

Froebel Trust End of Project Research Report

Title:

The experiences and pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices of students at Froebel College

Team:

Dr Kate Hoskins, Professor Kevin Brehony and Dr Sue Smedley

As the trust is aware, from the outset it was always intended that I would be doing this research on my own as Kevin knew he was seriously ill and, in his words, would not be around to see the project through. I have benefitted enormously from Dr Sue Smedley's input as a researcher on the project. I have also benefitted from my research mentor's (Professor Debbie Epstein) comments on drafts of my journal articles and conference paper.

Aims and research questions:

Key aims

The key aims of this project are as follows:

- To draw on a life history interviewing approach to understand what was specific about child centred Froebelian training in the 1950s and 1960s at Froebel College.
- To explore how we can develop and nurture teachers committed to Froebelian ideals and values for teaching and early years education in the future.
- In meeting these aims, the project data has explored the possibilities and challenges associated with taking a Froebelian pedagogic approach in early years settings.

The intention is to use this data to inform a larger funded study which is discussed at the end of this report.

Research questions

This pure research pilot study addressed two research questions:

- What was the educational experience of a small cohort of students who attended Froebel College in the 1950s and 1960s?
- How did these experiences impact their pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices?

The project data highlights the participants' perceptions of the distinctive features of child centred learning and their views on the importance of child centred learning.

The data has also enabled us to think about how we can protect and extend Froebelian philosophy in practice and to reflect on the value of doing so.

The project aims have a strong applied element and have considered how contemporary education policy could further utilise Froebelian ideals and values in terms of teacher training and early year's education provision in the UK. Thus dissemination of the findings to academics and practitioners has the potential to directly influence pedagogic practice.

Methodology, methods and ethics:

The research methodology was qualitative to explore the participants' lived experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) from their perspective. Qualitative methods enabled me to explore the participants' experiences of Froebelian training and of enacting Froebelian education philosophy in a range of early years settings.

The primary research tool was interviews informed by a biographical life history method. This method involved conducting semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions to see how the participants "subjectively remember and understand significant events of their lives" (Rubin and Babbie, 2009: 220). Taking a life history approach provided participants with the space to discuss the issues that are important to them, within the context of the wider topic under investigation.

The research complied with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) revised ethical guidelines; the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) ethical guidelines; and the University of Roehampton's (2011) ethical guidelines. The ethical concerns relating to conducting qualitative interviews included issues of confidentiality and anonymity in terms of protecting the participants' identities and obtaining informed consent. I made the participants aware that they can withdraw at anytime and/ or not answer questions throughout the research process.

All of the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed to allow for thorough and rigorous data coding and analysis. The transcripts enabled me to identify patterns within the sample and to construct accounts of the participants' experiences of their education and subsequent professional practice. The initial coding of the data was informed by Straussian (1987) (see also Strauss and Corbin, 1990) techniques and enabled me to identify emergent thematic data categories and concepts.

Froebel Participant Demographics Table:

We had hoped to access and interview 12 participants. However, in the process of conducting the interviews, data saturation occurred after 9 participants were

interviewed so at that point we stopped. The sample details are set out in the following table:

| Pseudonym | Social class | Ethnicity | Private/state schooling | Mother's occupation | Father's occupation |
|-----------|---------------|----------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Flora | Middle class | White, British | Small girls' school in the country – formerly a private school | Full time mother and housewife and then a Teacher | Medical masseur |
| Sandra | Working class | White, British | Girls' secondary grammar school (primary not mentioned) | Teacher | Army then teacher then head teacher |
| Isabel | Middle class | White, British | Private boarding school | Teacher | Army |
| Ruth | Middle class | White, British | Private primary school and girls' grammar secondary school | Housewife and mother | Lecturer in Botany |
| Madeline | Middle class | White, British | Independent school | Voluntary and charity work and full time mother | Underwriter, Lloyds London |
| Jane | Middle class | White, British | Independent girls' school | Nurse/nanny/ then full time mother | Ran the family coal business |
| Una | Middle class | White, British | Private primary Grammar secondary | Not stated | Teacher |
| Jennifer | Middle class | White, British | Attended state primary until 8 then private until left school | Full time house wife | Bank Manager |
| Theresa | Middle class | White, British | State school until 8 followed by CofE school | Kindergarten teacher | Research chemist |

Timeline of work:

As the Trust is aware, the start of the project was delayed due to the sad passing of Professor Kevin Brehony. The project officially started in November 2013. Dr Sue Smedley joined the team in March 2014. As such, the timetable of work completed is as follows:

| Time | Activity |
|------|----------|
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|-------------------------------|--|
| November 2013- May 2014 | Arrange and conduct up to 15 1 hour life history interviews |
| May 2014 – August 2014 | Transcribe interviews and analyse the data. Begin drafting the journal articles and draft the paper for the International Gender and Education Conference in June 2015 |
| September 2014 – January 2015 | Complete writing up 2 journal articles and submit them |
| February 2015 – March 2015 | Complete final journal article and submit it. |
| May 2015 | Academic and practitioner dissemination event at the University of Roehampton |
| June 2015 | Presentation of 2 conference papers at the International Gender and Education Conference |
| December 2015 | Presentation of the final conference paper at the Society for Research In Higher Education Conference |

Key findings:

The data has provided fascinating life history insights into the participants’ family background and experiences of training and Froebel College and their subsequent career journeys. I have organised the key findings in relation to the research questions as follows:

•What was the educational experience of a small cohort of students who attended Froebel College in the 1950s and 1960s?

In addressing this research question, we explored the Froebel College education legacy, and considered how Froebelian training in the 1950s and 1960s resonated with the participants’ family background, habitus and dispositions in distinctive ways (Bourdieu, 1977). The data shows some similarity in the sample in terms of family backgrounds and private/selective state education pathways. The participants’ similar childhood experiences, which were inflected with accounts of freedom, autonomy and opportunities to engage with nature, reflect a synergy with Froebelian principles and philosophy. The resonance between childhood experiences and the pedagogical approach advocated by Froebel highlights the dispositions they benefitted from within their family milieu. We argue that arriving at Froebel College must have felt like coming home to these women.

All of the women in the sample benefitted from supportive, privileged families where the emphasis was on providing an education for girls that could enable them to have a respectable career and teaching fit the bill. The family habitus and dispositions

reported here evidenced a strong middle class orientation with an emphasis on informed support and enabling educational opportunities.

The data reveals a gendered story around the growing acceptance of women obtaining paid employment. The participants were assisted by the historical context in terms of the social and political landscapes that framed their early years and educations – in particular the liberal and progressive landscape that slowly began to emerge after the Second World War. Whilst their experiences were arguably circumscribed by gender ideology about the appropriate and suitable forms of education for a girl, their privileged class backgrounds gave the majority of them the opportunity to pursue a high status, reified education and subsequent professional career not available to many working class girls.

•How did these experiences impact their pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices?

We explored the women's narratives as Froebelian student teachers and their remembered constructions of their experiences. Using an analytical framework underpinned by theories of identity and language (Bakhtin, 1986, Britzman, 2003, Vygotsky, 1978), their stories are shown to shed light on the women's engagement with and commitment to Froebelian ideas (1885, 1887, 1896) and their sense of identifying with what the college stood for.

The women's stories illustrate a version of professionalism, located in time, place and culture, which incorporates contradictory elements of self-belief and self-effacement. In reflecting on their identities as Froebelians, their stories enact an understanding of politics and advocacy which demonstrates professional autonomy.

Unexpectedly, their stories also show some difficulties with articulating Froebelian principles, and instead express an emotional attachment. That emotional engagement, rather than being seen as an inadequacy, is argued to be a central strand in developing a hopeful, motivating and enabling professional workforce. Such a workforce is all the more important today, in the light of current increasing statutory pressures towards performativity, regulation and control in early childhood education and care.

Pathways to impact:

1.Academic publications

We have written two papers that will be submitted on Friday 30th January 2015. The details are as follows:

Hoskins, K. & Smedley S. *A very Froebelian childhood? Life history insights into the early childhood and education experiences of Froebel trainees educated in the 1950s and 1960s*. Submit to Journal of Early Childhood Research.

Smedley, S. & Hoskins, K. *Learning to be Froebelian: student teachers' life histories 1952-1965*. Submit to European Early Childhood Education Research Journal.

I am writing a final article which will be ready for submission in March 2015:

Hoskins, K. Learning through play: reflections on the historical and contemporary status of Froebelian ideals and values in early years educators' training. Submit to European Early Childhood Education Research Journal.

2.Academic dissemination through conferences

We have had 2 peer reviewed abstracts accepted for the International Gender and Education Conference at the University of Roehampton. The papers will be based on our publications as listed above. The papers are as follows:

Hoskins, K. *A very Froebelian childhood? Life history insights into the early childhood and education experiences of Froebel trainees educated in the 1950s and 1960s*.

Smedley, S. *Learning to be Froebelian: student teachers' life histories 1952-1965*.

I intend to present the final paper at the Society for Research In Higher Education Studies conference in December 2015. The paper is as follows:

Hoskins, K. Learning through play: reflections on the historical and contemporary status of Froebelian ideals and values in early years educators' training. Submit to European Early Childhood Education Research Journal.

3.Practitioner, professional and academic dissemination

We will arrange an academic and practitioner dissemination event to take place at the University of Roehampton in late spring – i.e. May 2015. This will be organised and arranged to suit colleagues from the Early Childhood Department at the University of Roehampton.

Follow up project request

The key aim of this follow up project is to build on the existing project detailed above and explore the possibilities of enacting Froebelian principles in practice. The principal research question is:

What are the opportunities for protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice through policy interventions?

To address the key aim, the following research sub-questions will also be addressed:

1. What are practitioners' understanding of play, focusing on any Froebelian education the participants gained through their early year's teacher education, training and development?
2. What connections do practitioners make between their understanding of a Froebelian approach and their own childhood, education, principles and professional practice?
3. What are the possibilities/spaces available to enact Froebelian principles in practice?
4. What are early year's practitioners' self-perceptions of their professional status?

The proposed study will develop the possibilities for protecting and extending Froebelian practice through policy interventions, with a particular emphasis on the education and training received by a sample of 48-64 early years educators. To address the key aim, I will explore the possibilities/spaces available to enact Froebelian principles in practice in contemporary early years contexts. In doing this, the project data will provide qualitative insights into the contemporary enactment of Froebelian philosophy in early year's education, the role of theory in practice, practitioner views on learning through play and their perceptions of their professional status.

The project will provide important insights about issues associated with enacting, protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice. Thus, the project will address the Trust's key aim of developing new thinking on Froebelian practitioner training and training techniques by exploring early years practitioners' understanding of Froebel's key principles, including, but not limited to, learning through play and starting where the child is, rather than where the child 'should' be. In addressing the aims and objectives, I intend to impute what my participants perceive is distinctive about Froebel's approach to early years education to enable me to identify potential gaps in early years training and development, which could be subsequently protected through policy interventions in both the early years curriculum and early years teacher education, training and development.

Dr Kate Hoskins
23rd January 2015