

Protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice: exploring the importance of learning through play

Abstract

The current early years emphasis on ensuring young children achieve 'school readiness' has contributed to a context of academic pressure in early years settings in England. The debated term 'school readiness' is vaguely expressed in England's early years curriculum as 'Children reaching a good level of development in the prime areas of literacy and mathematics' (EYFS, 2014, 2017). Opportunities for play, self-directed and adult initiated, are impacted by the academic pressures created by the English government's demands for young children to achieve school readiness (EYFS, 2014, 2017), which can dominate and determine the activities on offer in early years settings (Bradbury, 2014). The possibility to enact Froebelian approaches to learning, through child initiated play, are further marginalized by the current early years policy agenda. A key issue relates to Ofsted, who judge settings primarily in relation to the quality of the academic environment provided and successful academic and developmental outcomes achieved by all children.

In our recent research project we sought to understand how much capacity early years practitioners perceived they had to enact Froebelian principles in their daily practice and the importance they attached to Froebel's notion of learning through play. We interviewed 33 early years practitioners in six settings, working with preschool children aged between 2-4 years, about their understanding of Froebel's concept of learning through play, the space, physical and temporal, they had to encourage and enable play and the challenges of supporting children to learn through play. We explored the participants' theoretical understandings of Froebel's work and ideas in their education and training pathways. Our data highlights that many practitioners followed Froebel's approach, but did not overtly name and identify their practice as Froebelian.

Keywords:

Froebel, early years educators, learning through play, practice, policy enactment

Introduction

Globally, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been a focus of policy reform over the last decade as part of a package of neoliberal reforms of education systems (Moss, 2013). The education system in England is at the vanguard of standardisation and the use of accountability measures in this sector within the United Kingdom (UK) and worldwide (Bradbury, 2014), including the increased regulation of early years professionals, is common practice. This contrasts with the historical lack of legislation in early years, which previously had been the domain of autonomous professionals, trained according to the philosophies of theorists such as Montessori, Froebel and Steiner and allowed to operate without the pressures of regulation (author reference).

Another recent development in England is the emphasis on preparing pre-school children (from six months old to 4 years of age) for primary school, which they begin in the September after their fourth birthday. Early years settings in England must follow the Early Years Foundation Stages (EYFS, 2017: 1), which sets out a 'statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' and sets out 'the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five'. As a consequence of the demands placed on early years settings by the EYFS, practitioners must focus on developing pre-school children's academic skills, which has created a need for more highly qualified staff to ensure the academic development of young children. The pressure facing early years settings in England to show 'school readiness' is part of an increased drive to bring early years into accountability regimes across the state funded education sector (Bradbury, 2012), in part to improve the UK's position in international education league tables, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). To respond to the demands of these new pressures the English government contends that the sector requires more qualified staff and more managers (EYFS, 2014: EYFS 2017), thus ratcheting up the tension between the cost of delivering high quality childcare and education for young children and providing affordable childcare for working parents, particularly women (Urban, 2017a).

In this paper we draw on data gathered as part of a funded project from the UK based Froebel Trust's grant programme. The Froebel Trust's (2018: 1) mission statement indicates the key aim is to 'promote the value and relevance of Froebelian principles to the education and

learning of children in the 21st century'. Thus, our project has a particular interest in identifying the possibilities to enact Froebelian principles in practice as a counter discourse.

The project involved interviewing 33 early years educators to explore the place of play in their daily professional practice. There are three key aims underpinning this paper: first, to provide an overview of our participants' understandings of learning through play to highlight the importance they attach to play. Second, to explore if our participants perceive that they have time to provide opportunities for learning through play and to examine any challenges they encountered when trying to enable opportunities for play. Third, to argue for an interpretation and enactment of the EYFS that emphasizes the importance of play, as a counter discourse to the pressure to ensure school readiness (EYFS, 2014, 2017).

The practitioners' interpretation of the EYFS in relation to opportunities for play is looked at through the lens of policy enactment theory (Braun et al, 2011: Ball et al, 2012). We argue that all the practitioners' value play, but the enactment of the EYFS in their settings has tended to focused on academic development and consequently almost all our participants reported having insufficient time and focus on learning through play in their setting. Thus, in this paper we argue for an interpretation and enactment of the EYFS that emphasizes the importance of play. By raising the profile of Froebel's approach to learning through play, we aim to highlight the importance of play as a tool to empower children and engage them in their learning journeys.

Having addressed the three aims, we conclude by recommending the expansion of early years educators' training to explicitly reference Froebel's theoretical work regarding approaches to learning through play. To theoretically support our recommendation we draw on policy enactment theory (Braun et al, 2011: Ball et al, 2012) to analyse how Froebelian principles can be protected and extended in practice through policy interventions that could raise the profile of a Froebelian approach in early years practitioners' education.

Policy context

Early years settings in England, and across many of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, have faced increasing pressure to pre-

pare children for the academic demands of school to address government agendas to improve school readiness amongst preschool children (EYFS, 2014; EYFS 2017; Urban, 2017a, 2017b). Moss (2013: 13) notes that since its widespread usage from the 1920s onwards, the term readiness was formed of two constructs 'vying for prominence – readiness for learning and readiness for school'. Disagreement about the term has persisted and Bingham and Whitehead (2012: 4) highlight the continuing contested nature of the term 'school readiness' and argue that the lack of definition is because:

there is no agreement upon what young children should be prepared for; in essence, the disagreement about terminology and definition encapsulates a fundamental difference in conception of the purpose of early years education.

In acknowledging this tension, Bingham and Whitehead (2012: 4) highlight that the English government have become 'interventionist' and highly prescriptive in their articulation of 'school readiness' and their expectations of the enactment of this concept in practice:

The government uses the term 'readiness for school' as a finite construct, implying there should be a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social development that prepares children to meet school requirements and assimilate curriculum, typically embracing specific cognitive and linguistic skills.

The pressure facing early years practitioners to equip children with learning dispositions in addition to providing physical and social development has resulted in early years settings experiencing ever-increasing expectations about the 'quality' and academic depth and breadth of their provision (Urban, 2017b, Dahlberg et al, 2007).

But debates about early years practitioners' qualifications are not new: in England debates about the need for qualified professionals to work with young children have persisted for decades (author reference: Ritchie, 2015; Urban and Dalli, 2008). Recently, these debates have centred on how to deliver high quality childcare and education whilst maintaining cost thresholds low enough to allow parents to access the services (DfE, 2013). The increased academic expectations held by the English government for early years settings have raised questions about the sort of qualifications staff require in order to deliver an academically

robust early years curriculum and to ensure the progress of each child as measured against the prescriptive, outcomes orientated EYFS (2017).

In this paper, we argue that the EYFS (2014, 2017) is too prescriptive and that it presents pedagogy, assessment and achievement in formulaic and standardised terms, which is restrictive for practitioners. We take the view that the EYFS (2014, 2017) relentlessly emphasizes the academic aspects of school readiness and provides no real alternative to 'standardised assessment and decontextualised measurement' (Urban, 2017b: 23). As Moss et al (2013: 20) similarly note 'from international studies, we know that national tests and evaluations seem to be standardizing not only the curriculum, but teaching content and workload'. We argue that this national and international policy context is not conducive to quality ECEC provision.

Understanding Froebel

This man is called "an old fool" by these people; perhaps he is one of those men who are ridiculed... by contemporaries, and to whom future generations build monuments. (Marenholtz-Bulow, 1891: 102).

As a counter discourse to the target driven context outlined above, we turn to the child-centred principles and practices that encompass a Froebelian approach and argue that these urgently need to be applied to contemporary ECEC in the UK. A Froebelian approach to early years education does not provide a prescriptive pedagogy; indeed, Froebel wanted to liberate children from rote learning and to acknowledge and respect children's own ideas as valuable in their own right (Liebschner, 1991). The whole child was the focus and 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 of the world around them. Symbolic activities, such as art, language, music and dance all nourish the child's inner life as well as providing a means to transform and express understanding (Bruce, 2012). In keeping with this, Froebel created the 'gifts' and 'occupations'. The most well-known of the gifts are wooden blocks, which encouraged creative play.

Froebel coined the term kindergarten, which according to Weston (2000) can mean a 'garden of children' as well as a 'garden for children'. Each child was given a plot in the garden

as their responsibility, as well as being expected to tend larger communal plots (Liebschner, 2000). The aim was for young children to be involved in and knowledgeable about the wider community.

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 Wollons (2000) 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 patriarchal social structures and 'strong authoritarian governments, the kindergarten was adopted without the activism of women, and without benefit to women's advancement' (Wollons, 2000: 7). Ideas about the kindergarten were 'modified as the concept of the modern child was refined' (Wollons, 2000: 7-8).

In terms of practitioner 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. Liebschner (2000: xiii) notes that '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 yet is of central importance for young children's early years experiences. Bruce (2012: 30) 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 (Bruce, 2012: 30).

In the UK, the contemporary early years context is focused on children achieving standardized targets through standardized assessments (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017); this approach to early years education is very much at variance with Froebel's philosophy advocating the importance of learning through play (author reference). The current context con-

tributes to the tension between autonomous and highly educated professionals 'in control' and the seemingly passive role of being a facilitator in ECEC settings.

What is learning through play?

However, whilst we advocate a Froebelian approach to learning through play, we acknowledge that Froebel's understanding of the concept requires some careful attention. What does learning through play mean? Are all forms of play as valuable as each other? How can early years educators deploy play to maximize learning opportunities and outcomes for young children? These questions are addressed in this section of the paper.

For Froebel, play is at the heart of childhood and has the power to satisfy the child, and determine the sort of person the child will come to be:

Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole – of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. (1898: 55)

The description of play provided by Froebel is one that encompasses the whole child – it not only attends to a child's physical need for activity, but it also makes reference to the need to provide space for nurture, for exploration, and to find joy and contentment in playful activities. The form and shape that play should take is not prescriptive in Froebel's writing, but what is consistent is the requirement that play is child-initiated and child-led (Froebel, 1898). Thus, the child is at the centre of play and activities and interests must stem from the child and cannot be imposed by adults.

A further strand in Froebel's work relates to the role of spirituality in children's play. An important aim of playing is to enable the child to connect with nature, with spirituality and with God:

Education as a whole, by means of instruction and training, should bring to man's consciousness, and render efficient in his life, the fact that man and nature proceed from God and are conditioned by him – that both have their being in God. (Froebel, 1898: 5)

Thus, the origin of Froebel's philosophy was rooted in a spiritual understanding of the child and childhood and placed emphasis on connecting the child to nature, because through nature the child can become closer to God.

More recently, Tovey's (2013, 2016) work emphasizes the continuing importance of play in contemporary early years education. Tovey (2016: 18) draws on Bruce (2011) to highlight that:

Rich play develops when adults and children play together, respecting each others ideas. Play takes children into a world of pretence where they imagine other worlds and create stories of possible and imagined worlds beyond the here and now.

Play is understood as collaborative and creative and provides children with space to explore and try out their imaginative ideas. Bruce (2011) refers to the concept of 'free flow play', which she has developed to interrogate what constitutes the Froebelian notion of learning through play. She contends that 'free flow play' is formulated of 12 elements that include imaginative play, solitary play and the ability for the child to incorporate life experiences in their play and the potential for (Bruce, 1991: 2011). Lilley (1967 :59) points out that:

Feature 12 emphasizes that play orchestrates learning – it helps children to bring together what they know in a connected and whole way.

In this paper, our conceptualization of learning through play draws in particular on feature 12 and we view learning through play as a creative, autonomous and connected experience for the child. At the heart of learning through play is respect for the child's interests and acknowledgement that these interests form the basis of meaningful learning experiences.

Theoretical approach

Turning now to the theorization of our data and in this paper we draw on the idea of policy enactment to argue that all our practitioners' value play, but almost all reported having insufficient time and focus on learning through play in their setting. Thus, we argue for an interpretation and enactment of the EYFS that emphasizes the importance of play, as a counter discourse to the pressure to ensure school readiness

The concept of policy enactment is comprised of interpretations and translations of policy at a local level:

Interpretations and translations are usually enactments of policy in different arenas, as different parts of the policy process, and in different relations to practice but they also interface at points. Interpretation is about strategy and translation is about tactics but they are also at times closely interwoven and over-lapping. They work together to enrol or hail subjects and inscribe discourse into practices. They involve the production of institutional texts, doing training/professional development, changing structures, roles, and relationships, and very importantly the identification and allocation of posts of responsibility and the allocation of resources. (REF)

Thus, policy enactment is a relational and temporal concept that is shaped and influenced by institutional requirements at a given moment in time. The interpretations of policy priorities in early years settings are first defined at a national level – i.e. the emphasis placed on accelerating the academic elements of young children’s development. Interpretations also exist at the local level – i.e. the space that can be given to other areas of child development such as play relate to the socio-economic demographics of a location. Rich, free flowing Froebelian play, requires ‘extended periods of time for play’, along with ‘sufficient space both indoors and outdoors’ (Tovey, 2016: 31). These requirements are not always readily available in more urban early years settings or indeed in the suburban settings we encountered.

Translations of the EYFS relates to the tactics deployed in the process of interpreting the policy at a national and then local, i.e. institutional level. The emphasis, nuances and distinctions between early years settings are relational and will impact on, for example, the individual facilities available, such as access to developed, well designed and well stocked outside space where children can learn and play. Translations are ideological and will inevitably be influenced by senior managers views about the priorities for their settings, for example, the time set aside for academic activities compared with time set aside for play. Translations are also practical and relate to the status of a setting as judged by OFSTED. Those settings judged good or outstanding will have more institutional autonomy to enact particular ver-

sions of the EYFS that might take more account of learning through play. For example, in a more economically and socially privileged early years setting the majority of children may have acquired some of the academic capability demanded by the EYFS, leaving more time for play. The interpretations and translations of the EYFS will be inflected, therefore, by national and local priorities at a given moment in time.

Methods, methodology and sample

The study draws on a qualitative methodology to explore the participants' lived experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) from their perspective. A qualitative methodology and use of life history interviewing provided us with insights into the participants' worlds through their eyes, giving their meanings and understandings of their experiences and aspirations (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). A qualitative methodology enabled us to understand the nuances and differences of how the cohort understand play, value the concept and how they view their education, professional training and current position. Reliable and valid data was achieved through the research design and included, for example, providing participants the opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcripts.

Over a 13-month period, we carried out life history interviews with 33 early years practitioners from six early years settings, with different demographic features: two in rural locations, two in towns and two in cities. The demographic spread was part of the project design and it has highlighted the influence that context has on policy enactment. Localism has been shown to impact on education policy enactment in distinctive and significant ways. These include, local demographics (i.e. rates of relative poverty, social class background and quality of education), access to financial resources and access to qualified teaching staff (see for example Ball et al, 2012; Chowdry, and Sibietta, 2011). Thus, the design takes account of the situated complexities arising from localism, and the demographic coverage will enable us to 'take the local context seriously', and to compare and contrast learning through play philosophy and enactment (Braun et al, 2011).

In each setting, we conducted semi-structured interviews, each lasting for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour each. The aim was to reveal any 'shared patterns of experience or interpretation within a group of people who have some characteristic, attribute or experience in

common' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 23). The interview questions covered the participants' early childhood experiences, their early years training pathways and their professional experiences, principles and approaches to early years practice. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed to allow for thorough, thematic data coding and analysis. The initial coding of the data was informed by Straussian (1987) (see also Strauss and Corbin, 1990) techniques to enable us to be open to emerging analytical frameworks.

Kvale (1996: 242) contends that achieving validity and reliability in the research process is not down to 'final verification or product control', rather, he argues that 'verification is built into the research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the findings'. Through the process of checking, questioning and theorising the data, we engaged in a "continual process of validation" and ensured that this "permeates the entire research process". Techniques to ensure reliable and valid research included asking open-ended non leading questions in the interviews and sharing the transcripts with participants to ensure accuracy; sharing data at conferences and in seminars to consider the multiplicity of data interpretations; and finally, we worked and reworked the accounts to achieve accurate portrayals (Kirsch, 1999).

The study complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) revised ethical guidelines, the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) ethical guidelines and the University of Roehampton's ethical guidelines. As the research has involved semi-structured interviews, ethical concerns relating specifically to the process of qualitative interviewing were addressed. These included issues of confidentiality, anonymity in terms of protecting the respondents' identities and obtaining informed consent. We created a consent form that sets out the conditions of participation in the proposed study including anonymity of identity, deletion of audio files once fully transcribed, the right to withdraw at any time and the right to not answer questions throughout the research process. Anonymity has been achieved by removing any identifying factors and through the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1: participant details

Pseudonym	Setting	Demographic definition	Early Years Qualifications
Emma	Green Fields	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 2
Eve	Green Fields	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Yvonne	Green Fields	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Lynn	Green Fields	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Karen	Sherwood	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 4
Lisbeth	Sherwood	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Gillian	Sherwood	Rural	Childcare NVQ Levels 2,3 and 5
Mel	Sherwood	Rural	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Tania	Sherwood	Rural	Childcare NVQ Levels 3 and 5
Diane	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 3 and 4
Elvira	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Megan	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 2
Yvette	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Saba	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Noreen	South Church	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Hannah	North Cross	Suburban	Teacher training (European country)
Annabel	North Cross	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Levels 2,3 and 5
Angela	North Cross	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 2
Ashley	North Cross	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Jennifer	North Cross	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 1 and 2
Gloria	North Cross	Suburban	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Ruth	East Lea	Urban	BA in Childhood Studies Childcare NVQ Level 3
Salma	East Lea	Urban	BA Education
Helga	East Lea	Urban	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Zoe	East Lea	Urban	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3

Tom	East Lea	Urban	BA Literature with Politics Starting a Childcare NVQ Level 3
Maria	East Lea	Urban	Childcare NVQ Level 2 and 3
Sandra	West Point	Urban	BA Social Work
Susie	West Point	Urban	Childcare NVQ Level 3
Maggie	West Point	Urban	BEd Primary Education
Jodie	West Point	Urban	BA Early Years Education
Lorna	West Point	Urban	BA Education
Claudia	West Point	Urban	NNEB Childcare

Understandings of learning through play

A significant theme in our data related to the importance our participants attached to play. Across the six settings, almost all of participants talked about the importance of learning through play and cited many potential benefits that they associated with providing children space to learn through playing. Play was constructed as an essential part of children’s cognitive, social and emotional development and was described as integral to extending children’s learning experiences; this sentiment was reflected in Jodie’s (West Point) view that:

the children should be able to just sort of use their home experiences, use their life experiences ... whatever it is they have to bring that into their play, to sort of be not judgmental and you know it just helps their self-confidence, self-assurance and yeah, so a lot of natural resources and creativity in their play really helps.

The inference here to the importance of being able to bring their home experiences, whatever they might be, into their play within an institutional context reflects a Froebelian view that the child’s home and family life are important. Bruce (2012: page) notes that ‘Froebel emphasized the importance of parents living with and learning with their children. At the heart of this is a respect for children’. The child’s home experiences are integral to their developing view of the world, their engagement with the natural world and their capacity for creative play.

In addition to the importance of home life in providing outlets and opportunities for play, our participants cited many benefits that they ascribed to learning through play, including the ability for children to learn, to share, to negotiate and to explore their preferences. For example, Claudia (West Point) identified the value of allowing children to negotiate through play:

They do like to have free play, you know and they do ... and I think that is important as well because they need to learn how to play with other children, how to negotiate.

Developing social skills through play was identified as an important element of providing children with the time for free play.

Eve (Greenfields) talked about the pedagogical potential of allowing children the space to engage in autonomous play:

If the children show an interest in something then we're very much child-led, go with the flow and they do really learn through their play [...] it teaches them to be creative and have ideas.

Gillian (Sherwood) similarly made reference to the benefits of autonomous play to enable and encourage children's learning:

The adults are there to sort of scaffold and build upon them, and help them in any way they can... I do think that that's quite embedded throughout the nursery. Obviously free flow play and having all the children's choices, I think we definitely work in that sort of way.

Helga (East Lea) similarly emphasized the importance of autonomous learning through play:

I think the playing side of it is really important for children that they need to explore for themselves and learn through play.

The valuing of autonomy in children's play is identified as important. To gain the confidence to engage in solitary autonomous play, children require time and support (Bruce, 2011). The notion of autonomy was identified as important by over half of our sample and formed a key element of our practitioners' understandings of play.

Outdoor play was equally important to all of our participants and described as an essential activity to assist with children's social and emotional development. For example, Ashley (North Cross) pointed out:

I discovered that outdoor play makes children more relaxed and they're more willing to develop their social skills and just develop their skills better [...] they love being in outdoor environments because they can learn so much about life skills.

Mel (Sherwood) recognized the potential of allowing children to explore and engage with the natural environment, particularly in different types of weather:

It is really, really important I think just to sort of let them experience a different climate, different ... you know, get them outside in the rain because, you know, it's quite important for them to play outside because everything looks different, everything smells different and feels different in the rain.

Maria (East Lea) similarly highlighted the benefits of autonomous outdoor play and she described the joy experienced by the children when provided with the opportunity to explore the natural environment:

We have the mud kitchen as well so children love playing with the soil and stuff like that[...] I do think that it is very important because if you're telling children what to do then you're not really knowing what they're learning and it's important that they ... it's important for them to learn by themselves.

These accounts highlight the important role of outdoor spaces in early years settings to allow children the chance to thrive in the natural world. For our participants, understandings of play were circumscribed by providing children with the chance to develop autonomous play, outdoor play and creative play. Many of our participants placed learning through play at the center of their practice as they felt it enabled children to learn by themselves, for themselves and to experience the world around them on their own terms, rather than terms imposed on them by adults. In sum, our practitioners viewed as an important aspect of understanding a child's potential, to provide them with space and opportunities to explore and learn by themselves, although not all of our settings had well stocked outside

spaces to engage children in creating a tension around the potential enactment of learning through play.

Time to play?

Yet whilst play was incredibly important to our practitioners, it became clear that some of them struggled to find sufficient time for the children to play in the current early years context, where the pressure to excel academic capability can supersede the time required to enable play. The government drive for achieving school readiness has contributed to a climate where the practitioners frequently felt that the emphasis in their setting was orientated towards developing academic capability, rather than creative free flowing play. Many of our practitioners described an early years environment that required them to push children towards achieving academic milestones, a process that often felt hollow and target driven, similarly to other research findings (Urban, 2017a). For example, Emma (Green Fields) talked about her experiences at a private nursery where the emphasis was on children's learning at the expense of providing them with time to play. She had felt so uncomfortable with the academic pressure placed on small children that she contested the schoolification of her setting:

The children were three to four and they had to sit down and learn to write, and she [manager] wanted them to go onto school already reading and writing and [...] then it come to a head when I went into the leader of the two to three room and she said the manager wanted the two to threes to be able to read and write and I just was like, 'No, if you want to do that then I'm not going to be here'. And we kind of had a discussion [...] I actually then went and found a lot of information why two to three year olds shouldn't be [...] sitting at a table learning to write and then she actually back-tracked.

Emma's experiences reflect the drive to achieve academic development in early years settings, often at the expense of providing children with time and space to learn through play. Academic achievement was perceived to be the number one priority by over half of our participants.

Maggie (West Point) and Yvonne (Green Fields) both referred to the prescriptive milestones that small children are expected to reach, as set out in the Early Years Foundation Stages (EYFS). Maggie explained with reference to the EYFS that 'the hardest thing I find is [...] everything's got to be so prescriptive'. Yvonne highlighted the tension between the goals orientated approach to early years provision, as outlined in the EYFS, contrasted with a more holistic view of the child that tries to engage the child by starting with where they are:

There's a lot to say that when you're this age, this many months you should be doing, this, this and this but if they're not at that stage you can start, you know, learning through play, starting where they're at and they're interested in what you're doing because you use their interests so they're more eager to learn because you're using their interest to build upon.

Yvonne commented that by engaging a child through its own interests, academic advancement is more easily achievable. Such a view runs counter to the government's prescriptive, milestone led EYFS (2014), which determines desirable outcomes for all children dependent only on their age.

In terms of policy enactment theory, the translations of the EYFS made by our participants and in the settings we visited were markedly influenced by contextual constraints and enablers (Ball et al, 2012). For example, at West point and East Lea, our participants reported more time and space for play opportunities, despite the urban nature of these settings. The staff indicated that because the children are growing up in urban locales, they need access to outdoor resources as much as possible whilst at their nursery setting, whereas at North Church, which was suburban, play was not constructed as a priority and the emphasis in the setting was placed on the safety of the children. The garden at North Church was limited in space and activities available to children. These varied enactments reflect the different institutional priorities, which were shaped by the staffs' education and training experiences, discussed in the following section, as well as the outdoor space available in different settings which varied considerably.

To protect the time allocated to play in early years settings, it is crucial to have support from parents. However, we found that parents were, at times, constructed as part of the prob-

lem. Several of our practitioners expressed frustration at parents' lack of knowledge and understanding of the benefits of play. For example, Mel (Sherwood) described play as the child's work, a way of expressing, learning and being, but not always understood and supported by parents:

They (parents) don't understand how important play is. It's the child's work, if you like, and that's how we used to explain it to some parents because it was, 'Oh, you're only playing.' 'Not only playing, we are playing' and it was trying to get that across to them that it's so important to play.

Mel explained that many of the parents she encountered in her daily practice were simply too busy to play with their children and the pressure on their time combined with their sense that play was not terribly important resulted in limited space and time for play in the home environment. Mel emphasised that providing time to play is a crucial element of positive child development:

Just be on the floor... That was the one thing, and I try and sort of get it in. 'Cause both my girls do a lot of babysitting and play and I know it's not the same as working in [a nursery] but I said, 'If you can give that child' ... even if it's just fifteen minutes before they go to bed, of your undivided attention, where you're on the floor with them and you're letting them play and get them to let you come into their play, don't take over... you know, they will get so much out of that.

Mel reinforced her view that ensuring the centrality of play in a child's early years is key to their 'satisfaction and development' and that parents needed to understand the important role of play in their child's early years.

Relatedly, Megan (South Church) referred to parents' anxiety about their child's academic development, to the detriment of the importance they attach to play:

It's definitely from playing it gives confidence in everything. I just feel parents worry too much academically, because the children are learning (when playing).

According to Megan, parents are overly concerned about their child's academic advancement to the detriment of other areas of their social and emotional development. The mis-

recognition of the importance of play by parents perhaps relates to the context informing early years as it is reported in the media and experienced on the ground by parents, where the emphasis and enactment of the EYFS in England and Wales is on academic skills over and above other skills and attributes. This misrecognition perhaps highlights the need for practitioners to work more closely and constructively with parents in relation to play to enable some parents to gain further insights and understandings of the benefits of their child's play. This is of particular importance given the limited time for play in many ECEC settings.

Enactment of the EYFS

So far we have argued that play was constructed as important to the majority of our practitioners and that many also reported the difficulty they encountered in providing time and space for play due to the policy demands created by the prescriptive EYFS (2014, 2017). Our findings highlight the tensions between practitioners' priorities for their professional practice and those imposed through government legislation, and also on occasions, through the parents themselves. The participants in our study almost without exception, identified the need for children to learn and develop through self-directed play, but they revealed how this aim is at odds with the current ECEC agenda. The EYFS policy enactment reported in our study revealed discourses that had become inscribed by a performative and academic agenda and culture, a context where practices are highly regulatory and where what constitutes success for our settings can be viewed as driven by outcomes. The school readiness discourse we encountered was reported to us as a non-negotiable practice, and inscribed and directed almost all of the policy translation and interpretation work of the EYFS in our settings. Yet despite this performative discourse, we overwhelmingly encountered professionals who passionately believe that practice should be orientated towards child-led play activities and were able to articulate numerous benefits of child-initiated play. Thus, we argue that the practitioners need different ways to theorise their play-based practice and that a Froebelian perspective could fill that knowledge gap. Furthermore, raising the profile of Froebel's theoretical work could provide a counter discourse to the statutory requirements imposed on ECEC by the EYFS.

One way to raise the profile of Froebel's work would be to overtly name those practices and the underpinning philosophy that represent Froebelian play and to include these elements

in early years practitioners' education and training pathways. For example, through the inclusion of a Froebelian approach in the NVQ level 2, Early Years Foundation Degree and BA Early Childhood programmes; the inclusion of Froebel's philosophy and accompanying practices, could provide a non-prescriptive theoretical framework to support the development of early years practitioners practice by showing the relevance and usefulness of theory in practice.

Conclusion

The space and time required for play is a key component of successful, rich opportunities for children to develop autonomy and self-esteem. But without the necessary building blocks – theoretical and pedagogical – there are difficulties in advocating for and enacting play. In this paper we have highlighted that our practitioners all valued play as a way to enhance the social, emotional and academic development of children, yet almost all of our practitioners reported that they had limited time for providing play opportunities due to the target driven and academically orientated early years policy context in England. We noted that the translations and enactment of the EYFS in our six settings was driven by the school readiness agenda, which is a significant discourse operating in our six settings.

We found that having sufficient time for children to play is a key issue for these practitioners, but so too is the professional confidence and understandings of enacting Froebelian informed play, which we discuss in depth elsewhere (author reference). A further necessary ingredient to enable play to flourish is a supportive parent who appreciates the importance of play for all aspects of child development, but this support was not always forthcoming for our practitioners.

In sum, the importance our practitioners attached to play, along with the difficulty of providing time to play, created a tension in our settings. The tension is also created by having to enact the government policy which emphasizes school readiness over and above other areas of child development. We argue that the need to provide children with space to play is worthy of placing further policy pressure on the English government to understand the importance of play and to legislate for time to play. We suggest that one way to achieve

this aim is to support and train practitioners to respond in practice to the tensions they are faced with at a local level when enacting EYFS and also their principles in relation to ECEC.

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