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Tina Bruce, Peter Elfer, Sacha Powell, Louie Werth

The life of the Froebel Archive

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Kornelia Cepok
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The Froebel Archive for Childhood Studies is regarded as a highly important resource on its subject. Together with the National Froebel Foundation Archive it tells a story of early childhood education in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. This chapter will present the two archives as a research facility and inspiration to their users through the eyes of an archivist. Following an introduction to its holdings, the chapter will describe the archive’s user groups. It will also discuss the co-relation between the user and the archive professional, and the benefits of this co-relation to all parties involved, including the archive itself. The findings are largely drawn from observation and experience in working with the archive for more than a decade and can therefore be seen as a personal account.

Established in 1977 (College Governing Body Minutes 1970–1983) under the name ‘Early Childhood Archive’, the core of the Froebel Archive was based on the National Froebel Foundation (NFF) Archive and donations (Weston, 2002). It has grown and developed significantly over the last 40 years and together with the NFF Archive, which has been housed alongside the Froebel Archive in the University of Roehampton Library since 2007, a wealth of information exists on the Froebel movement in Britain, teacher education and early childhood education in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Froebel Archive was established as a result of institutional changes, including the formation of the Roehampton Institute of Higher Education combining with three other local colleges for women’s teacher training (Digby Stuart, Whitelands and Southlands) in 1975. This change pathed the way for the formation of today’s University of Roehampton which gained its independent status in 2004; the Froebel Archive is therefore not only evidence of the Froebel movement and (women’s) teacher training, but also an underpinning record of the University’s legacy.

The archive holds an approximately 7,000-strong book collection which relates to Friedrich Froebel, his ideologies and achievements; distinctive approaches by other educationalists; texts on the history and philosophy of education, kindergartens, infant schools and progressive schools; as well as texts on child development, welfare and educational psychology. It holds key government reports and legislation, and a unique resource of the Froebel Society journal Child Life and its successors, as well as other periodicals, such as the New Era. In addition to the book collection there are approximately 180 running metres of institutional archives of the Incorporated Froebel Educational Institute (IFEI) and the National Froebel Foundation as well
as a number of sub-fonds (sub-collections) which are associated with the FEI, Froebel or early childhood education more generally.

There is no scope to present the archive’s entire content in this chapter (visit the website of the University of Roehampton to view the archive catalogue). Instead, a few key features are highlighted.

The Froebel Archive houses two distinct groups which give invaluable insights into aspects of teacher training in Britain that have followed Froebel’s principles, and student life at the IFEI and the history of the Froebel College. The first group is student course work (FACS/9/1) and the second contains photographs (FACS/15). The work of 82 former students is represented in the archive, consisting of lecture notes, course work, albums and the like. Spanning from the 1890s to the mid-twentieth century, they cover many subjects taught at the IFEI (Weston, 2002). Their richness and quality of execution is remarkable and invaluable for those seeking information about a wide variety of topics.

The collection of over 3000 photographs covers a similar date span and gives an insight into early Froebel settings and the college more generally. Students’ photograph albums (FACS/15/4/9), mostly dating from the 1920s and 1930s, often combine curricular and extra-curricular activities and give a wonderful insight into student life at that time.

A third distinct sub-collection is known as the Chris Athey Archive. This is an extensive record of Chris Athey’s work, her earlier interest on the subject of Humour, and more importantly the research she carried out during the Froebel Research Nursery Project (FACS/9/4/2). Initiated by Molly Brearley, then FEI Principal, it was led by Chris Athey on Froebel College grounds between 1972 and 1977 (see Chapter 33). This project included fundamental research on two key areas: patterns of play, which Athey developed into the Concept of Schemas and the involvement of families in nursery life, which contributed to the development of Sure Start, the flagship family policy of the New Labour government in England in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The project culminated in Athey’s publication, Extending Thought in Young Children (Athey, 1990).

Within the NFF Archive there are two further groups of important material: minute books and reports of the numerous committees associated with the Froebel Society, National Froebel Union and the National Froebel Foundation (NFF/1–3). Spanning from 1874, the year the Froebel Society was formed, to the end of the twentieth century, they are regarded as the core of the organisational archive and contain the historical evidence of the Froebelian educational movement in Britain.

Supporting the minute books and reports, the student registers (NFF/4–5) list every student – female only until 1965 – who enrolled on the Froebel Teachers Certificate course for over 100 years, i.e. between 1874 and the 1970s.

Both archives are repeatedly accessed as a source for research for many scholars from across the globe, underlining the importance and uniqueness of the Froebel Archive.

Closer to home, the archives have been subject to several projects over last few years, some generously supported by the Froebel Trust. The Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009, Froebel trained at Froebel College in 1930–1932) project was carried out between 2010 and 2012. This collaborative project involved work between Roehampton’s academic and support staff, individuals who worked with Elinor, a local nursery school, the archivist and the Froebel Trust. It utilised the film material that was Elinor’s legacy to produce a DVD for early years practitioners and to bring Elinor’s achievements (FACS/9/4/7) – the treasure basket, heuristic play and key person approach – to the attention of practitioners in contemporary early years settings (see Chapter 12).
A more recent project, also funded by the Froebel Trust, was carried out by Valeria Scacchi, who undertook the task of producing bibliographic lists of material on a number of topics. The aim was to aid the learning and research for students and scholars alike and provide them with guidelines as to which material can be found in the Froebel Archive on topics such as Block Play, Family Life or Froebel’s curriculum (see Chapter 6). It was an ambitious project and relied on the archivist’s content knowledge and meticulous ‘combing’ for relevant material. Valeria consulted approximately 70% of the archive material, in addition to the Froebel Archive book collection.

Facilitating and aiding research, such as that described above, is a major part of an archivist’s role and inevitably archivists can develop detailed knowledge of the subject and the material of which they are the custodians. The many people whose interest has brought them to the Froebel Archive have carried out research that has yielded benefits for the archive and enhanced the knowledge of the archivist. In the last decade or so, there has been recognition of a co-existence and collaboration between researcher and archive professional. Understandably, while archivists tend to have a good overview and detailed knowledge of the archive content, it is impossible to know each file or item within it. This is when the researcher can help. In order to give a positive experience and exploit the archives, researchers are encouraged to share some details about their research. This approach opens a channel of communication and exchange, and researchers will happily share interesting details or irregularities found in the archives. An archivist can use this information to enrich their knowledge of the archive content, but more importantly to provide more content information to the descriptive records and enrich the experiences of subsequent users. The archival collection benefits, too, as researchers help to identify preservation and conservation issues.

Historically, the Froebel Archive has maintained a close relationship with the School of Education at the University of Roehampton, and over the last few years similar relationships have been established with other teaching departments. This relationship is based on supporting the teaching and learning within the department. Lecturers embed material based in the archive or subjects represented in it into their teaching or reading lists and encourage their students to carry out research in the archive. Many lecturers also choose to offer an archive induction session to their groups, which are tailored by the archivist to the topics covered by the seminar based on information provided by the lecturer. For the vast majority of the students it is their first visit to an archive setting and presents a whole new arena for research. For the sessions, material is selected to be interesting as well as relevant to the students’ learning and they are offered a hands-on experience. In addition to talking about the material content, students learn about archive basics, such as handling, preservation issues and their responsibilities as a researcher towards the material. The aim is to present archives as something not distant and untouchable, but tangible and real, with great potential for consultation during their study. It poses a fantastic opportunity for the students to learn these basic archiving rules at university.

Feedback is generally very positive and students treat the material with much care and respect. Many admire the quality and nature of the material, which very often includes examples from former students’ course work and which they can relate to their own course work. In addition, of course, the students learn about student life a century ago and take away a piece of their university’s history. At times, a few students return to the archive; this is because of genuine interest in a topic or because they would like to explore the archive profession.

Much of the Froebel Archive holdings have been donated by former students or other individuals associated with the IFEI during the 1980s and 1990s. Without these donations the archive would not have been the rich resource it is. They inject life into the organisational records and make the archive so much more personal.
Recently an elderly gentleman contacted the archive, having been triggered into thinking of his early schooling experiences. He knew that he attended a ‘Froebel school’ in London as a young child in the 1930s, yet he could not remember details. With the help of his descriptions and photographs from the archive, it seems likely that he attended Colet Gardens, a setting which was established as a Demonstration School to the then FEI in 1896. It provided early schooling for children following the Froebelian principles and was supplied by Froebel trained (female) teachers. Initially attached to the college building, it remained in the same building after the college moved to Roehampton in 1922 until 1939, when it was evacuated to Little Gaddesden in Hertfordshire.

The gentleman talked about his memories in the school and about the impact it had on him in his later life. He was invited to write down his memories in relation to the school and send his account of school life to the archivist. Whilst the archive contains a rich collection of student reminiscences among our archive holdings, scarcely any first-hand accounts exist from individuals describing what it was like to be taught in a Froebel setting by Froebel trained teachers. In this case, this gentleman seems to have been a pupil of the Demonstration School which makes it the more interesting. A case such as this provides new evidence for research and a further layer within the rich story of early childhood education which this archive tells.