

# **The Voice of the Child: Ownership and Autonomy in Early Learning Froebel Research Fellowship**

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with Sue Robson, Hiroko Fumoto, and Sue Greenfield**

## **Introduction**

Phases 1-3 of the project have been successfully completed, with a number of publications and presentations arising as a result (see Appendix). The main theme that derived from phases 1-3 of the project, which considered early childhood professionals' experiences of facilitating children's thinking, was the importance of time: the time that is needed for professionals and children to share experiences that are meaningful for both of them (Robson and Hargreaves, 2005; Fumoto and Robson, 2006). While the majority of the early childhood professionals who took part in our project reported that they believe that they are effective in creating time in various ways, they also suggest some causes for concern. These are particularly evident in the areas of training, parental involvement and professionals' confidence in providing an environment which ensures sufficient temporal and physical space to facilitate children's thinking. Current foundation stage curriculum guidelines (QCA/DfES 2000) which emphasize fulfilment of a range of pre-specified learning outcomes, and completion of the foundation stage profile (QCA/DfES 2003) are often seen by professionals as militating against sufficient time to facilitate children's thinking. This may be viewed as particularly worrying given the range of evidence which suggests that the development of relationships in early childhood settings (between children themselves, between children and teachers, and between teachers and parents/carers) requires time and space for positive shared experiences between all those involved (e.g. Broadhead 2004, Paley 1986, Pianta 1999). Further publications are currently in preparation.

Phase 4 (September 2006-August 2007) and phase 5 (September 2007-August 2008) investigate the ways in which social relationships in early childhood settings support and influence children's creative thinking. The specific focus on creative thinking reflects both its position as one of a category of 'higher level' mental activities (Wilson 2000), and the value of aspects of creative thinking for the development of intellectual autonomy and hypothesis framing (White 2002). The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE 1999:64) suggest that 'creative thinking always involves some critical thinking', whilst Sternberg (2003) suggests that creative thinking, whilst an important life skill, may too often receive less attention than other aspects of thinking, such as analytical thinking.

## **Research design**

The project is based on both Froebelian and socio-cultural perspectives on children's development (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff 1990) and draws on theoretical frameworks such as developmental systems theory (Ford and Lerner, 1992). The main research question addressed in the investigation is as follows:

How do social relationships in early childhood settings support and influence children's creative thinking?

This is considered in three strands:

- Children's perspectives: What are the children's perspectives on their activities in early childhood settings, and how do they reflect upon these? The investigation involves observation and video recording of episodes of children's play. These episodes form the subject of reflective discussions between the children and the researcher. (Sue Robson)
- Parents/ carers' perspectives: What opportunities do parents provide for children to engage in creative thinking? Parents/ carers' perspectives are elicited through questionnaires and one-to-one semi-structured interviews involving commentary on selected video extracts. (Sue Greenfield)
- Teachers' perspectives: How are teachers' experiences of relating to young children shaped by children's developing creative thinking, and vice versa? The examination of teachers' perspectives involves questionnaires, one-to-one semi-structured interviews involving commentary on selected video extracts, and the administration of Student-Teacher Relationships Scales (Pianta, 2001). (Hiroko Fumoto)

Phases 4 and 5 will take place in foundation stage settings (with children 3 to 5 years of age) and primary schools (Year 1, children aged 5 and 6 years), respectively.

### **Progress Report**

The Pilot phase research was carried out in June and July 2006, in a nursery school, with a sample of 2 children, 2 practitioners and 2 parents/carers. Preliminary analysis of the data has been undertaken. As a result of this, minor modifications have been made to the size of sample in the main study (3 settings rather than 2). The headteacher and staff at the Pilot setting were most interested in our initial findings, and are keen to continue to work with us. As a result, phase 4 will include this setting, along with a nursery and primary school in another Local Authority and a workplace nursery, as the settings for the main study in Phase 4.

As a result of recommendation by the ex-Director of the Foundation Stage, Hiroko Fumoto delivered 2 workshops for practitioners in Yorkshire in September 2006.

Phase 4 of the Project has included development of a framework for analysing observable behaviour in young children's creative thinking. This has been successfully used in an in-service session with a local nursery school, and a further development day, with another local nursery school, is planned.

### **Phases 4 and 5**

#### Phase 4 (Sep 2006-Aug 2007)

Two maintained nursery schools/early years units and one private workplace nursery have been selected involving approximately 2 girls and 2 boys each (N=12) with their parents/carers (N=12) and their teachers (N=12). All teachers in the year group will complete the questionnaire and Student-Teacher Relationships Scales. Parental questionnaires will be distributed to all parents in the year group.

#### Phase 5 (Sep 2007-Aug 2008)

Phase 4 will be repeated in Year 1 classes.

In both phases 4 and 5, video recording of play episodes, reflective discussions with children, parents and teachers, and completion of the Student-Teacher Relationships Scales will be carried out twice in each year, in Autumn and Summer, with the same

cohorts of children and families. This will enable us to examine developments in the children's thinking, and their ways of reflecting upon this in discussion.

### **Possible Future Developments**

Professor Hargreaves is presenting a report on the Froebel Research Fellowship research in a Symposium on Aesthetic Learning in Early Childhood at Goteborg University in November, and will be discussing potential collaboration with the Early Years group there.

### **Appendix: Froebel Research Fellowship: Publications and presentations Phases 1-5, 2002-8**

#### **Books**

Robson, S. (2006). Developing thinking and understanding in young children. London: Routledge.

#### **Journal articles**

Robson, S. & Hargreaves, D.J. (2005). What do early childhood practitioners think about young children's thinking? European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 13, (1), 81-96.

Robson, S. (2006) Supporting Children's Thinking in the Foundation Stage: Practitioners' Views on the Role of Initial Training and Continuing professional Development. Journal of In-service Education, 32(3): 341-58.

Fumoto, H. and Robson, S. (in press) Early childhood professionals' experience of time to facilitate children's thinking. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 14(2).

Hargreaves, D.J. (in press). Invited commentary on 'Music education: A site for collaborative creativity', Special issue of the International Journal of Educational Research, eds. D. Miell, K. Littleton & S. Rojas-Drummond.

#### **Conference papers**

Hargreaves, D.J. (2004). Developing creativity in music and the arts. Invited keynote address, 2<sup>nd</sup> International Early Childhood Music Education Conference, Panevezys, Lithuania, 12.4.04. Kūrybiškumo ugdymas muzikoje ir mene, in Vaiko Muzihkos Pasaulis, pp. 6-11.

Hargreaves, D.J. (2004). Developing creativity in young children's songs and drawings. International Froebel Society Conference, Froebel College, University of Surrey Roehampton, 2.7.04.

Robson, S. (2004). Children's thinking in the early years. First Roehampton Education Research Conference (ROERCE 1), 16.12.04.

Robson, S. & Fumoto, H. (2004). Who owns children's thinking? International Froebel Society Conference, Froebel College, University of Surrey Roehampton, 2.7.04.

Fumoto, H. and Robson, S. (2005) Adults' experiences of extending children's thinking in the Foundation Stage. European Early Childhood Education Research Association: 15th Annual conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education. Dublin, Ireland, 2.9.05.

Fumoto, H. & Robson, S. (2005). Making time to extend children's thinking in the foundation stage. Second Roehampton Educational Research Conference (ROERCE 2), 15.12.05.

- Greenfield, S. (2005). Creating parent-teacher partnership through home visiting in early childhood settings: a consideration of the balance of power Second Roehampton Educational Research Conference (ROERCE 2), 15.12.05.
- Hargreaves, D.J. (2005). Why do children do creative arts work at school? Teacher and pupil views. Second Roehampton Educational Research Conference (ROERCE 2), 15.12.05.
- Robson, S. & Fumoto, H. (2006) Supporting Children's Thinking: Ownership and Autonomy in Early Learning. European Early Childhood Education Research Association: 16th Annual conference on Democracy and Culture in Early Childhood Education. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1.9.06
- Greenfield, S. (2006) Parent teacher partnership: can this be achieved without training? European Early Childhood Education Research Association: 16th Annual conference on Democracy and Culture in Early Childhood Education. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1.9.06
- Hargreaves, D.J. (2006). Ownership and autonomy in aesthetic learning: the Froebel Research Fellowship. Invited contribution to symposium on Research on aesthetic learning during early childhood, Academy of Music and Drama, University of Göteborg, Sweden, 23.11.06.

Sue Robson, November 2006