical setting where they are used.

The principles in the EYFS resonate with those of Froebel. He recognised the uniqueness of each child's capacity and potential. The EYFS contains four overarching principles, the first of which states that, ‘every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured’ (DfE, 2017a: 6).

The Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL), which underpin the EYFS mirror Froebel’s philosophy. Froebel believed that play was a central, integrating element of a child’s development and learning, involving imagination and active exploration. ‘Playing and exploring’, ‘active learning’ and ‘creativity and critical thinking’ are the three CoEL (ibid: 9).

Froebel also recognised the importance of the child as part of a family and community. The EYFS resonates with this, emphasising the importance of positive relationships and that young children develop and learn well in environments in which their experiences respond to their individual needs, with strong partnerships between practitioners and parents and carers.

Concluding comment

For Froebel, who developed his philosophy in the eighteenth century, and for Dame Clare Tickell in her review of the EYFS in the twenty-first century, it is essential to have knowledgeable and appropriately qualified early childhood professionals using skilled, informed observation of children to support effective development and learning. This is particularly important since the expansion of places for 2-year-olds. All young children need practitioners who embrace a pedagogy that provides secure relationships from which they can enjoy first-hand experiences that have meaning and purpose to the child, and involve play, talk, reflection, joy, wonder, concentration, unity and satisfaction.

Curriculum for excellence (Scotland)

Scottish government has devolved powers for education and child and family policy (The Scottish Parliament, 1998). The Scottish education system has its own distinct characteristics and has enjoyed an excellent reputation abroad [Knox, unknown]. Concern about an achievement gap identified by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) initiated the case for change (OECD, 2007) and an aspiration to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up has driven the cross-party consensus in government to radically transform Scottish education. The process began with a Scotland-wide consultation The National Debate on Education (Education Scotland, 2002). The consultation asked, ‘What do you want from our education system?’ People wanted children who were successful learners, confident individuals,
responsible citizens and effective contributors (Scottish Executive, 2004). They wanted a system that reflected the values that parliament itself was founded on: wisdom, justice, integrity and compassion (The Scottish Parliament, 1998).

There followed a period of reflection on how this would be delivered through the architecture of the curriculum design (Education Scotland, 2010b). Early in this process the effectiveness of learning in the early years was recognised, and a paper on Active Learning was published (The Scottish Government, 2007). This praised the engagement and activity found in the early years and sought to extend this throughout the curriculum across the sectors. Seven design features were developed: personalisation and choice; challenge and enjoyment; breadth; depth; progression; relevance and coherence (Scottish Executive, 2004). Alongside these were entitlements for all children and young people to personal support, additional support for learning and a broad general education (The Education [Additional Support for Learning] (Scotland) Act, 2009). The curriculum architecture was explained in a series of publications called Building the Curriculum (Education Scotland, 2010). Alongside this was published Outdoor Learning, also a daily feature of learning in the early years that was promoted for all children and young people (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010).

Using this design, curricular areas were developed, eight in total (The Scottish Government, 2006). These created combinations of subjects that were traditionally separate in secondary schools and were a radical shift in thinking for the early years who were accustomed to five areas based on child development. The progression in the curriculum was to be achieved through experiences and outcomes at the early, first, second, third and senior phase. The early level would encompass nursery to the end of primary one (children aged 3 to 6 years).

Building the Curriculum 4 focused on the development of skills, for learning, life and work (The Scottish Government, 2009).

Building the Curriculum 5 focused on assessment (The Scottish Government, 2010). This built on previous work on assessment for learning, engaging the child and parent in learning discussions as well as progress through the outcomes and levels and national qualifications in secondary school.

Brehony (2001a) details the influence of Froebel on the education of young children in nursery and infant schools. There has been a strong Froebelian influence in Scotland in the early years (Bruce, 2012a and see Chapter 35). Until 1972, Froebel certificates were offered in many teacher-training colleges as an extra qualification. Many of the leading policy makers who have extra qualifications in the early years are at the peak of their careers in Inspection, local authority and government bodies, such as Education Scotland, and are strong advocates for play and child centred education. The Early Years Framework (EYF) gave a mandate for change (The Scottish Government, 2008). Recent early childhood policy has been informed by strong advocates for change from the chief medical officer and violence reduction, social enterprise and neuroscience communities (The Child’s Curriculum, 2010). The case for investment in the early years has been made and is becoming statutory through the process of the Children and Young People’s Bill (Scotland) 2013 (The Children and Young People’s Bill, 2013; United Nations, 1989). Within the Bill are articulated the rights of the child to play, described in the Play Strategy (The Scottish Government, 2013). There can be no more Froebelian principle than the significance of play (Bruce, 1996, 2001, 2011, 2012a; Bruce et al, 1995; Lascarides and Hinterz, 2000; Liebschner, 1992). The government allocated a budget for transformational change to prioritise the needs of young children and their families and early intervention (The Scottish Government, 2011). The Collaborative is a Scottish government initiative that enables and tasks agencies to work together using a scientific model of change to improve outcomes for children and families (The Scottish Government, 2012). The focus on the ecological model of the child
as part of a family and community is fundamentally Froebelian, as is building the capacity of the community to effect outcomes for itself (The Scottish Government, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Liebschner, 1992).


Many of the core experiences of Froebel’s kindergarten can be translated into current practices. Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations become blockplay and workshop experiences (Whinnett, 2012), his Mother Songs are embedded in family songs and traditions (Baker, 2012; Ouvry, 2012) and in library Rhymetime sessions and initiatives like Books For Babies (Cross, 2012) and Bookbug (see Scottish Book Trust). The importance of the garden (Brown, 2012) and experiences of outdoors – for example, forest school (McNair, 2012) – all have their roots in Froebel’s kindergarten.

In conclusion, Froebelian principles both underpin and are an effective way to translate Curriculum for Excellence into practice. There is a strong correlation between the values, design principles, experiences and outcomes of the curriculum and those described in Froebel’s writing. Froebel gives solid foundations to build a new curriculum on. The practice that grows and develops will be firmly rooted in the belief that children are unique individuals, a member of a family in a community, who learn through holistic experiences and play as an essential right of their childhood.

The foundation phase in Wales and its links to Froebelian principles: the historical/political context underpinning the early years curriculum/framework and its status

Devolution from UK central government in May 1999 signified the shift of responsibility for education within Wales to the (then) Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). WAG’s vision document *The Learning Country* set out the intention to ‘get the best for Wales’ (NAfW, 2001: 2) and ‘build stronger foundations for learning in primary schools with a radical improvement for early years provision’ (NAfW, 2001: 12). The Foundation Phase created a ‘rich curriculum under seven Areas of Learning’ (DCELLS, 2008: 3) that combined previous requirements for children aged 3-5 (ACCAC, 2000a) and 5-7 (ACCAC, 2000b). This radical overhaul of early childhood education in Wales signalled a shift away from UK government education policy. It was predicated upon a concern about the ‘detrimental’ (NAfW, 2001a: 8) effect of an overly formal approach to early years education for children below the age of 6. The aims of the Foundation Phase were related to raising attainment, enhancing positive attitudes to learning and addressing children’s developing needs to ensure active, engaged citizens of the future who benefitted from their educational opportunities (NAfW, 2003).

The Foundation Phase is a statutory requirement for all maintained and non-maintained settings providing education and care for 3- to 7-year-olds. Despite recent pressures in the Welsh education system related to two sequential sets of disappointing PISA scores (Welsh Government, 2009; Wheater et al, 2013), there appears to be an ongoing commitment to the Foundation Phase even though the policy is under Welsh Government review (e.g. Evans, 2013). However with the recent appointment of Professor Graham Donaldson to review the Welsh education system for 3- to 18- year-olds (Welsh Government, 2014) this may be set to change.
Key elements of the curriculum/structure

The Foundation Phase sits within an overarching and emancipatory vision for children set out in the Welsh Government’s seven core aims for children, developed from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and promotes a play-based approach to learning for 3- to 7-year-olds:

Children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of ‘play’ providing the vehicle. Through their play, children practice and consolidate their learning, play with ideas, experiment, take risks, solve problems, and make decisions individually, in small and in large groups. First-hand experiences allow children to develop an understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. The development of children’s self-image and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem are at the core of this phase.

(DCELLS, 2008: 6)

The Foundation Phase curriculum sits within seven Areas of Learning (AoL):

- Personal and Social Development, Well-Being and Cultural Diversity
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills
- Mathematical Development
- Welsh Language Development
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development
- Creative Development

The central role of the practitioner is as a ‘facilitator of learning’ (DCELLS, 2008a: 12); where learning is seen as a continuum and the curriculum is planned to meet ‘the needs of the individual children and facilitate progress’ (DCELLS, 2008: 12). Educational settings are required to provide children with access to ‘indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe’. There is specific emphasis on using the outdoor environment and providing a ‘balance between structured learning through child-initiated activities and those directed by practitioners’. Interaction between adult and child is centrally placed in the learning process, in particular practitioner involvement in children’s play and ‘shared and sustained thinking’ (DCELLS, 2008: 4–6).

The documentation details expectations of learning outcomes for each AoL, the contents of which ‘remain essentially unchanged’ (Maynard et al, 2013: 56) from previous curricula. In addition, the Welsh Government has introduced a National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF), which is statutory from age 5 but expected to be extended to include children from age 3. This framework, seen as an important instrument to raise attainment, describes the annual national expectations for literacy and numeracy and may also be tied to the Government priority to tackle the link between poverty and low attainment (Welsh Government, 2013b). The LNF is intended to reduce knowledge gaps in young children’s literacy and numeracy skills, which are accepted as strong predictors of children’s later academic success (Maynard et al, 2013: xiii).

Resonance with the Froebelian principles and practice

Froebel is recognised within the Foundation Phase pedagogic guidance as the ‘first person to formulate a theory of pre-school education’ and considered to have had ‘the most far reaching
influence on early childhood education’; Froebelian principles are, alongside the theories of Montessori, Steiner, McMillan, Isaacs, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner and Gardner, presented as support for the pedagogical strategies promoted within Foundation Phase (DCELLS, 2008a: 28–31).

More specifically, it is Froebel’s ‘carefully planned curriculum based on key learning experiences’ and the ‘development of the whole child through play and active learning’ (DCELLS, 2008a: 28) that are highlighted as particularly pertinent to Foundation Phase pedagogy. Further, Froebel’s understanding of the family as ‘the child’s first educator’ (DCELLS, 2008a: 28) is acknowledged and fostered through ‘positive partnerships with the home’ (DCELLS, 2008: 4).

For practitioners, learning is realised through a balance of teacher-directed, focused activities and child-initiated activities, which take place within the continuous provision. Learning, within the continuous provision, is active and experiential, involving practical activity. Resonating with the Froebelian principle of self-activity, which sees ‘all true development, and consequently all true education, [as a] self-directed process’ (Fletcher and Welton, 1912: 17), continuous provision can be further enhanced by the practitioner to include additional resources and activities based on close observations of the child and their development.

More tenuous links to Froebelian principles can be drawn when considering the use of the outdoors as a space for learning as, although not directly attributed to Froebel, it is another aspect of the curriculum that resonates with Froebel’s kindergarten approach. More recently, and again reminiscent of the Froebelian tradition for educated practitioners, the Welsh Government has introduced a Masters in Educational Practice (MEP), open for all newly qualified teachers, which recognises that ‘high quality teaching is the key to improving learners’ outcomes’ (Andrews, 2013).

Concluding comment

Bennett (2006) has identified major tensions between early years programmes that fit within a model of social pedagogy and those that resonate with a model of preparedness for future school learning. Practitioners working in the Foundation Phase may be subject to these tensions, as highlighted by Maynard et al (2013), in their attempts to enact a pedagogy that both resonates with Froebelian principles, as indicated above, and includes more formal approaches to learning, such as fulfilling the demands of a detailed statutory curriculum and a statutory LNF, that might be considered to ‘jar’ with these same principles.