

Life history insights into the early childhood and education experiences of Froebel trainee teachers 1952-1965

Author details:

Dr Kate Hoskins, (*Corresponding author*) *School of Education, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PU, United Kingdom, 0208 392 5753, kate.hoskins@roehampton.ac.uk*

Dr Sue Smedley, *School of Education, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PU, United Kingdom*

Abstract

Drawing on life history interview data collected as part of a research project funded by the Froebel Trust, this paper explores the family backgrounds and educational experiences reported by nine women who attended Froebel College located in London in the United Kingdom (UK), in the 1950s and 1960s. Informed by Bourdieu's¹ theories of habitus and field and theories of identity², this paper explores any shared habitus and dispositions within the early childhood and family milieu reported by the participants. The paper also considers the women's educational experiences and their stories of getting into Froebel College, reflecting on the commonality of family values and secondary education pathways they reported. The findings show some striking resonances between Froebel's³ educational ideals, in particular his belief in the mystical and transformative power of learning through play and engaging with nature⁴ and the participants' stories of their early childhood experiences.

Keywords: Froebel; early childhood; life history; habitus and field; gender identity

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

² Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2003); Janet, M. Stoppard, *Understanding depression: Feminist social constructionist approaches* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³ Friedrich Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel's Education By Development: the second part of the pedagogics of the kindergarden* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896).

⁴ Kevin J. Brehony, ed., *The Origins of Nursery Education: Friedrich Froebel and the English System* (London: Routledge, 2001); Kevin J. Brehony, 'The kindergarden in England 1851-1918' in *Kindergarden and cultures: the global diffusion of an idea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000): 59-86.

Introduction

The paper draws on life history interview data that was collected as part of a research project funded by the Froebel Trust which explored the family background, educational experiences and subsequent career pathways of students who attended Froebel College in London (UK) in the 1950s and 1960s. This paper presents data and analysis relating to the influence of the participants' family background and educational experiences on their decision to attend Froebel College. For a discussion of the participants' narratives as Froebelian student teachers and their remembered constructions of their experiences please see our other project paper⁵

We draw on theories of habitus and field⁶ and theories of identity⁷, to highlight any shared habitus and dispositions within the early childhood and family milieux reported by the participants. We then discuss the women's experiences of secondary schooling and their stories of getting into Froebel College, reflecting on the commonality of family values and education we identified in their narratives. The research examines how Froebelian ideology infused all of the participants' early childhoods on some level, particularly notions of child freedom, autonomy, learning through play and engaging with nature⁸. At the centre of this research is our commitment to Froebel's⁹ educational ideals, in particular we have set out to explore the way his philosophy has been experienced and taken up by the participants throughout their lives.

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel's (1782-1852) work in Keilhau, Germany, between 1817-1831, and then in Lucerne, Switzerland, between 1831-1836, provided the foundation for teacher education courses at Froebel College, in particular, his commitment to developing 'all the faculties of his pupils through the exercise of their own activity in subjects whose interconnection had been carefully thought out and which were seen to be in close connection with life'¹⁰. It is these sentiments, reflected in Froebel's *Education of Man*, which made important contributions to the distinctive development of Froebel College teacher education programmes since they were established in 1892. The commitment to learning through play, which is central to Froebel's work, has influenced the development of teacher education at Froebel College. Froebel's approach to learning requires

⁵ Author reference.

⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

⁷ Burr, *Social Constructionism*; Stoppard, *Understanding depression: Feminist social constructionist approaches*.

⁸ Brehony, *The Origins of Nursery Education: Friedrich Froebel and the English System*.

⁹ Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel's Education By Development: the second part of the pedagogics of the kindergarden*; Friedrich Froebel, *Letters on the Kindergarten* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1887).

¹⁰ J White, *The Educational Ideas of Froebel* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1907): 66.

educators to start with the child, with their interests and abilities, and thus they are afforded a degree of autonomy in terms of their preferences and choices. The opportunity for autonomy is important for developing children's self-esteem and confidence in engaging with their environment. A child led approach requires educators to have a comprehensive understanding of how children learn through play, which points to the need for highly trained teachers who can provide enabling contexts. The transformative potential of play was central to Froebel and he viewed it as 'the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul'¹¹. Froebel College has thus been a nexus for practicing and developing this Froebelian philosophy and has provided a space for like-minded individuals to explore the potential of enabling children to learn through play.

The Froebelian tradition

In what follows, we briefly summarise the key principles informing Froebel's theoretical approach and practice. This summary informs the later discussion in this paper exploring how the concepts were experienced by the participants in their early childhood. Froebel has an international reputation as a pioneer, and is perhaps most well known for his creation of the 'kindergarten' which encapsulates several of his key ideas about the importance of children's self-directed activity, nature, and the community. His overarching belief in the unity of human beings, God and nature ties his principles together in a philosophy, which was to him as much spiritual and mystical¹² as it was practical and pedagogical.

In keeping 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 and inform adults' interactions with them¹³. Froebel wanted to liberate children from rote learning and to acknowledge and respect children's own ideas¹⁴. 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. 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

¹¹ Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel's Education By Development: the second part of the pedagogics of the kindergarten*.

¹² Irene, M. Lilley, *Friedrich Froebel: a selection from his writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Nanette Whitbread, *The Evolution of the Nursery-Infant School* (Abingdon, Routledge, 1972).

¹³ Helen Tovey, *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴ Joachim Liebschner, *Foundations of Progressive Education: The History of the National Froebel Society* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991).

as well as providing a means to transform and express understanding¹⁵. In keeping with this, Froebel created the 'gifts' and 'occupations'. The most well-known of the gifts are wooden blocks. Their simplicity and their aesthetic appeal, encouraged children to use their imaginations to construct whatever they wished. The occupations (for example resources for weaving and sewing) stimulated children's interest in and awareness of pattern.

Weston¹⁶ points out that kindergarten can mean a 'garden of children' as well as a 'garden for children'. This reflects Froebel's pantheistic beliefs¹⁷, as well as his respect for young children as individuals and as respected members of the community. Each child was given a plot in the garden as their responsibility, as well as being expected to tend larger communal plots¹⁸. Young children were to be involved in and knowledgeable about the wider community. Froebel's approach which fostered young children as independently-minded people, met with a hostile political context¹⁹ and this led to the 'Kindergarten Verbot', the banning of kindergartens in Prussia and the subsequent move of Froebelian supporters and ideas to London and beyond, for example the United States of America (USA) and later to Tokyo²⁰.

In the process of translation between the contexts of nineteenth century Prussia to twentieth century North America and Europe, Froebelian practice underwent modifications that related to a country's cultural context, and in particular, the position of women within society. For example, as Wollons²¹ notes, for western women 'the history of the kindergarten has been included in the larger histories of women's social activism and professionalization in education'. However, in countries, such as Japan and China, with 'strong authoritarian governments, the kindergarten was adopted without the activism of women, and without benefit to women's advancement'²². In addition, ideas about the kindergarten were 'modified as the concept of the modern child was refined'²³. These modifications, which included changes to the activities and games played by young

¹⁵ Tina Bruce, ed., *Early Childhood Practice. Froebel Today* (London: Sage, 2012).

¹⁶ Peter Weston, *Friedrich Froebel: His Life, Times and Significance* (London: University of Surrey Roehampton, 2000).

¹⁷ Kevin J. Brehony, 'Theories of play' in P. *Encyclopedia of children and childhood: in history and society* (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003): 826-832.

¹⁸ Liebschner, *Foundations of Progressive Education: The History of the National Froebel Society*.

¹⁹ Kevin J. Brehony, 'The Froebel movement in England 1850-1911: texts, readings and readers' in *Perspektiven der Fröbelforschung* (Wurzburg, Königshausen & Neumann: 2006): 49-64.

²⁰ Roberta Lyn Wollons, *Kindergartens and cultures: The Global Diffusion of an Idea* (USA: Yale University, 2000).

²¹ Wollons, *Kindergartens and cultures*: 7.

²² Wollons, *Kindergartens and cultures*: 8.

²³ Wollons, *Kindergartens and cultures*: 7-8.

children and changes to the pedagogy of kindergarten practitioners²⁴, provided a philosophical basis for the development of subsequent approaches to early childhood such as Montessori and Steiner.

In terms of teacher education, Froebel's intention was to develop adults' understanding of young children's learning. From that basis, and with an attitude of respect and interest, adults could judge when and how to intervene to support children's learning. Liebschner²⁵ quotes *The Education of Man*, 'Education, instruction and teaching should in the first instance be passive and watchfully following and not dictatorial and interfering.' The interpretation of this approach in contemporary early years practice is controversial and is of central importance for young children's early years experiences. Bruce²⁶ cites one of Froebel's 'most famous remarks', 'begin where the learner is, not where the learner ought to be'. Froebel felt that valuing the child should start from birth, when 'the child should be recognised in his essential nature and allowed to use his energy freely in all its aspects. There should be no hurry to get him to use some of his powers while others are repressed'²⁷. In the UK, the contemporary early years, i.e. preschool, education context is increasingly focused on children achieving standardized targets through standardized assessments; this approach to early years education is very much at variance with Froebel's philosophy²⁸.

Women, education and employment

A further stand in this research is to examine the social context framing the participants' education and subsequent career opportunities. Contextualizing the historical, social and education moment the participants experienced provides insights into the situated gendered expectations and constructions these women were exposed to. The participants were born in the 1930s and 1940s and grew up in the shadows of the First and Second World Wars. The social context was shaped by political unrest and economic austerity. Education provision in England was piecemeal and dependent on the area where people lived and their family background²⁹. Schooling was only compulsory to the elementary stage and opportunities for girls to be educated were limited, although this

²⁴ Henrietta R. Eliot and Susan E. Blow, *The Mottoes and Commentaries of Friedrich Froebel's Mother-Play* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2000).

²⁵ Liebschner, *Foundations of Progressive Education: The History of the National Froebel Society*: xiii.

²⁶ Bruce, *Early Childhood Practice*: 30.

²⁷ Lilley, *Friedrich Froebel: a selection from his writings*: 59.

²⁸ Author reference.

²⁹ Les Bash, David Coulby and Crispin Jones, *Urban schooling: theory and practice* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

varied considerably between upper, middle and working class girls. The participants entered elementary education in the 1940s and 1950s at a time when expectations for girls' education were focused on 'traditionally gendered aspirations and outcomes'³⁰. This positioning continued in the post-War period because, as Martin³¹ argues, 'the victorious politicians saw the domestic role of women as crucial for the construction and rehabilitation of social harmony and cohesiveness'. These gendered assumptions underpinned the elementary and secondary education provision for many girls in the post war period.

In the early post Second World War years, some girls were educated privately where the emphasis was generally on an academic education, although this could be complimented by training to become an 'intelligent wife'³². A small minority of girls benefitted from the 1944 Education Act and passed the eleven plus and attended grammar or direct-grant schools. Summerfield's³³ study of grammar school girls' experiences found that several of the girls had aspirations for a university education. For the majority of grammar school girls in this period 'teaching was the favoured career goal'³⁴ because of its respectable overtones³⁵ and common sense compatibility with having a family³⁶. Thus, the number of teacher training colleges in the UK was increasing and by '1958 there were 18 for men, 100 for women and 18 mixed colleges'³⁷. For privileged middle and upper class girls whose parents paid for their schooling, such as the participants in our study, private provision could easily be extended to the post compulsory context.

Following the Second World War, the number of female students participating in higher education was gradually increasing³⁸. This increase was a result of three key factors: first, policy changes, specifically the 1944 Education Act, which allowed some girls access to an academic school curriculum via the eleven plus; second, the 50 per cent

³⁰ Meg Maguire, 'Gender and Movement in Social Policy' in *The Sage handbook of Gender and Education* (London: Sage Publications, 2006): 7.

³¹ Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Leicester, 1999): 104.

³² Penny Summerfield, *Women workers in the Second World War: production and patriarchy in conflict* (London: Routledge, 1989).

³³ Penny Summerfield, 'Cultural Reproduction in the Education of Girls: a Study of Girls' Secondary Schooling in Two Lancashire Towns, 1900- 50', in *Lessons for Life. The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950* (Oxford: Basis Blackwell, 1987): 149-170.

³⁴ Summerfield, 'Cultural Reproduction', 106.

³⁵ Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable* (London: Sage, 1997).

³⁶ Sue Ledwith and Simonetta Manfredi, 'Balancing Gender in Higher Education. A Study of the Experience of Senior Women in a 'New' UK University', *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 7 (2000): 7-33.

³⁷ Christine Heward and Paul Taylor 'Effective and ineffective equal opportunities policies in higher education', *Critical Social Policy*, 13 (1993): 23-24.

³⁸ Margaret Coats, *Women's Education* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994).

expansion of university places which took place during the 1960s³⁹; and third, the demands of the post-War economy necessitated 'the growth of white-collar and professional occupations' and this 'required the recruitment of female labour'⁴⁰. The expansion in higher education for girls was circumscribed by gender ideologies, which prescribed disciplines such as teaching and nursing as compatible with femininity. To explain the increasing participation of females in some form of higher education, Deem⁴¹ argues that:

changes in the education of women since 1944 have usually been accompanied by changes in general social policy, and those changes have been closely linked to the needs of the economy and to prevailing ideologies about women's role in society.

To accommodate these changes the state ideology 'encouraged women into education and training'⁴² and supporting welfare services such as childcare provision were increasingly made available from the 1970s onwards to enable women's participation in the labour market 'albeit in segregated sectors'⁴³.

Over the last century the social and policy context, and changing social norms, have significantly influenced women's career aspirations and expectations to include a wider range of employment, but the literature also recognizes that gendered career choices have persisted, particularly in teaching⁴⁴. The persistence in feminine career choices has been attributed to:

patterns including institutional or structural barriers, the internalisation of social norms and gender discourses and differences in values and goals that include career choice⁴⁵.

³⁹ Ann Brooks, *Academic Women* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Brooks, *Academic Women*, 16.

⁴¹ Rosemary Deem, *Active citizenship and the governing of schools* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995): 31.

⁴² Brooks, *Academic Women*, 16.

⁴³ Brooks, *Academic Women*, 16.

⁴⁴ Jane Read, 'Froebelian women: networking to promote professional status and educational change in the nineteenth century', *History of Education* 32 (2003): 17-33.

⁴⁵ Lisa Smuylar, 'Redefining self and success: becoming teachers and doctors' in *Gender and Education* 16 (2004): 226.

The internalisation of gendered norms and gender discourses has encouraged some women to position themselves as valuing certain characteristics, for example 'a sense of self as helper rather than leader, as warm rather than ambitious, as emotional rather than rational'⁴⁶. This socially constructed gender positioning makes teaching especially in the early years, with its overtones of caring, shaping and nurturing children, an obvious choice for women⁴⁷.

It was also due to 'social changes in the acceptability of married women and mothers working outside the home'⁴⁸, partly attributable to the role of women workers during the First and Second World Wars, that made teaching a suitable, respectable and common sense job for women in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly middle-class women, although working-class women also participated. As Maguire⁴⁹ notes:

girls and women have traditionally been (re)produced through discourses of femininity, maternity and caring. Thus teaching and nursing are "common-sense fillers" between leaving school and starting a family.

The values and goals underpinning decisions about career choice are, for many women, shaped by their family and caring commitments⁵⁰. Teaching can be a practical choice for women who wish to attempt the work/family balancing act.

It is interesting to reflect on Froebel's revolutionary belief in the early 19th century that women be recruited and trained as teachers of young children⁵¹. Despite being ridiculed for this suggestion, Froebel continued to stress the importance of the mother-child relationship, poignant, given the death of Froebel's mother when he was nine months old. His emphasis on the contribution of women as skilled teachers of young children when few professional careers were available to women, helped, according to Whitbread⁵² 'to promulgate an idea that became entrenched'. As Read⁵³ has shown, this belief that women would make excellent educators gained momentum, particularly amongst the middle classes who were keen to provide suitable career pathways for their educated

⁴⁶ Lisa Smuylan, 'Redefining self and success', 227.

⁴⁷ Burr, *Social Constructionism*

⁴⁸ Acker Sandra, ed., *Teachers, Gender and Careers* (East Sussex: The Falmer Press, 1989): 9.

⁴⁹ Meg Maguire, 'Missing Links; Working-Class Women of Irish Descent' in *Class Matters: 'Working Class' Women's Perspectives on Social Class* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997): 94.

⁵⁰ Pamela Cotterill, Susan Jackson and Gayle Letherby, eds., *Challenges and Negotiations for Women in Higher Education* (The Netherlands: Springer, 2007).

⁵¹ Liebschner, *Foundations of Progressive Education: The History of the National Froebel Society*.

⁵² Whitbread, *The Evolution of the Nursery-Infant School*, 34.

⁵³ Read, 'Froebelian women'.

daughters. Thus, Froebel College represented an important training opportunity that was taken up by predominantly middle class women as a suitable, and desirable, occupation for an educated young lady.

Methodology and methods

The project utilised a qualitative methodology to understand the ‘the daily actions of people and the meanings that they attach to their environment and relationships’⁵⁴. A qualitative approach enabled us to explore the participants’ perspectives and constructions of the value of Froebelian education both historically in relation to their childhood, education and early career experiences and in relation to the contemporary context in terms of their more recent career experiences. This approach was useful for us to gain insights into the participants’ worlds through their eyes, giving their meanings and understandings of their childhood, educational biographies and career experiences.

The primary research tool was interviews informed by a biographical life history method, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to understand how the participants ‘subjectively remember and understand significant events of their lives’⁵⁵. Taking a life history approach to the research has allowed us to situate our participants’ lives in the wider political, economic, social and education context, which has furthered our understanding of their stories, as well as their values and beliefs⁵⁶. Life history interviews also provided participants with the space to discuss the issues important to them, within the context of the wider topic under investigation.

However, as with all research methods, there are limitations associated with taking a life history approach. We cannot focus in depth on all the limitations of the approach, which include issues with validity and reliability of subjective knowledge that is produced and re/produced within the interview, analysis and writing process⁵⁷. But we have been keenly aware of the issues related to the memories participants decided to share, and which recollections they call up and why. Do these condensed and abridged versions of

⁵⁴ Tim May and Malcolm Williams, eds., *Knowing the Social World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998): 8.

⁵⁵ Allen Rubin and Earl R. Babbie, *Essential Research Methods for Social Work* (CA: Cengage Learning, 2009): 220.

⁵⁶ Christine Bold, *Using Narrative in Research* (London: Sage, 2012).

⁵⁷ Ivor Goodson and Pat Sikes, *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001); Nigel King and Christina Horrocks, *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2010).

the participants' recollections of their childhoods really offer an accurate reflection of their lives? According to Goodson and Sikes⁵⁸:

In one sense, all stories are memories as all memories are stories... Why we remember some things and forget others is, perhaps, always to do with how whatever it is we are remembering fits, or has fitted, into one of our stories.

Goodson and Sikes' reminded us of the need to reflect carefully on the data collected and presented and their account highlights some of the tensions around reporting such reflections as anything more than a story from a number of possible stories. Yet the rich and contextualized data made possible through life history research arguably outweighs this limitation. We followed the representation suggestions provided by Kirsch⁵⁹ and worked together to thematise the data carefully and to construct, critically reflect and then reconstruct our accounts of the participants' stories to provide an accurate and authentic portrayal of their life histories.

Theoretical framework

To understand the participants' habitus and dispositions to choose Froebel as their higher education pathway we have utilized Bourdieu's⁶⁰ work. Habitus refers to 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices'⁶¹. The term characterizes the recurring patterns of social class, social mobility and class fractions that are inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, particularly in early childhood. A shared habitus with similar dispositions was evident in the participants' talk about their childhoods, values, beliefs and education pathways. The term field refers to 'a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)⁶². As Reay⁶³ notes, field refers to 'the context in which practices take place. It can be understood as a site of struggle and dialectic'. We used the idea of field to explore how it can structure the individual habitus

⁵⁸ Goodson and Sikes, *Life History Research in Educational Settings*.

⁵⁹ Gesa E. Kirsch, *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation and Publication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London : Sage, 1993).

⁶¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Algeria 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): vii.

⁶² Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 227.

⁶³ Diane Reay, 'The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social Class and Educational Inequality', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54 (2006): 288-307.

and how an individual habitus 'contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or value, in which it is worth investing one's energy'⁶⁴.

We have also decided to take a social constructionist approach to the research to examine the ways in which women are politically, socially and economically situated and also to interrogate the constructed nature of gender in their stories. Such an approach required us to:

... view all knowledge claims as being partial and contingent, rather than having the status of timeless truths that can be detached from the particular social context in which they are produced⁶⁵.

Taking a social constructionist approach to constructing knowledge was an attempt to disrupt some of the unequal power relations inherent in the research process. Following the principles of a social constructionist paradigm were useful to enable us to understand and theorise the gendering and resultant inequalities experienced by women.

Sample

We accessed a sample of 9 participants who were all educated at Froebel College between 1952 and 1965. The selection of participants was based on the key variables of education background and age. The participants were selected as they had all experienced their early years teacher education in a period of relative professional autonomy in the 1950s and 1960s, prior to the introduction of a prescriptive national curriculum, standardized assessments and standardized development milestones, which were implemented nationally in England from the 1980s onwards. The social context informing the participants teacher education was one where 'creativity and autonomy were valued, as part of a reaction to the harsher period of post war schooling of the 1950s'⁶⁶

Whilst all of our participants are middle class, we are aware of class fractions and that the myriad differences within social groups does not lend itself to a clean-cut analysis where rigid middle-class positions can easily be taken up⁶⁷. The participants spent most of their careers working in education, networked with Frobelian colleagues and participated in Frobelian societies and thus, they are all sympathetic to Frobelian ideas and the value of their teacher training.

⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, 'Towards a reflexive sociology. A workshop with Pierre Bourdieu', *Sociological Theory*, 7 (1989): 44.

⁶⁵ Stoppard, *Understanding depression: Feminist social constructionist approaches*, 2.

⁶⁶ Author reference.

⁶⁷ Tim Butler and Mike Savage, eds., *Social Change and the Middle Classes* (London: UCL Press, 1995).

The participants are summarised in the following table:

Insert Table 1 – Froebel Participant Demographic Table here

Childhood experiences, values and beliefs

The sample table illustrates the participants' shared middle class background, articulated through parental (predominantly fathers) professional/managerial occupations. It is interesting that four of the nine participants had mothers who were teachers and so came from families where women had careers at a moment in history when this was exceptional. Their dispositions were all circumscribed by a 'solid' middle class family milieu, which included strong traditions of, or strong commitments to, appropriate education for girls.

Six of the participants discussed their childhoods in overwhelmingly positive terms, noting the freedom they experienced in terms of their physical environments and the benefits of supportive and caring families, particularly their mothers:

Well, I had a childhood absolutely steeped in play, so I really knew what play was and I had a brother who was younger than me, three and a half years younger and we used to play [...] at home you know we'd have clothes horses and we were allowed to turn one of the tables upside down to make boats and things like that. (Theresa)

Family background, was very happy - lovely parents, one sister [...] It was a very free, very creative, fun childhood. A very Froebelian childhood in fact. Lots of hands on, lovely singing mother and that's the background. (Una)

My mother was a full-time Mother, but she -- previous to that had worked with children all her life [...] so looking after children was very much her thing and we had an idyllic childhood. We had a lovely house with a big garden, which my father built in 1939, on the onset of war. (Jane)

My mother was a wonderful person and I was hardly ever scolded, not that I was a goody, goody but [...] she always encouraged me, always interested in what I did. (Madeleine)

I had a very solid childhood, you know mum was at home very -- just one hundred percent for making a good home and being there and nurturing etc, and my dad was -- I was a dad's girl. [...] I had a very, very happy upbringing. (Jennifer)

The environment was secure for me to ride up and down the street on my tricycle, my blue tricycle, just looking out for anybody who would play with me, or talk to me. I talked to everybody. I changed my name every day, and told this very elderly man who came to his gate, with his pipe. It was an idyllic early childhood (Ruth)

These extracts evoke a Froebelian infused childhood full of play, learner autonomy, creativity, nurture and engagement with nature. All of these women spoke warmly of their mothers and fathers, acknowledging the benefits that secure and loving family environments had bestowed upon them. They had benefitted from symbolic activities, such as singing, free play, art and engagement with nature; Froebel argued such activities could nourish and nurture the child's inner life and provide space to transform and express understanding⁶⁸ (Bruce, 2012).

These early experiences had arguably influenced these women's synergy with the Froebelian theories of childhood and their commitment to developing the whole child, through an engagement with freedom, nature and the natural world, perhaps making their later choice to attend Froebel College an easy and 'natural' choice.

These somewhat romantic versions of childhood are in keeping with the historical moment into which these advantaged women were born – a slowly changing landscape after the hardships of the Second World War. They experienced a more progressive and liberal political society influenced by a call to the masses and political elites to pursue

⁶⁸ Bruce, *Early Childhood Practice*.

peace and harmony, a return to nature and a more free way of living. Such sentiments of peace and harmony are reflected in these women's descriptions of their formative years.

The shared elements of family habitus and dispositions between these participants are striking in these narratives. Bourdieu⁶⁹ posits that by analysing an individual's dispositions it is possible to illuminate and account for 'the similarity in the habitus of agents from the same social class and authorises speaking of a class habitus'. The generative basis of structured and unified practices and experiences is apparent in the participants' discursive constructions of their childhood. The resources available to the participants, such as having their mothers at home to look after them, along with the material environments that provided resources for free and imaginative play and the security to play with freedom, evoke a sense of Bourdieu's⁷⁰ notion of a shared class habitus where 'practices and representations' via the inculcation of cultural norms and values, accrued in the formative years have been experienced and thus embodied in the form of durable dispositions.

However there were examples where differences in early experiences were apparent. Flora, Isabel and Sandra talked about their childhoods in slightly less romantic terms:

I was a country girl brought up Shropshire and rather extraordinary for those times my mother, who came from a huge dynastic farming family, in rural England married a Czech Jew refugee and I'm one of six children and I'm the eldest and ... so that's my background. None of us [her and her siblings] expected to have a career. Our mothers tended not to have careers, although strangely enough that wasn't true of my Froebel friends. Many of them had very high powered mothers. My mother was a farmer's daughter of course, and she married in her early twenties and had six children and supported her husband. But she did train eventually as a teacher (Flora).

My father was in the army, my mother was a teacher, erm my husband is an engineer ... My mother died when I was 11, but up to then erm, I think I was very normal in the fact that my mum was around for much of my childhood... I had a happy childhood but in some ways there were some very unhappy

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, *Sociology*, 5.

⁷⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

bits in it, and there were bits I could do and bits I couldn't do ... I did have considerable freedom, personal freedom (Isabelle).

I was brought up in [affluent London suburb] and dad had a large rural secondary modern, which then amalgamated with the local girls' grammar school to become a comprehensive ... So that's how I was brought up. I was brought up in a, you know, in a teaching family (Sandra).

These narratives reflect an advantaged family background, with freedom and respect evident, yet they are also inflected with the realities and difficulties of personal and familial circumstances. The habitus and dispositions are shaped by middle class privilege, yet are inflected with challenges. These experiences emphasise the similar and different classed habitus and dispositions that exist in a collective class group and highlight that 'not all social words are equally viable to everyone' and 'not all courses of action are equally possible for everyone, only some are plausible, others are unthinkable'⁷¹. The generative habitus of these participants is influenced and impacted by early childhood and experienced by them in complex ways.

But overwhelmingly, the participants' stories of their early years reflect relatively privileged family backgrounds, certainly in economic terms, and all reported very stable and secure families, despite any difficulties experienced. The shared habitus between the participants is evident in their recollections of the family milieu, highlighting a level of commonality in their early childhoods. The shared family values of Froebel women found in this study resonate with those captured in Read's⁷² research exploring women who attended Froebel College in the nineteenth century, suggesting it had long been a reified learning space.

Secondary education experiences

The sample table shows that all the participants experienced some form of private or independent education or benefitted from a selective education made possible through the English grammar school system introduced through the 1944 Education Reform Act. Despite receiving a relatively privileged secondary education, five of the nine participants were unhappy at secondary school, particularly with the academic focus and pressure they

⁷¹ Brian Swartz, *Culture and Power: the Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 107.

⁷² Read, 'Froebelian women'.

had experienced at the expense of engaging with a broader range of activities including arts and crafts. The stories presented below are a survival against the odds narrative.

Una's experience of education was happy until secondary school, when things started to go downhill. She explained:

I went to a rather bad grammar school, because we had to take the 11 plus, so I got in but was poor and then I won a music scholarship to a Ladies College. [...] It was tough -- I boarded, I didn't want to board. I don't think my parents wanted me to either. I was 11. My parents didn't really, in a way, want me to board but we were stuck out in the Gloucestershire fields, they saw I had a certain talent and there were wonderful teachers there, but it was tough ... academically tough.

Theresa was also unhappy in her selective, direct grant grammar secondary school where the emphasis was on academic ability above all other areas of the curriculum:

There was the possibility if you passed the entrance exam that you could go to what was then a direct grant grammar school, and you could go into the junior bit and then you still had to sit an exam, but you stayed in the same school through to 18. [...] It was single sex and it was a very, very narrow sort of girls' school. [.]. It was very academic, so art was -- you did it but it was a bit of a thrill, you know a 35 minute lesson I think we had a double for that. [...] I was quite unhappy, but I passed the entrance exam to the next level. I was quite good at the English that was the problem so I used to write these quite creative essays.

When Jennifer described her private secondary school experiences, she simply said 'I hated it all, apart from the sport'. Theresa, Una and Jennifer's secondary education was a world away from their creative and autonomous childhoods where free play and expression through symbolic activities was the foundation of their experiences. The emphasis on middle class girls experiencing an academic education reflects other research literature, which similarly captures the shift towards a more intellectual emphasis⁷³. Indeed, as Delamont⁷⁴ has argued, many girls' grammar schools continued to

⁷³ Coats, *Women's Education*; Summerfield, *Women workers in the Second World War*.

value academic education and qualifications, offering some emancipation to girls at school during the early post Second World War period.

Several of the participants talked about the important role of the arts, humanities and sport in their educations to provide them with some level of creative engagement with an otherwise highly academic curriculum. Ruth had enjoyed sport but she had managed to balance this with achieving academic success. But this did not stop her from feeling an outsider in her secondary school and not enjoying the whole experience:

I didn't fit in with that school which was ... I didn't understand the rules. I didn't understand all about detentions [...] I wasn't sure about, you know how I was supposed to be behaving really. [...] I mean I just wasn't really in that world, but I did very well academically and I was good at sports.

Ruth's narrative emphasises that the field of her secondary school was at odds with her personal habitus, an experience that can produce 'disposition disruption'⁷⁵. As Reay⁷⁶ has argued, habitus is dynamic because of the interconnected nature of habitus to the field. Exploring the flow of influence and power that operates between habitus and field enabled us to consider how the field of Ruth's grammar school influenced her habitus and moved her beyond the "practical sense' that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations'⁷⁷. This disposition disruption between an individual's habitus and the field(s) they operate in may have problematic consequences. For some middle class girls, experiencing the field of a particular fraction of the middle class or even upper class school can produce discordances⁷⁸. Yet despite the mismatch between her habitus and the field of the school, Ruth had enjoyed academic as well as non-academic success and had progressed through her education with relatively few problems.

Isabel, similarly to Ruth, was good at sport and this 'saved' her in the independent school environment:

⁷⁴ Sara Delamont, *Knowledgeable Women: Structuralism and the Reproduction of Elites* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁷⁵ Author reference.

⁷⁶ Diane Reay, 'They employ cleaners to do that': habitus in the primary school' in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 16 (1995): 353-371; Diane Reay, 'Feminist theory, habitus, and social class: disrupting notions of classlessness' in *Women's Studies International Forum* 20 (1997): 225-233.

⁷⁷ Bourdieu, *Sociology*, 5.

⁷⁸ Reay, 'Feminist theory, habitus, and social class'.

Well, it was completely alien to me ... And it was a very close knit, forceful society ... it was all very different but however, the one thing that actually did save it for me and is really very ... important, I think for everybody there has to be something that you're good at in order for you to survive in situations. And one thing I was good at, and it's a natural ability within the family is swimming ... and so therein my star was born.

This expression of success in symbolic activities, such as art and sport, was useful to the participants to be sympathetic to, and engage with, a Froebelian approach to education when they arrived at Froebel College. These creative outlets also resonated with elements of Isabel's childhood, which had 'good bits and bad bits' but overwhelmingly provided her with considerable freedom and autonomy.

Flora did not comment on her enjoyment of secondary school, but what stood out to her when reflecting back was the incredibly gendered ideology that shaped and framed her school experiences:

The small girls' high school I went to in the country, where my mother had attended ... so she and all her sisters went there when it was an independent school. It then became a small girls' high school. And the only two professions really, that were considered for discussion in those days for us girls, were nursing and teaching.

This narrative resonates strongly with the literature⁷⁹, which highlights the predominance of gendered career expectations for educated girls, with social work, nursing and teaching all common sense choices for many at that time.

Sandra was supported at her independent secondary school, but she saw many girls who struggled:

I did the 11 Plus and I got a free place so I did two years in their junior department and then the first three years of secondary education I did at [name of elite independent school]. ... It was really quite difficult. ... It was fine for me, erm I had all the benefits of supportive parents, but I had friends who got absolutely no encouragement from the school at all.

⁷⁹ Deem, *Active citizenship*; Summerfield, *Women workers in the Second World War*.

Jane had attended an independent girls' school which she loved. Madeleine similarly loved her time at the independent girls' which she described as a very happy time in her life. These stories resonate with literature exploring the experiences of girls attending high status schools, which emphasized academic as well as arts and humanities subjects⁸⁰. Such a broad curriculum along with supportive teachers was an enabling experience for these participants.

Getting into Froebel College

Three key factors influenced the women to apply for Froebel College: the reputation of the College, support and encouragement from their family and a strong desire to become a teacher. The strong reputation of Froebel College was cited as the most influential factor as evidenced in the following extracts:

I had applied to certainly Bristol I remember, and I wanted to do a combined degree of English, French and History because those were my A-levels and that's all I knew about, but I thought I'd be a teacher after that you see. But then some people at [my secondary school] had gone to Froebel, I seem to remember -- and I'm just sort of thinking back a bit now and had spoken so highly of it, and Froebel was just a name that I knew and I read a bit more about the principles and I thought, 'That's what I want, that's what I want to do'. (Jane)

Everybody began to say, '...but Ruth ought to be a teacher'. ... my father was so wonderful, I mean also very backed by my mother and he said, 'Well what's the point of Ruth going to University if she wants to be an infant school teacher, she'd be better off, you know going to a teacher training college that specialised in that age group'. And he found out which were the best ones to go to. There were three I think and Froebel was at the top, [...] So we tried for Froebel (Ruth).

⁸⁰ Sara Delamont, *Knowledgeable Women* (London: Routledge, 1989); Sara Delamont, *Old fogies and intellectual women: an episode in academic history* (The Women's History Review, 1992); Mary Evans, *A good school; life at a girls' grammar school in the 1950s* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1991).

Flora similarly told me that: 'Froebel was considered tops; it was 'the' place to apply to'. She went on to explain:

I applied to the three Froebel Colleges, because they were considered to be the very best ... they 'creamed off the cream'. So it was very elitist in the sense that it attracted very bright young women, who may not, particularly, had thought that they were going to have a career. You know, but their parents were principled and high-minded, they wanted their daughters to have further education and experiences and the possibility, I expect of a career.

Isabel also talked about the high status of Froebel College and identified the strong reputation as a key factor in her choice to study there:

So I remember going to a careers woman, at a ladies college who was useless, and she said, "well you know, go to Froebel Institute" ... and of course Froebel then just seemed very much the Rolls Royce Teacher Training College.

When the participants set out to choose higher education their childhood experiences, habitus, dispositions and school support combined to incline these women to choose a course based on Froebelian ideology that was so aligned to their own formative experiences. Both Flora and Isabel's mothers were teachers and supportive of their daughter's aspirations. Jane and Ruth benefitted from mothers who were full time housewives and similarly supportive and enabling. The participants' early childhoods and family support had influenced their aspirations to attend Froebel College.

Three of the participants had found themselves at Froebel College because of serendipitous circumstances, combined with some knowledge of the College's reputation. Serendipity, that is the extent to which a participant's agency was shaped by unexpected or unpredictable developments, played a role in the following participants' experiences:

I was going to do PE and then I hurt my back, and the specialist said, 'Don't go in for PE', and I was talking to my PE teacher and she said, 'Why don't you try Froebel?' Because that does a bit of everything, and of course I did

teach PE when I came to Froebel ... but I loved it at Froebel because it was such a wide curriculum. (Madeleine).

I failed my exams and I said to my dad "I didn't want to go back", and he said, "Well what are you going to do?", and I had done A level French and I said, "Well if Froebel will take me on my last year's interview, I'll go to France for a year as an au pair and then at least I'm not wasting time". The phone wasn't working at home and my father phoned Froebel and ... I mean talk about things happening for a reason... He got through to the head teacher who said she would phone him back, and she phoned him back within the hour to say that somebody had turned down a place, term had already started, and if I could go up the next day, I could start on Monday. And so I went! (Sandra)

I knew about Froebel because I'd lived in London. I knew about it and in fact I had come to a ball with somebody, or dance or something and I remember thinking oh what a lovely place it was. And also because nursing was so tough, it precluded all the things that I loved like the music and reading and all those things and I thought selfishly, I've got to get somewhere where I can get more experience in this. And so I came to Froebel (Una).

These accounts highlight the events that led these three participants to Froebel College. All had intended to follow alternative higher education pathways, but nursing had not worked out for Una, Sandra had failed some of her A-levels and Madeleine could not pursue her PE plans and so Froebel College was their backup plan. The reputation of the College combined with the input and advice received from their families influenced the participants to attend. Sandra and Una also both came from teaching families, which would have shaped their dispositions to choose a career in education. The popularity of teaching as a suitable job for women and their experiences of growing up in teaching families would arguably have influenced their backup planning and provided them with a respectable alternative career.

Perhaps not surprisingly, two of the participants had a strong desire to be teachers from an early age, and had experienced parental encouragement for these early aspirations. Jennifer explained that:

I just longed to be a teacher. I taught in Sunday school and did everything that I could possibly do to be a teacher really, and my brother said there's only one place you should go to be a teacher - 'You need to go to Froebel, you will be in the very, very best hands'. I thought there's no way I'm going to get to Froebel, because I'm not academic and then I had glandular fever when I took my A-levels so -- they went up the spout. But I was very sporty so I think I sort of got in on something, I don't quite know what it was. A wing and a prayer I think it was (Jennifer).

The influence of Jennifer's family on her choice resonates with Jackson and Marsden's⁸¹ study exploring the role of class on educational pathways. The main focus of their research was the experiences of 88 working class children transitioning to secondary school, however they also shed light on the secondary school pathways taken by 10 middle class children, noting the support and strategies that eased their transitions. They observed that for the middle-class pupils in their sample, their 'families had an educational inheritance with which to endow their children'⁸². This inheritance served to protect these pupils from educational failure, as 'there was a shrewd and trusting understanding between school and family, supporting the child'⁸³. Jennifer could have benefitted from this sort of inheritance, in part bestowed by her family background and reinforced through her private education.

The importance of family support and guidance was evident in Theresa's story. She also had ambitions to teach from an early age. Her family, in particular her mother, had been central in her aspiration formation and choice making processes:

I knew I would like to teach -- I think probably my mother had been a big influence on me in that respect ... my mother was thrilled at the idea that I would become a kindergarten teacher. ... When I arrived everybody was talking about the importance of play and telling me the sort of things they did, pond dipping and I thought that it was so like my childhood (Theresa).

Theresa's narrative again resonates with the work of Jackson and Marsden, and the familial educational inheritance she benefitted from. They also found that in terms of the

⁸¹ Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the working class: some general themes raised by a study of 88 working class children in a Northern industrial city* (London: Routledge, 1962): 42.

⁸² Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the working class*, 42.

⁸³ Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the working class*, 42.

significant familial influences in their middle class sample ‘the centre of [educational decision making] power usually lay with the mother’⁸⁴. They noted that this ‘could not be altogether accounted for by the mother’s education or her superior station before marriage, though both these mattered’⁸⁵. Perhaps the middle class habitus experienced by Theresa was a factor in shaping her dispositions to teach, along with her mother’s influence. Her mother was a kindergarten teacher, and Theresa spent all of her career in the same field of work, evidencing social reproduction in her story.

Many of the participants talked of the choice to study at Froebel College as a privilege and commented on the reputation and high status attached to the course. Their families had also played a role and several talked of parents or siblings who supported and encouraged their aspirations to become teachers. The social construction of teaching as a gendered occupation, suitable for educated middle class ladies also seemed to have shaped the participants’ inclination towards carving out a professional identity. As Read⁸⁶ has argued, ‘Froebel’s philosophy was conservative in its identification of a particular and restricted role for women in the public world’, although it simultaneously had ‘potential for more radical change, particularly in the construction of a new profession, the early years teacher’.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the early childhoods, educational experiences and pathways into Froebel College taken by nine participants who were educated there in the 1950s and 1960s and went on to spend their lives as Froebelian educators. The data reveals some striking similarities 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 philosophy. The resonance between childhood experiences and the pedagogical approach advocated by Froebel highlights the dispositions they benefitted from within their family milieu.

However, we also acknowledge that these women’s experiences of Froebelian training may have led them to re-interpret childhood memories retrospectively in Froebelian terms and this is a limitation of the research that we have taken into account in

⁸⁴ Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the working class*, 46.

⁸⁵ Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the working class*, 97.

⁸⁶ Read, ‘Froebelian women’, 17.

our data analysis and the conclusions drawn. Whilst this is not discussed here in any depth, we have written a further paper which explores this issue⁸⁷

All of the women in the sample benefitted from supportive and economically 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 and knowing support and enabling and appropriate educational opportunities. Several of the women had grown up in teacher families, with one or both parents spending their careers as teachers. The social reproduction between generations was evident in the participants' stories and four reported having children who had similarly become teachers.

The participants were assisted by the wider 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 began to slowly emerge after the hardships of the Second World War. Whilst their aspirations and experiences were circumscribed by gender ideology about the appropriate and suitable forms of education for a girl, their privileged class backgrounds gave them the opportunity to pursue a high status, reified education and provided them with a professional identity not available to many working class girls at that time.

Their stories highlight the influence of Froebelian philosophy on their early years and later at Froebel College. Arriving at Froebel College must have felt like coming home to these women and it provided them with a professional identity that they nurtured, developed and practiced throughout their long careers as educators (Author ref).

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⁸⁷ Author reference.