**Finding a place for Froebel’s theories : early years practitioners’ understanding and enactment of learning through play**

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Abstract

This paper is part of a wider research project, exploring the possibilities to protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice and analyses interview data from thirty-three early years practitioners to investigate their understanding and enactment of learning through play in relation to the theories of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Analysis of the data sheds light on the practitioners’ professional priorities, referencing the centrality of play, respect for children’s ideas, and risk and safety. Even though many of the practitioners’ principles resonate with Froebel’s ideas, the majority of the practitioners do not theorise their practice as Froebelian, neither do they perceive theory and practice as interrelated. This paper argues for policy-driven early years’ training with a focus on Froebel’s theories, to create confident practitioners and advocates, who appreciate the origins of their practice and can provide rich learning experiences.

key words

Froebel; early years practitioners; play; theory; early years education and training; young children

**Introduction**

The data analysed in this paper were collected as part of a wider project, [funding details] with the key aim of exploring the possibilities to protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice. 60s. The project investigated how the participants’ formative experiences impacted on their pedagogical beliefs and professional practice and the data highlighted the significant impact of a Froebelian identity on participants’ professionalism [authors].

Here we draw on interview data from thirty-three early years practitioners to examine contemporary understanding and enactment of Froebel’s principles, and in so doing shed light on those practitioners’ principles in their work with young children, and for the majority, they reveal limited knowledge of Froebel’s ideas. Our analysis also raises questions about the place of theory in relation to practice and the ways professional practice might be developed.

Froebel’s principles emphasise that children’s development, learning and wellbeing are best served through play and creativity that is ‘child-initiated and child-directed’ (Bruce, 2011a, p. 24). Children are to be supported by adults who understand that learning is holistic. Each child is respected and understood as unique. Engagement with outdoor play, the natural world and the wider community are also centrally important to Froebel’s theoretical perspective.

As Bruce (2011b) and Tovey (2013) argue, Froebel’s theories are not frequently explicitly articulated by practitioners, even though their practice suggests that his ideas are widely accepted. Tovey (2013, p. 1) points out, ‘the word “kindergarten” is widely known today, the name “Froebel” is less well known.’. Our project was funded by the [funder’s name] with the specific aim of examining how to enact Froebelian principles in practice, as part of [funder’s name]’s strategic objective to raise the profile of Froebel’s work. We investigate possibilities for early years practitioners to draw on Froebel’s philosophy of learning through play and to advocate for rich learning experiences, at the same time as following the [Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) policy](http://www.usethekey.org.uk/administration-and-management/policies-documents/curriculum/early-years-foundation-sample-policy) agenda and contending with increasing pressures to prepare children for targets and the next stage of school.

This study is premised on research that argues young children learn most effectively through play (Bruce, 2012; Curtis & Carter, 2003; Tovey, 2007, 2013) and that Froebel was a founder of this pedagogical approach. However, this approach is challenged by on-going statutory pressure for practice that is more didactic and assessment-driven, as highlighted by Osgood (2006, 2010), Taggart (2011) and Rose and Rogers (2012). Urban (2008) has challenged this context, which he characterises as shaped by ‘...a wider predominant discourse on children and childhood in modern society, which, is increasingly concerned about gaining certainties through regulation and achieving predetermined goals’ (Urban, 2008, p. 142). A recent exacerbation of this concern arose with the prospect of a ‘largely meaningless international league table’ (Urban & Swadener, 2016, p. 10): the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) so-called pre-school Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) known as the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS). Although ‘the OECD has said it is not an assessment of school readiness but of more long-term outcomes’ (Goddard, 2017), Moss and Urban see it as ‘a blunt instrument’ (Moss & Urban, 2017, p. 253) which could put pressure on practitioners to ‘teach to the test’. Urban (2017, p. 3) laments the ‘OECD’s commitment to ensuring that children in participating countries no longer engage in wasteful activities like play’ and sees this as another example of a reductive version of what early childhood education and care is about. We share Moss and Urban's concerns, and this project aims to explore the potential of play from a Froebelian perspective as a counter to these statutory pressures.

**A Froebelian approach to early childhood education**

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel has an international reputation as a pioneer, and is most well known for his creation of the ‘kindergarten’ which encapsulates several of his key ideas (1885, 1896) about the importance of children’s self-directed activity and play, respecting children, the centrality of nature, and the community. Bruce and Dyke (2017) provide an important reminder that Froebel’s commitment to the importance of nature was not just about fresh air and being outside, but was about developing a fundamental relationship with nature, a way to understand the unity and interconnection of all things. Froebel’s overarching belief in the unity of human beings, God and nature and his pantheistic beliefs (Brehony, 2010) draw his principles together in a philosophy which was to him as much spiritual and mystical (Lilley, 1967; Whitbread, 1972) as it was practical and pedagogical.

Froebel wanted to liberate children from rote learning and to acknowledge and respect children’s own ideas (Liebschner, 1991). The whole child was the focus and in conjunction with this, all aspects of learning were to be linked through first-hand experiences and play. It is these sentiments, explained in Froebel’s (1885) *Education of Man*, which made important contributions to the distinctive development of Froebel’s approach to the education of young children. Froebel believed children’s self-directed play was an expression of their imagination, creativity and understanding. Symbolic activities, such as art, language, music and dance all nourish the child’s inner life as well as providing a means to express and transform understanding (Bruce, 2011b). In-keeping with this, Froebel created the gifts, the most well-known being wooden blocks. Their simplicity and their aesthetic appeal encouraged children to use their imaginations to express themselves and their ideas in construction. Each child was given a garden plot in the kindergarten as their responsibility, as well as being expected to tend larger communal plots (Liebschner, 1991). Froebel respected young children as independently-minded people and as valued members of the community.

In line with its own principles, a Froebelian approach does not offer a prescriptive pedagogy, but rather sets out an understanding of young children, and of learning, which should guide adults’ interactions with them (Tovey, 2013). From that basis, and with an attitude of respect and interest, adults could judge when and how to intervene to support children’s learning. Liebschner (1991) describes Froebel’s emphasis on observing children, rather than taking an overtly didactic stance which could undermine children’s autonomy. Bruce (2011b, p. 30) cites one of Froebel’s ‘most famous remarks’, ‘Begin where the learner is, not where the learner ought to be.’ However, a contemporary emphasis on targets and assessment levels clashes with this child-centred philosophy. Orlandi (2014) highlights the tension between providing open-ended activities which follow the interests of young children, and decontextualised, ‘artificially created methods designed to maximise learning’ (p. 297) in response to the pressure to meet short-term goals, for example in literacy and mathematics (Orlandi, 2014). The ‘Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage’ acknowledges, ‘There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults.’ (DfE, 2017, 1.8, p. 9), but a goal-oriented culture can impact on practitioners’ interpretations of this in practice. Neither does the document highlight the creativity, determination and joyful engagement that Froebel emphasised as fundamental to play.

Concerns about such tensions are widespread. Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroec (2012) review early childhood education and care in 15 European countries and highlight the ‘schoolification’ (p. 527) of the early years and the risk that this undermines play-based learning. Research undertaken in primary schools in England by Bates (2016), found that ongoing policy pressure to focus on targets and pupil performance was at odds with the teachers’ own values and principles. In the light of this context, we argue that it is all the more important to protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice in relation to play, and to understand and support early years practitioners as confident, knowledgeable professionals.

**Theorising play from a Froebelian perspective**  
In this section, we set out the challenges and context that practitioners face in theorising their practice in relation to play.

The complex relationship between theory and practice is noted by Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002) who describe the difficulties practitioners in England have in ‘articulating pedagogical values’ (p. 470). Similar concerns about practitioners’ ability to theorise play exist elsewhere, for example in Australia (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018) and the U.S.A. (Gelfuso, Parker & Dennis, 2015), highlighting how widespread the issue is.

Wood and Attfield (2013) and Platz and Arellano (2011) point to the traditions that inform the justification of valuing play in children’s learning. Stephen (2010) identifies reluctance amongst practitioners to engage in pedagogical discussion, which she speculates is shaped by the tension between the conflicting priorities of care and academic learning. Broström (2017) notes a dichotomy between a child-centred approach and a more academically-oriented focus. There are also challenges with justifying the ‘big ideas: child-centred learning and play’ (p. 18). Stephen highlights pedagogical questions about adult intervention in child-centred learning and significant variation in how play is interpreted in practice. Broström (2017) specifically considers Froebel’s ideas and argues that they have been overgeneralised and interpreted too literally so that the role of the adult in supporting and extending play is underestimated, based on ‘a romantic argument for play as an activity that will always and automatically contribute to children’s development’ (p. 5).

In this complex context, and faced with extrinsically imposed policy moves to work in more target-oriented ways, we contend there is value in investigating practitioners’ understanding of play and their ability to theorise it. Thus, our paper investigates the ways in which practitioners are able to articulate a theory of play that informs their pedagogy and identifies areas where the relationship between theory and practice could be strengthened. Our data analysis points to tensions between theory and practice, and the practitioners tended to be unable to theorise their pedagogy, even though practice based on Froebel’s ideas, could be identified in their accounts.

**Methodology, methods and analytical framework**

This study adopts a qualitative methodology and life history interviews, which enabled us to gather rich data to examine participants’ understandings and theoretical perspectives (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Through professional contacts, we identified and accessed a sample of six settings, two in rural locations, two in towns and two in cities. This geographical range was planned to strengthen the variety of perspectives represented within the data. It also contributed to our investigation of localism in relation to professional qualifications [authors], but it should be noted that a limitation of the study is that the data is drawn from settings in England only. By deploying a snowballing technique, in total 33 volunteer participants came forward, 32 women and one man, between four and six people per setting. The participants’ qualifications included childcare NVQs and honours degrees (see Table 1: Participant details). [Table 1 near here]

The study complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (2011) revised ethical guidelines, the British Sociological Association (2002) ethical guidelines, and the University of Roehampton’s ethical guidelines (2011). Informed ethical consent was granted by each participant, using appropriate forms, which explained the research focus and procedures. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and care was taken to exclude identifying information relating to the settings, in order to protect confidentiality and to ensure anonymity. Pseudonyms were also provided for the settings and the names of any children, colleagues or settings referred to in the interviews.

Over a 13-month period, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 33 early years practitioners. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview questions covered the participants’ early childhood experiences, their training pathways and their principles and approaches to early years practice. As the interviews were semi-structured, this provided the participants with opportunities to elaborate on issues of importance to them or to introduce a different focus, thus contributing to a co-construction of knowledge.

Both researchers carried out an initial thematic coding of the data, informed by a constructionist grounded theory, which acknowledges that meanings are created through social interaction (Marvisti, 2004) and prioritises ‘theorizing close to the data (Marvisti, 2004, p. 85). The identified themes were then collaboratively reviewed in relation to our specific focus on the participants’ understanding of learning through play according to Froebelian principles.

y As Goodson and Sikes argue, we also ‘see informants and researchers as being each engaged in interpreting the world from their own various perspectives’ (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 39). No research approach is neutral (Walsh, 2001) and neither a researcher’s involvement nor their detachment guarantees validity (Hammersley, 1993). All data and research accounts should be read in the light of their being produced through social practices that take place in specific contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

The process by which individuals take up certain subjective positions has been called ‘investment’ (Hollway, 1989). Individuals construct, maintain, or resist possible versions of their practice and professional identities. This active performance is enacted in each interview as the practitioners construct a sense of their professional priorities and their understanding of their work with children. Their accounts are not straightforward, but involve a process of selecting from their professional practice to express their understanding, making experiences into something with meaning. Their stories shape and reflect their theoretical understanding and their practice.

Kvale (1996, p. 242) argues that achieving validity and reliability should be ‘built into the research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the findings’. We have asked open-ended, non-leading questions and offered participants the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy. We have shared our data and preliminary findings at conferences and seminars to consider the multiplicity of data interpretations. Finally, we have worked and re-worked the accounts to achieve accurate portrayals (Kirsch, 1999).

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**Presentation of data and discussion**

In this section we consider what the data show about the participants’ implicit and explicit understanding and enactment of Froebel’s theories in relation to learning through play. There are five key themes here: first, the practitioners’ commitment to play in a general sense; second, explicit reference to Froebel’s theories; third, respect for children’s own ideas; fourth, risk and safety and fifth, the practitioners’ understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.

i) ***It’s all learning from play’ (Megan)***

Analysis of the data shows a strong ‘investment’ (Hollway, 1989) amongst the practitioners to the importance of play, and for Megan this is evident when she claimed that, ‘It’s all learning from play’. The data suggest that learning through play is associated with independence, enjoyment and mess. Jodie, for example, wants children to ‘engage in their own play’ and for Noreen, play was ‘all centred on the children’. Claudia, Elvira, Gillian, Jodie, Mel and Noreen all refer to free and/or free-flow play, for example, ‘Very good free play with lots and lots of activity’ (Noreen). ‘It’s just to make the kids all happy, you know. To watch them play ... I like all the mess.’ (Elvira). These comments were readily expressed and are framed by well-established early years discourses which emphasise the importance of play. The social aspects of play were also important to the practitioners. Lynn wanted children ‘to play and be children’ and Angela believed there should be ‘fun at the same time that they’re learning.’ The social benefits of play are mentioned by Annabel, who said that children should ‘learn how to play together and socialise’. Outdoor play was frequently referred to as a positive and necessary experience, both for the space and freedom it offers, and for the scope to play with natural resources and to learn about nature. Such an over-arching commitment to play if it is not theorised and considered reflectively could be considered ‘a romantic argument for play that will always and automatically contribute to children’s development’ (Broström, 2017, p. 5).

We now consider the extent to which knowledge of Froebel’s theories in relation to play helped practitioners to articulate their principles and theorise their practice.

ii) ***How do Froebel’s theories feature?***

Jodie, Sandra, Tania, Lisbeth and Karen made comments that were different from those made by others in this research sample, as they mentioned Froebel explcitly. Jodie mentions Piaget and Vygotsky before explaining how Froebel is ‘very much into natural objects and natural learning and into building blocks ... yes, the gifts’. In the home corner, Jodie states there should be real cutlery rather than toy, plastic versions. Creativity is to be encouraged in play, so children might be ‘using pine cones as cakes in little paper cases and using bark and leaves as pretend food for cooking’. Jodie is specific about benefits to children’s learning of the use of real objects. She explains that when a child holds a real orange, rather than a plastic one, they experience ‘that density, you’ve got that feel, you’ve got the smell.’ Jodie thinks natural materials also have a ‘therapeutic’ benefit for children. She makes a detailed connection between Froebel’s theories about nature and the environment and her own practice, enabling her to go some way to advocate and justify her pedagogical approach. This resonates with Murray’s (2018) account of how Froebelian principles have guided and informed her thinking in the field of early childhood education and helped her to identify her values.

Sandra articulates her understanding of Froebel’s view of children and the importance of their relationship with the environment,

I know Froebel’s principle was very much based on the uniqueness of the child and emphasis on a close relationship with the environment... unique people in their own right ... holistic view of the child ... he saw the beauty of children.

Sandra then speaks with enthusiasm about her approach and the wider context of learning through play which starts with and focuses on the child,

Making sure our children are respected ... [so children can] engage in their environment, be very, very creative in their approach, ... lots of exploration, all this awe and wonder ... fluidity of free flow play, they explore sand, water ... block-play ... natural resources .

Sandra sums up her commitment by stating, ‘This is what I love.’. The significance of personal perspective and life history (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) is illustrated in Sandra’s comment about taking a Froebel course, which ‘brought a lot of fond memories about my own childhood’ and it may be that this personal connection in part reinforced a commitment to Froebel’s ideas. A similar point is made by Tania,

I believe and from Froebel’s belief, that the child is the centre of everything and you learn from the child, and the child leads you.

Murray highlights ‘the great value of authentic play that Froebel understood’ (2018, p. 216) which was play initiated and directed by children themselves. However, Broström (2017) reminds us that free-play should not imply a passive role for the practitioner and that some adult direction was suggested by Froebel. The children’s voices and opinions are important and an ‘open-ended egalitarian approach’ (Brooks and Murray, 2018, p. 153) resonates with a Froebelian approach, but also has to incorporate professional decisions about a balance between children’s autonomy and adult direction.

The connection that Jodie, Sandra and Tania made with Froebel’s ideas was not spontaneously offered by the other practitioners we interviewed. In some cases, if the interviewer briefly outlined Froebel’s ideas, then a connection was made. For Lisbeth, the discovery of Froebel’s ideas was something of a surprise, and in terms of theorists in general a sort of defensive, self-effacing panic set in, which can be contextualised within discourses which split theory from practice and where theory is perceived as a ‘diversion and at the expense of practice’ [author],

Actually I was reading Froebel, is it Froebel? … he's probably the one theorist that actually has underpinned my beliefs and my teaching and everything, without actually knowing that he existed necessarily … I'm rubbish with names and I'm rubbish with theorists. (Lisbeth)

Similarly, other practitioners expressed a lack of theoretical knowledge and an inability to articulate their ideas. Karen explained that ‘I’m rubbish at remembering all the names!’ Yvonne told us that ‘I know about his sort of … he’s one of the ones that goes back to nature. Piaget and ... oh gosh, now you’ve asked me I feel the pressure ... I can’t remember now.’ Zoe also struggled to cite relevant theorists and explained that ‘There were quite a few but they’re not coming to my head.’

Lynn, Ashley, Hannah, Angela and Gloria said they had not heard of Froebel. Mel and Gloria mentioned Piaget, Bowlby and Montessori, but not Froebel. Froebelian ideas and approaches were expressed, but were not identified as such by the practitioners themselves. So for example, Mel talked about free play as ‘the child’s work’, which she did not identify as Froebelian. Bruce (2011b) and Tovey (2013) both highlight the absence of explicit reference to Froebel’s ideas in early years practice today. Bruce (2011b) explains that a ‘Froebelian influence has become less overtly articulated’ (Bruce, 2011b, p. 66). Manning (2005), writing from an American perspective, makes a case for re-examining Froebel’s philosophy, based on unity, respect and play, to assess whether looking back to some of the roots of the early childhood thinking, can inform and encourage their development today. Manning describes Froebel’s intention with the kindergarten as providing children with a ‘sanctuary’ (p. 372) that would, ‘protect them from the regimentation they would soon face’ (loc. cit). Murray (2018) also argues that Froebelian principles are ‘relevant and valuable touchstones’ (p. 215) for today. So, Froebel’s ideas were made explicit by some, but they were infrequently articulated spontaneously, and the practitioners’ perception of theory in general, does not seem to help them to justify or develop their practice. A theory-practice gap, also identified by Coleman (2003) suggests that the ways that practitioners are supported in theorising their practice should be reviewed and made more meaningful.

iii) *Respect for children’s own ideas*

The practitioners’ perspectives on play were imbued with a respect for children’s own ideas, a core Froebelian tenet, although not identified by many, as such. The practitioners expressed commitment to children’s autonomy in their play and clear resistance to imposing ideas and activities on children: ‘Everything should come from the children’ (Noreen) and ‘Let them take the lead’ (Saba). Tania insisted that play should be child-led, emphasising that ‘you should wait to be invited into their play’. This perspective is echoed by Jodie, who stated that children should be ‘in control of what they’re doing rather than “This is what we’re going to do today” ... it’s more like extending on what the children already know.’ Drawing on Hollway’s theory of ‘investment’ (1989), here the practitioners are invested in a version of professionalism that values children’s autonomy and resists an overly didactic pedagogy.

Mindful of the potential for negative interpretations of such a child-centred approach, Noreen added the following caveat,

We’re not... leaving children to themselves, you know, like William Golding with Lord of the Flies. You are providing the framework ... so you’re guiding them, but giving them time to find themselves.

This proviso reflects an important interpretation of a value into practice and is a position supported by Howe’s research, which concluded that whilst control of learning should not be solely in the hands of children, it is important to consider the learning benefits of allowing children ‘to exercise autonomy and follow their own interests in playful activities’ (Howe, 2017, p. 757). The practitioners expressed resistance to policy directives which they see as limiting their own practice, ‘They keep changing the goalposts about what’s the priority in children’s learning.’ (Diane). As Bates (2017) argues, working from a basis of core values and a philosophy is undermined ‘when meaning is imposed rather than spontaneously created’ (Bates, 2017, p. 2015). In England, the *Statutory framework for the early years foundation (EYFS)*  describes decision-making about child and adult led activities as an apparently straight-forward ‘ongoing judgement’ (DfE, 2017, 1.8, p. 9), but Brooks and Murray (2018) identify a ‘dissonance’ in the EYFS between the school readiness agenda and a commitment to children’s needs and self-expression. They conclude that ‘a social pedagogy’ is needed, which ‘subordinates school readiness to children’s voices’ (Brooks and Murray, 2018, p. 146) . This position connects with the pedagogical approach outlined by the practitioners in our study, which focused on observing and listening to children, respecting their interests and individual development. This resonates with core Froebelian principles. Tovey (2013) describes the Froebelian approach as ‘inherently respectful of children’ based on a ‘connectedness’ that focuses on children’s own experiences and supported by adults who are ‘deeply informed about and attuned to the distinctive nature of young children’s learning and development’ (Tovey, 2013, pp. 2-4). However, the connection is seldom apparent to the practitioners themselves. So, they work in a context where standardised external measures and targets militate against such child-centred practices and, as Urban (2008, 2017) argues this also applies globally. And in addition, the majority of these practitioners are not drawing on a Froebelian theoretical perspective that could support and extend their professional practice.

iv) *Risk and safety*

Tovey (2007) points out that risk is socially constructed and culturally specific. The practitioners’ comments about the importance of safety are expressed within what Furedi (2002) has described as a culture of fear. Eve said the environment should be ‘caring and safe and promote independence.’ In relation to children’s play and independence, practitioners have to interpret risk and safety in practice and when and how to interact with the children. Kleppe (2018) reviewed 1-3 year olds risky play at early childhood centres in Norway and concluded that autonomous play might seem to justify no interaction, but on the other hand low interaction might suggest low quality experiences for the children. It is important for practitioners to be able to theorise their practice and to take account of the specific context. Four of the practitioners prioritised protecting children and keeping them safe from potential dangers. Hannah said, ‘I think ... the security of the children is the most important thing. You have to take care of them, but be in charge of their safety as well in all aspects.’ For Ashley, it was her ‘main priority just to keep them safe, not hurt themselves.’ And Lynn stated her priority was ‘Respect and that you listen to them and you make sure they’re safe’. In outdoor play, when children were on a climbing frame, Helga would ‘watch at a safe distance, so they’re not going to fall.’

Froebel (in Lilley, 1967, p. 126) wanted children to face challenges in their play, for example climbing trees, and argued that by doing so they were safer, having had opportunities to learn to assess potential risks. This is very different from removing all risks from children’s play, which Tom sees as ‘definitely a control issue.’ In some cases children cannot learn about risk and consequences, because the play area is ‘ridiculously safe to the point where the ground outside is soft.’ (Tom). The complexity of the situation is highlighted by Little’s research (2015) which was based in Australia. Little found that although mothers valued outdoor play, their own children had restricted play experiences with more adult supervision (Little, 2015). To find a ‘workable solution’ (p. 37) which accommodates autonomy and risk is a difficult challenge needing a response at a community rather than an individual level, which connects strongly with Froebel’s belief in the centrality of community in terms of family and the environment.

iv) Theory and practice

The data suggest a limited impact of theory compared to the ideas that shape the practitioners’ professional principles, which is compounded by a separation between theory and practice.

The practitioners focused on professional relationships with children when asked about their theoretical position and principles: ’warm and affectionate’ (Sandra), ‘understanding children’s needs…sensitive’ (Ruth), ‘having the children’s best interests at heart’ (Maggie) and ‘kind and loving’ (Noreen). Ruth rated the ability to interact with children effectively and appropriately over and above qualifications, stating, ‘I think it depends on the individual and your interactions with children and how you are in practice. I think practice is far more important than what you’ve got on paper.’ (Ruth) . An emphasis on affective qualities is in line with Froebel’s philosophy. ‘Love, care and maternalism were the very fibre’ of Froebel’s kindergarten movement (Aslanian, 2015, p. 156), although this is not articulated.l

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Helga and Claudia described theory and practice as two separate entities, and overall experience trumps being a graduate with a strong theoretical background,

It’s like who is better than who? … the theory they're really good at, but the actual other side they don't know what they're doing. They're a bit lost and then you think okay, you're working with children, you're a manager for a nursery, but you don't know how to speak to a child … but someone with experience will know you've got to bend down to a level to speak to them. (Helga)

I also think that some people … can spout it all off, and then you put them with children and they don't know how to interest them so just because you've got a degree doesn't mean you're going to be any better qualified than someone who hasn’t. (Claudia)

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Urban (2008) writes of a ‘top-down stream of knowledge’, which rather than enabling practitioners, increases the pressure on them to achieve pre-determined goals and is premised upon a ‘clear distinction between theory and practice’ (p. 141). Such impositions can also result in practitioners being made to feel incompetent (Bradbury, 2012) or to feel their role is simply to implement rather than interpret policy (Oberheumer, 2005). o s As Brogaard Clausen (2015) argues, practitioners need resilience to manage these tensions. It is unhelpful for theory to be externalised and perceived as separate; rather there should be a reflective interaction between theory and practice and practitioners should be encouraged to explore existing theories, such as Froebel’s, to support and extend their practice.

We argue that an awareness of Froebel’s ideas could have supported the practitioners in theorising their pedagogical principles. Raising the profile of Froebel’s ideas would contribute to this and to practitioners being able to advocate for rich learning experiences, at the same time as following the EYFS agenda and contending with externally-imposed pressures to prepare children for compulsory schooling.

**Conclusions**

Our data demonstrate the subjective positions that the practitioners adopt, which help to maintain their commitment to providing rich experiences of play for children. Linked to this is the centrality of the practitioners’ respect for children’s autonomy. Overlaying this, was a recognition of the discourses concerning children’s safety and avoidance of risk, which can be limiting in relation to adventurous play.

Froebel’s ideas were identified by some, when prompted, but were seldom articulated spontaneously by the practitioners, a position which resonates with the work of Bruce (2011b) and Tovey (2013). Indeed, the practitioners’ perception of their knowledge and understanding of theory in general, does not seem to help them to justify or develop their practice. Dyer (2018) argues that for practitioners to develop agency and professionalism they must ‘draw upon and articulate a critical understanding of the theory and research that underpins their practice’ (Dyer, 2018, p. 358)

From our data analysis, we argue that a place needs to be found for Froebel’s theories, and changes are required in how theory is perceived, and how early years education and training are positioned in the wider policy context. We contend that theoretical understanding should be based on reflective practice that draws on Froebel’s ideas, which would contribute positively to practitioners’ understanding and enactment of learning through play, and, more widely, help to dismantle the unhelpful barriers that seem to exist between theory and practice (see Table 2: Finding a place for Froebel’s theories to enrich practitioners’ principles and practice). [Table 2 near here]

An important aspect of professionalism is the longer-term view, and an ability to develop pedagogy, rather than taking an ‘overly pragmatic view of teaching’ [author]. Knowledge of Froebel’s ideas could inform practitioners about where ideas about play have come from so that they can consider their relevance today (see Tovey, 2013). This requires pedagogical approaches based on interaction, experience and meaning-making, which draw, for example, on Vygotsky’s ideas (1978, 1986) [see author], as well as policy initiatives which more clearly promote a Froebelian approach to young children’s play in early years training and ongoing professional development. Such an approach could provide a valuable counter to discourses of school-readiness which can undermine practitioners’ ability to prioritise play in practice. In the early years context ‘educational values need to be defined anew’ (Bates, 2016, p. 205), rather than principles being externally imposed. Moyles et al. (2002) argue for opportunities for practitioners to revisit and reflect on practice: to engage in a process of ‘reflective dialogue' (p. 469), which recognises that practitioners’ own experiences in practice can be the basis for learning and theorising (Dyer, 2018). To support the application of theory to practice, practitioners should be given opportunities ‘to voice, explore, and critically examine’ their values and pedagogical approach. (Di Santo et al, 2017, p. 223).

For young children to be ‘educated in the deep, broad sense, rather than merely schooled’ (Bruce, 2011b, p. 66), we argue that a place for Froebel’s ideas must be found in early years training and continuing professional development to support practitioners as advocates for the importance of play in quality early years education.

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Table 1: Participant details

**etails**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Setting** | **Setting Status** | **Demographic Definition** | **Early Years Qualifications** |
| Emma | Green Fields | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 2 |
| Eve | Green Fields | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Yvonne | Green Fields | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Lynn | Green Fields | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Karen | Sherwood | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 4 |
| Lisbeth | Sherwood | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Gillian | Sherwood | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Levels 2,3 and 5 |
| Mel | Sherwood | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Tania | Sherwood | State maintained | Rural | Childcare NVQ Levels 3 and 5 |
| Diane | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 and 4 |
| Elvira | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Megan | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 |
| Yvette | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Saba | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Noreen | South Church | State maintained | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Hannah | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Teacher training (European country) |
| Annabel | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Levels 2,3 and 5 |
| Angela | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 |
| Ashley | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Jennifer | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 1 and 2 |
| Gloria | North Cross | Private | Suburban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Ruth | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | BA in Childhood Studies  Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Salma | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | BA Education |
| Helga | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Zoe | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Tom | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | BALiterature with Politics  Starting a Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Maria | East Lea | State maintained | Urban | Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3 |
| Sandra | West Point | State maintained | Urban | BA Social Work |
| Susie | West Point | State maintained | Urban | Childcare NVQ Level 3 |
| Maggie | West Point | State maintained | Urban | BEd Primary Education |
| Jodie | West Point | State maintained | Urban | BA Early Years Education |
| Lorna | West Point | State maintained | Urban | BA Education |
| Claudia | West Point | State maintained | Urban | NNEB Childcare |

**Table 2: Finding a place for Froebel’s theories to enrich practitioners’ principles and practice**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Identified theme* | *Example from data* | *Summary of findings* | *Finding a place for Froebel’s theories to enrich practitioners’ principles and practice* |
| Learning from play | Very good free play with lots of activity.(Noreen) | All practitioners expressed a commitment to the importance of play in relation to young children’s learning. | Froebel is a pioneer of early childhood education and play and knowledge of his ideas would help practitioners to contextualise and reflect on their professional work. |
| Froebel’s theories | I believe and from Froebel’s belief, that the child is the centre of everything and you learn from the child.(Tania) | Five of the participants referred to Froebel’s theories to explain and justify their pedagogical approach with young children. | Working in the context of policy requirements eg early years assessments, it is important that practitioners can articulate and justify their principles and practice. |
|  | I know he [Froebel] exists, but I can’t remember what his ideas were. (Zoe) | 28 of the participants expressed little or no knowledge of Froebel’s theories. | Wood and Attfield argue that practitioners ‘need to raise their own theories, values and beliefs to a conscious level of awareness’ (2013 p58). |
| Respect for children’s own ideas | Let them take the lead.(Saba) | The practitioners expressed commitment to children’s autonomy in their play and clear resistance to imposing ideas and activities on children. | Respecting children’s own ideas and encouraging self-directed play are core tenets of Froebel’s philosophy. |
| Risk and safety | Main priority just to keep them [the children] safe, not hurt themselves. (Ashley) | A high priority was given to protecting children and keeping them safe from potential dangers. | Froebel (in Lilley, 1967, p. 126) argued that children facing challenges in their play are safer as they have learnt to assess potential risks. |
| Theory and practice | I think it depends on the individual and your interactions with children and how you are in practice. I think practice is far more important than what you’ve got on paper. (Ruth) | Practitioners perceive a separation between theory and practice. | Practitioners describe practice that resonates with Froebel’s theories but do not identity it as such. Froebel’s theories could provide a way in to understanding the interaction between theory and practice. |