

Froebel Conference 2nd March 2019

Sara Holroyd and Felicity Thomas: Froebel Kolkata Project

The Froebel Trust Kolkata project began in 2012 with a long term aim of supporting training for early years teachers and helping to improve the education for young children which is part of the current Indian education policy.

There was considerable preliminary work involved in setting up the project and this took 18 months and two visits. It culminated in us working with the Parivar Foundation, a charitable organisation working alongside the Kolkata Police and run by Anindita Tamta. Parivar have established nine schools, based in police stations, for street children who have little access to main stream schooling.

Today we are going to focus on the nature of our early work in these schools where children aged 2 to 14 were engaged with largely untrained teachers. This was Phase 1 of the project and we made six visits of between a week and 12 days over three years. I was joined initially by Jill Leyberg and then by Kate Razzall.

During our first two visits our work was based in one school. West Port School is a small room with up to 35 children, both Hindu and Muslim, and two young teachers both studying for higher education qualifications as well as teaching for 3 or 4 hours each day.

Our observations in many Kolkata school settings showed a huge emphasis on copying and rote learning whether it was letters, times tables, lists of fruit and veg [largely presented in English], drawings and much more. At West Port the children spent a lot of time sitting and waiting for WORK to be put in books or on blackboards; falling asleep; watching thro' windows and involved in low level physical play activities often disruptive.

Joachim Liebschner in his book 'A Child's Work' sites Froebel as "*concerned to free children from the drudgery of rote learning*".

It was our aim to offer an alternative to this authoritarian, adult led approach modelled by the teachers.

A methodology based, of course, on the teachers' own experiences as pupils and mirrors what continues to be the practice in most main stream schools. The teachers were bored and lacking motivation; and so were the children.

Before we began our involvement, and throughout the project, we considered the following issues.

The Context: We spent time exploring and getting to know the context including the geographical and cultural context, the settings and the family circumstances of staff and children. Anindita shared with us the ethos and philosophy which underpinned the work of her Parivar charity and we explored the similarities and the differences in our approaches. *As was noted in this morning's key note lecture we identified a clear commonality with the Froebelian principle that highlights the relationship of every child to family, community and to nature, culture and society.* These discussions were important throughout the project because at times we disagreed on next steps for example the request for us to identify and celebrate "the best teacher".

Local Assets: The teachers were delighted with the resources we introduced. These were based on Froebel's gifts and occupations and included a set of Community Play mini blocks. However the Parivar charity has little money for general resources and we tried to source local natural materials which were familiar and available- sand, water, clay, cooking utensils, fabric, plants, stories, songs [relevant topics included clay, rivers, bridges, goats, chickens, clothes,]

Communication: Asim, our interpreter and guide, was invaluable; constantly on the move supporting us all; feeding back our thoughts to the teachers; interpreting for the teachers including reading body language signs which we often missed which helped us understand the teachers' feelings both positive and negative about the work. We eventually built up relationships with the practitioners to the extent that we could challenge and question them and even tease them in the process of "coming to know".

These issues are of course equally relevant whether we are working in Kolkata or Kettering.

We thought long and hard about our approaches and practices throughout this project in order to avoid being perceived as colonial in our approach. The nature of Froebelian principles in themselves helped us here.

As Froebelian teachers we were clear about our starting point for work with the practitioners.

As Froebel said-"to learn a thing in life through doing is much more developing, cultivating, and strengthening than to learn it merely through the verbal communication of ideas"

Based on information from all the above and having shared the big picture of Froebel's life and the ideas he developed we initially focussed on three Froebelian principles

► *Start with the child. [Freedom with guidance]*

If we are to know children and discover where they are in their development and interests we must observe them playing and interacting with their environment. As Froebel argued, "giving children freedom with guidance". We spent the first day helping and observing a normal session at West Port and found children were often asked to complete tasks

repeatedly with many struggling because it was too difficult and others bored because they could do it. At the end of the session we introduced the teachers to the resources we would use the following day, letting them explore them and together identifying what learning may come frominitially the mini blocks. We then led class sessions introducing resources, making observations and taking photos as we went. Each day we would spend time sharing our thoughts about how the children responded to the changes and how the teachers were feeling about the changes. This was considerably easier and more effective once there were three of us teaching- Jill Leyberg and Kate Razzall.

► *Children are active learners*

West Port had a small concrete area outside the doors and we cajoled [again Asim was invaluable here] the Police Inspector into building a wall around it to create a small play area and garden.

The children already enjoyed dancing and we introduced ring games and action rhymes.

We set up the classroom so children could move around, choosing materials and activities.

We encouraged the children to do their own thing!

► *There are links between different areas of learning;*

We began by introducing gifts 3, 4, 5 and 6 and the CP mini blocks and talked about Froebel's ideas for the forms of life, knowledge and beauty slowly introducing other gifts and occupations including, sticks and peas, sticks and tops, mark making, books, finger rhymes and stories, paper folding, paper weaving and on future visits - role play resources, clay, water, sand.

We slowly introduced the new materials, setting up the classroom before the children arrived, and sharing with the teachers' different ways to organise and manage a classroom.

Stories and songs and rhymes were chosen or adapted to reflect the local context [Howrah Bridge is falling down, In and out the Tall Green Grasses, Floating down the River to the Hoogly-oh].

During the classroom sessions we pointed out and discussed the observations we made of the children and where they were in their learning so that interventions could be planned to support the next steps. This was a constructive process. We learned together and from each other. The Parivar teachers were able to observe us in discussion sharing and fine tuning planning ideas [they were used to a top down model where they were told what to do and they told the children what to do].

As the resources became familiar and classroom organisation became more effective the Parivar teachers were able to see how resources including story and play enabled them to include children at different stages of development and learning. They also began to identify

the knowledge and skills that individuals were exploring whether mathematical, scientific, linguistic etc.

What transformations did we see in students and teachers?

Sleeping boy SB [3 yrs] spent most of his time in school asleep or lying on the floor or watching events outside the door. After a couple of days he showed some interest in the blocks but was often pushed away by the older children. We gave him gift 4 and he set to making repeated patterns often using 2 blocks alternating their position by 90 degrees. By the end of the week he was building single block towers often 3 in a row with a triangular prism on top of each.

Bowl girl BG [3 years] Again a very passive child, sitting in the shadow of her sister, watching but not engaging with any resources. We initially gave her Gift 3 and she spent time wrapping the blocks up and posting them under the table. Later in the week she was observed moving tops from one bowl to the other, filling them; pretending to cook with them; stacking them. She remained at the activity for 25 minutes.

Water boy WB [6 years] the teachers at LS were not keen on water activities especially as we used their cooking bowls initially and it has a tendency to wet the floor and the children! However after seeing a series of photos of WB experimenting with the amount of splash made as he poured from higher and lower levels most of the teachers were keen to acknowledge that they had witnessed science in action including testing, trial and error and problem solving.

Clay girl CG [5 years] A deaf child, largely ignored by staff and children who had very low expectations for her. Other children ridiculed her when she misunderstood. Once she had access to open ended resources her skills became evident, she made the best thumb pots. As the week progressed and she became engaged in more activities, both teachers and her peers changed in their relationships with her and she began to be included in more situations.

Bridge boy BB [8 years] we introduced rolled up newspaper as a resource. We had been singing Howrah Bridge is falling down and introduced some non-fiction books including one on bridges. BB wanted to make the Golden Gate Bridge. Kate gave encouragement, offered additional resources and he solved numerous problems in completing his project which took 2 days and was later used in play activities and to illustrate songs e.g. Floating down the river. Exploring scientific, mathematical, and, design and engineering skills including the properties and strength of the paper, bracing structures, angles, balance, symmetry.

Fan boy [6 years] FB had been working cooperatively with 2 others on a complex 3 story building, a house. On the next mat another child, who was exploring core and radial patterns, had made a plant [the police were making us a garden and there was one plant, a palm, in it!]. FB made his own similar structure- a ceiling fan.

At the end of each visit we held a seminar with the practitioners from the other eight schools. Together with the Parivar teachers with whom we had been working we shared our experiences about the changes we had made together in their school in order to illustrate the impact of introducing Froebelian Principles and practices to the children and the teachers.

After the first two or three visits we would return to see some teachers using the resources but telling the children what to represent and modelling exactly what to do with the resources we had introduced -such as sticks and peas, sticks and tops, clay and mark making.

On this Chris Athey's ideas on constructivism came to mind – *“the ability of a skilled practitioner to plan for and organise activities which allow the children to actively construct knowledge rather than copying”*.

This ability requires the practitioners to recognise, reflect upon and value the child's actions, communications and representations in order to move their learning on. **This is skilled and complex work. It takes time for practitioners to develop and understand this knowledge and have the confidence to implement it.**

We knew that this could not be a quick fix.

During visits 3, 4, 5, and 6 we worked with and/or visited all the Parivar schools

In one of our later seminars we discussed how you could approach your role as a teacher much as you would the task of making a Biryani describing all the knowledge, love and care that goes into making it and how different people in different places vary their approach.

- **Careful preparation-** *a knowledge of the Biryani basics/Froebelian principles*
- **Good ingredients- knowledgeable** *teachers, resources, the curriculum*
- **The right mix and quantities-***timetable, classroom organisation, preparation*
- **Add things at the right time-***start where the child is/freedom with guidance*
- **Keep an eye on it -***observe changes, plan accordingly*
- **Taste it regularly-** *provide encouragement, offer additional resources*
- **Give it time-** *opportunities for children to return to activities*
- **Enjoy-** *give children time to wallow, time to laugh [humour shows deep understanding]*

It is a slow cook recipe. This really resonated with the practitioners.

Outcomes:

After three years many teachers are able to identify significant differences in their practice through using a Froebelian approach. They cited outcomes including increased attendance, better behaviour, greater concentration spans, better achievement in their formal school, happier children, and, not least, happier teachers enjoying their work.

Verbatim remarks

- We need to make children curious. [Aberjit]
- Every day is different and the teacher needs to change what they do
- I know now that babies have value
- This work makes children happy
- I think about how to manage their behaviour
- I say positive things
- I am learning from the children
- I like coming to work

As Tabassum noted she is learning from the children; and we too have learned from working in Kolkata. Working in some of the most difficult circumstances the Parivar teachers were confidently exploring and enjoying new ways of working.

However as we all know if we are to maintain our focus and continue to learn and develop most of us need the support of fellow practitioners, researchers. This was the focus of Phase 2 of the project with Felicity Thomas and Thelma.

I have to say when I look at the practitioners in these photos I feel quite emotional.

You can see the enthusiasm, confidence, professionalism and joy in their involvement.

In conclusion we have learned that a Froebelian approach is one that can support and transform learning in any context, albeit very different from that in the UK. International work, such as the Soweto and Kolkata projects, offers this opportunity to illustrate the value, credibility and impact of Froebelian practice.

Sara Holroyd, March 2019