Froebelian influences on early childhood education and care government policy documents in England

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In Chapter 11, reference is made to the influence of the Froebelian Helen May in the development of the *Te Whariki: Early Childhood Curriculum*. In this section five English government documents are shown to have been influenced by Froebelian participants. The first is the Hadow Report (1933), *The Report of the Consultative Committee on Infant and Nursery Schools*. Froebelian kindergarten practice is examined in some detail, and it is probably significant that Froebelian Susan Isaacs, Head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education in the University of London, was a contributor. Educational pioneers are included in Part I of the Report which gives a history of nursery infant education, expanded to other countries in the Appendices. Froebel is given a great deal of attention and argued to be ‘the first great educator on the continent who endeavoured to provide a coherent scheme of infant education’ (1933: 1) (see also Chapter 40). The increasingly wide dissemination of his influence is outlined:

He elaborated a system of training through the senses based on organised play for children up to the age of six. His kindergarten was intended to supplement and widen home training and not to be a substitute for it. His influence on infant education in England was not felt, even indirectly, till the early (eighteen) fifties. Public attention was first directed to his system through a display of Froebel apparatus and a lecture by Frau Ronge of Hamburg at an Education Exhibition held at London in 1854 under the auspices of the Royal Society of Arts.

( [Hadow, 1933: 24](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315562421-47) )

References to the benefits of Froebelian kindergarten education became common practice, such as one in 1905, which notes that ‘the Department desired to give further encouragement to the employment of kindergarten methods’ (Hadow, 1933: 26). However, the Hadow Committee members did not embrace every aspect of the Froebelian practices, and they listened carefully to the criticisms from those giving evidence to the committee.
Though kindergarten teachers are praised in the Reports, kindergarten occupations are condemned as being contrary to the spirit of Froebel, when taught mechanically in large classes.

(Hadow, 1933: 32)

Some years later, in 1967, the Plowden Report was published *The Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools*. The Chair was Bridget Plowden, and Molly Brearley, the Principal of the Froebel Educational Institute in Roehampton (see Chapter 31) was appointed as a member of the Committee. Froebelian themes beam out of this report. The value of high quality nursery infant education was once again highlighted. The importance of family and community was given prominence. Inclusion was given a central place, together with the importance of recognising a child’s individual needs and development rather than seeing children as groups. The serious engagement with and study of nature was given attention, as was a valuing of the arts and a broad approach to mathematics:

The appraisal we have made of the curriculum, and of the methods which have proved to be most fruitful, confirm many or most of the suggestions our predecessors have made. Their insights have been justified and refined by experience. ‘Finding out’ has proved to be better than ‘Being told’. Children’s capacity to create in words, pictorially and through many other forms of expression, is astonishing. The third of the three Rs is no longer mere mechanical arithmetic, French has made its way into the primary school, nature study is becoming science. There has been dramatic and continuing advance in standards of reading. The gloomy forebodings of the decline of knowledge which would follow progressive methods have been discredited. Our report is a report of progress and a spur to more.

(Plowden, 1967: 460–1)

Whereas the Hadow Report emphasised the need to reduce the prescriptive teaching across the curriculum, the Plowden report gave a similar message but with the experience of the success of encouraging children to be *active learners* in every area of the now broader approach to the curriculum. However, best practice was the focus, and there was awareness in sections of the report which demonstrate that best practice does not always exist. Hence the need for high quality teacher training of those who will work with the youngest children, for ‘There cannot be a good school without good teachers’ (Plowden, 1967: 461).

In 1988, the House of Commons Education, Science and Arts Committee published a *First report: Educational Provision for the Under Fives, Volume 1: Report together with the Proceedings of the Committee*. In the list of witnesses, Lesley Abbott is a representative from the Tutors of Advanced Courses for Teachers of Young Children (TACTYC). The Centre for Early Childhood Studies, Roehampton Institute (UF94) was invited to give evidence and interviews took place at the Froebel College with Principal Gill Redford, Tina Bruce, Shirley Maxwell and Linda Pound. A Memorandum was included as an outcome. This led in 1990 to *Starting with Quality: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Quality of the Educational Experience offered to 3 and 4 year olds, chaired by Mrs Angela Rumbold CBE MP*. Lesley Abbott, a leading Froebelian and Principal Lecturer in Primary Education (Early Years) at Manchester Polytechnic (later MMU), was an important participant.

However, 6 years later a different contribution arose from Froebelians when a Voucher Scheme for early childhood education was proposed in 1996 and the document *Desirable Outcomes for Children’s Learning on entering Compulsory Education* was published by the School
Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). Both were greeted with opposition (such as marching) and the Voucher Scheme proposal was dropped. Key Froebelians included Marjorie Ouvry, Wendy Scott, Vicky Hutchins and many others in colleges and voluntary organisations, and early childhood provision of all kinds. It is significant that no names are on the document as having authored or contributed to it.

In 1997, a change of government brought about two new documents. Bernadette Duffy, Jenny Spratt and Tina Bruce were deeply involved in developing Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000). This document returned to the spirit of the earlier Starting with Quality framework but gave more detail in the way it was presented. This was followed by Birth to Three Matters: A framework to support children in their earliest years. This was chaired by Lesley Abbott who initiated the most respected literature review since the Hadow report was published, which is still of great use today (David et al., 2003). This was undertaken at her request by Tricia David, Kathy Gough and Sacha Powell with Lesley Abbott herself. The working party included Froebelians Peter Elfer, Tina Bruce and Bernadette Duffy. Peter Elfer's contribution was important in embedding the key person principle for young children, pioneered by Elinor Goldschmied (see Chapter 12). These documents became enshrined in a law. An article by Lesley Abbott and Anne Langston are included at the end of this section, illuminating one aspect of the Birth to Three Matters Framework (Surestart, 2003).

It is significant that civil servants were tasked with bringing together these two documents in (successive versions of) the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008); much of the Froebelian influence was lost. This contrasts with Scotland (see Chapter 41) where the Curriculum for Excellence 3 to 13 is the framework. The supporting publications from the Scottish Office Building the Ambition: National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare, Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 referred to the Froebelian publication edited by Tina Bruce for the Castlebrae Cluster Developing Learning in Early Childhood (2004) and stated:

When children are engaged in what practitioners would say as free flow play this too can be perceived as less meaningful than a planned activity. The challenge that practitioners face is that at times they feel uncomfortable about letting natural play evolve and tend to want to over direct play. Tina Bruce describes 12 features of free flow play to help staff understand the level of deep engagement in learning which children show while they play. For example, in their play children use their first hand experiences they have had in life. Children rehearse their future in their play. But there is a balance where we need to raise the profile of play and also to deepen an understanding for practitioners in supporting play experiences with children.

(Scottish Government, 2014: 28)

The need for well-trained practitioners who can support deep learning through play is highlighted again in the report from Professor Iram Siraj and Denise Kingston (2015) in An Independent Review of the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) workforce and out of school care (OSC) workforce. Froebel courses in Scotland (at the University of Edinburgh and taught by the Edinburgh Froebel Network) are mentioned as high quality examples (see Chapter 35).

A strong child, by Ann Langston and Lesley Abbott

Introduction

In the last issue of Early Childhood Practice (volume 4, number 2) you may have read about the publication of *Birth to Three Matters: A Framework of Effective Practice*. The pack has now been launched and more than 80,000 childminders will already have received copies, whilst 200,000 practitioners still await theirs with eager interest.

The framework recognises the skill and competence of babies and children under 3 years of age and offers support to those working with them in day care settings. It describes children under four Aspects, which are:

- A Strong Child
- A Skilful Communicator
- A Competent Learner
- A Healthy Child

This article will expand on the first of these aspects: A Strong Child, making reference to the four cards that make up this strand of the framework. Throughout this article the pronoun ‘she’ has been used in preference to ‘he’ or ‘s/he’.

Background

The *Birth to Three Matters* framework conceptualises babies and young children as emotionally and physically strong people, who are at the same time, skilful communicators, competent learners and healthy, as illustrated by 9-month-old William, who at a family meal was seated in his high chair and, when given a ‘round piece of bread ... taking it in both hands, without any instigation from anyone else, (he) began making noises, “brm, brm”, twisting the round slice from side to side’ contrasting with views of the young child as weak, vulnerable, unable to communicate and with everything still to learn.

So, far from being unaware, young children pick up social signals and quickly make sense of what is going around them, using what they learn, to decide what is important. This demonstrates that the young baby is an active learner, who uses cues available in the environment to become a participant in the community of the home or day care setting.

In a Strong Child, there are four parts, called components, which are:

- Me, Myself and I
- Being Acknowledged and Affirmed
- Developing Self Assurance
- A Sense of Belonging

Each separate component relates to and is intertwined with every other component, revealing that to be strong children need, not only to realise their own individuality, and to experience and seek closeness, but also to develop self-assurance and a sense of belonging.

Me, myself and I

A fundamental part of becoming *A Strong Child* is related to the development of selfhood, where young children come to a realisation of their own individuality. *Me, Myself and I* focuses on the
young child’s growing sense of agency, which is enhanced or reduced by the relationships s/he has with significant others such as parents, carers or a keyworker. However, as Davies (1999: 197) reminds us ‘The concepts ‘sense of self’ and ‘development of self’ are abstractions. Whereas language or motor development can be tracked definitively, the evolution of the self is not so easily quantifiable’. This presents a number of problems since what cannot be seen, and is an abstraction, is difficult to assess or judge in any way, since it is by definition invisible. However, that children have a sense of themselves is clear to any observer who watches even the youngest baby communicate her needs, feelings and desires at times when she is hungry, amused, or wants a particular toy.

Since the child’s developing ‘sense of self’ cannot be tracked (unlike its language or motor development) this area can easily become neglected because there are no markers on the road to selfhood, and like an old car that miraculously continues to run, in spite of not having regular services, there are often few indicators to alert adults that something is wrong (with a child’s developing sense of self) until it is perhaps too late.

In order to avoid this it is important to ensure that babies and young children develop a robust sense of themselves that is supported by sensitive adults who know them and have their best interests at heart. In early infancy this support is offered by ‘contingent adults’ who reflect back to the child feelings of efficacy, which emerge in later childhood as the child’s secure belief in herself, evident in the frequently heard response ‘I can do that’.

**Being acknowledged and affirmed**

Being Acknowledged and Affirmed focuses on experiencing and seeking closeness and this component reminds us that infants and toddlers ‘depend on the affirmation and warmth of trusting relationships’. In full day care, the ‘keyworker’ usually fulfils this role, providing continuity of care alongside that of the primary caregiver at home. This relationship is emphasised continually in the framework and helpful interactions are described on the component cards, for example: ‘Plan for key people to be with babies and children to create opportunities for ‘snuggling in’, or ‘Consider how to reinforce children’s sense of individuality’.

Helping the young child to hold on to who she is, when she is away from home is a highly significant task, and one which should not be under-rated, since even adults, with their many life experiences, often feel their personality threatened or compromised when away from home, or in the company of strangers.

Indeed it is arguable that if the thread of ‘who’ we are is weakened when we are not in the presence of the people or objects that we hold dear, then it is paramount that those caring for young children ensure two things, first that the link between the home and the setting is developed and strengthened so that the two contexts work in harmony, the one building the other, and second that there are visible and audible signs of home in the setting so that the child recognises parts of her own experience in what is essentially a ‘strange environment’, that is, one with which she is not completely familiar.

Again, the component cards illustrate ways to help children and their families to feel ‘at home’ in the setting; for example, they suggest: ‘Provide an area to display pictures of children’s families, pets and home and any pictures they have brought from home’ and ‘Recognising, accepting and understanding that carrying, sucking or playing with something such as a dummy that they have brought from home helps young children as they move between home and a new setting’.

This then is how adults respond contingently to young children and so enhance their self-esteem, self-efficacy and feelings of being powerful. The bases on which these responses are
likely to succeed are in relationships where adults and children share a sense of attachment to one another. Attachment theory has been criticised in the past for placing too strong an emphasis on the mother-child relationship; however, research has demonstrated a link between ‘the quality of a child’s sense of self to the quality of attachments’, (Surestart, 2003) suggesting that any enabling, close relationship will positively affect a child’s self-worth. It is through these relationships that young children begin to feel acknowledged and affirmed, relationships in which adults are respectful of children, and through which they communicate to the young child that they are accepted and valued for being themselves.

When young children learn that they are responded to, they learn to communicate their needs and feelings, knowing that they are safe to explore their emotions. In this way they begin to explore boundaries, encountering the expectations and rules that surround them and which keep them physically and emotionally contained. All children are individuals with their own histories and experiences, some children need more support than others and it is suggested in the cards that additional time may need to be spent with ‘children who need more attention than others, without neglecting other children’. Dilemmas such as these face practitioners on a daily basis when they are forced to make choices about how and where they may best use their time or direct resources.

A further challenge is how to convey to children who behave inappropriately that their actions or responses are unacceptable, while continuing to provide support for their developing sense of self, acknowledging and affirming them at the same time. That young children experience strong feelings should not be denied, and in order to survive the feelings that emerge, children need adults who can help them understand and come to terms with them so that they are reassured.

Developing self-assurance

Developing self-assurance focuses on how children go on to become able to trust and rely on their own abilities, the foundation for a healthy personality and the basis for successful learning. Through providing clear and consistent expectations adults help children to develop a sense of trust in others. As children become confident that their physical and emotional needs will be met by either their parent/carer or keyworker/co-keyworker they gain self-assurance, secure in the knowledge that somebody is ‘there’ for themselves and it is recommended in the cards that practitioners ‘Increase the time babies play independently remembering it is comforting for them to hear familiar sounds and have you near’.

As children become more confident at doing things either alone, or for themselves, it follows that they want to exercise their independence and should be supported in this by people and an environment that allows them both to do, and to get, things for themselves. A major factor in facilitating independence, in very young children, is that of time, which is frequently in short supply – time to allow a child to struggle to put on their own socks, or to pour her own drink or simply to watch a cat on a cold morning – yet as we are reminded in the cards ‘Maintaining a watchful presence when babies and children are becoming more independent is not always easy in a busy environment, but is essential to the development of self-confidence and assurance’.

Another dilemma presented, in this equation, is how to protect children from ‘physical harm whilst enabling them to be independent, responsible and self-sufficient’. Clearly there are no easy answers and broader issues about safety are addressed more lengthily in the component A Healthy Child; however, if babies and young children are encouraged to become independent, responsible and self-sufficient they will not be as vulnerable to physical harm.
A sense of belonging

As children continue to become competent and gain confidence in their own abilities they develop a *Sense of Belonging*, where they ‘know what they can do can make a difference (which allows them to) explore and try out new activities’ (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). When children feel ‘at home’ in a setting they are likely to function at their highest level, to truly ‘be themselves’. In this way they begin to relate to others within the group, contribute to what goes on in the setting and value their own and others individuality.

Being able to ‘snuggle in’ gives babies and young children emotional and psychological security as well as physical pleasure and comfort. Indeed, in a society which has become increasingly anxious and concerned about child sexual abuse it is more important than ever that babies and young children experience being touched and held in reassuring ways, since young children learn through all their senses and human contact is vital to emotional well-being.

Having objects, such as a dummy, and a place, like a hideaway beneath a tall cupboard, that are familiar and loved, contribute to this feeling, and encouraging children to take pleasure in these will increase their sense of belonging. Talking to children and their parents about a favourite toy or story or a child’s special hiding place helps to convey to the child that she is approved of and that the adults in her life understand her need to make a ‘home’ in the day care setting where she spends a large proportion of her waking time. It is important also, particularly in day care, to find ways to make all children feel valued, since it is only when a child, or indeed an adult, feels good about herself that she is able to respond in the same way.

Conclusion

A quality Sunday newspaper warned recently that ‘Adult success depends heavily on your childhood self-image’ (*The Observer*, September 2000), going on to describe how both Richard Branson and Cherie Booth were able to overcome childhood difficulties in order to succeed in their adult lives because by the age of 10 they had developed self-esteem.

The life chances of children with low self-esteem are greatly reduced, showing boys with low self-esteem at 10 experiencing a greater risk of unemployment in early adulthood, and more able children with low self-esteem at 10 years of age outstripped as wage earners by their more confident, though less academic peers. It is worth remembering, then, that when people feel good about themselves they have the capacity to affirm other people; to acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses; to be confident in their own abilities, generous in offering praise to others, proud of their own individuality culture or beliefs and respectful of those of others. In short, they are what has been described as *A Strong Child*, and surely no more important foundation than this can be laid, if the ultimate ideal in society is to create adults who are equally strong?
Re-articulating research and policy

Tina Bruce and Sacha Powell

The Froebelian themes which act as navigational tools to Froebelians are used to gather into a summary key message for research and policy relating to early childhood.

1. Curriculum and pedagogy emerge from coherent philosophical frameworks

Curriculum and pedagogy require a coherent philosophical framework with inner logic so that teachers and practitioners are guided in their professional judgements and there is less risk of prescriptive or confused practice. Fundamentally, education is always about, for, with, through and because of the child (who is unique). This principle goes far beyond rhetoric and is a thread that must weave through curriculum documents and emanate through teachers’ and practitioners’ interpretations of curriculum. Curriculum must be a pedagogy that recognises and respects the holistic and connected nature of the child’s being, developing and learning.

2. Educational histories inform educational futures

Learning the lessons of history supports this process. Froebelian education offers useful lessons in this respect. Froebelian education demonstrates not only how a principled approach to curriculum and pedagogy navigates through time but also across geographical boundaries. Hence it is also sensitive and adaptable to social and cultural difference, diversity and commonality.

3. Sustaining high quality education and training

High quality initial education and in-service training of professionals are essential for all those working in the education and care of young children with parity of status across sectors and phases. Froebelian educators recognise not only that children’s learning can be either enabled or restricted by physical or imagined boundaries. Unhelpful boundaries may include distinctions that are conceived between learning environments and endeavours. Teachers and practitioners have an important role to play in dismantling those distinctions and helping children to pursue increasingly complex, linked endeavours. Consequently, teaching and caring for young children is a ubiquitous pursuit.

(Continued)
4. Developing mature and principled professionals

Teachers and lead practitioners need to be mature, well-educated and to train through practice supported with discussion and critical reflections, principled framing of the work and interconnection with current research and theory. This is a ‘slow cook’ approach, which is both broad and deep in scope, so short training periods with little linkage of theory, practice and philosophy aiming for quick results will not enable high quality education or care of the youngest children. Instead of education there will be instruction and schooling. The Froebel teacher training was of three years duration. Learning to know children, their families and communities is open-ended and learning the profession of education and care takes time. Mastery is a life’s work.

5. Devoting time to the art and craft of teaching

Teacher education, lead practitioners and managerial leaders in schools, nurseries, children’s centres and family work contexts need the ‘slow cook’, deeply educative kind of initial training to be maintained through subsequent professional training days and courses. These should always have explicit connections to the underlying philosophy and principles of the educational approach and the curriculum, enriched with contemporary theory and research. The Froebelian Networks makes a powerful contribution here.

6. Practising professional reflection

Initial and in-service training needs to emphasise the importance of integrating the philosophical base with current research and theory, and the ability to articulate, reflect, discuss, analyse and debate. The way to develop this and sustain it is to encourage participation in professional reflection groups and networks involving communities of learners. Professional reflection needs to include attention to the role of emotion in professional interactions and the nature of anti-discriminatory practice.

7. Engaging in peer support and scrutiny

These discussions need to be based on daily and regular practice in working with young children and their families. Theory without practice is empty and tends to become prescriptive and formulaic. Being part of a network of critically thoughtful practitioners or researchers allows participants to deepen the ability to collect their thoughts and develop them. It equips them to meet others who take a different view and to hold their ground in a rigorous well-grounded way.

8. Listening and being heard

Research needs to be ‘with rather than on’ practitioners if it is to be influenced by and influence. Communities of learners where practitioners and researchers work together, sometimes with children, families and civil servants, help bring about clearer thinking and progress.

9. Contributing expertise

Policy is more likely to be embraced by practitioners when they feel listened to by researchers and policy makers and they have been an influential part of its development. Examples of this are in this book. When this does not happen, morale is likely to be undermined.