

Froebel Trust summary research report: The experiences and pedagogical beliefs, perspectives and practices of students at Froebel College

Research team:

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Aims and research questions:

The project set out to explore the following research aims:

- 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.

To explore the aims, the 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.

Methodology, methods and ethics:

The research methodology was qualitative 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. 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.

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.

Academic publications

We have submitted the following to journal articles for peer-review:

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*. Submitted to History of Education.

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

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.

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.