



Research Grants Final Report Form

- Name: Dr Kate Hoskins
- Institution: University of Roehampton/Brunel University
- Project title: Enacting Froebelian principles in practice
- Project start date: June 2015
- Project end date: July 2018 (including a period of maternity leave)
- Grant reference number:

1) **Overview.** Please provide a brief overview of your research project, including the original research objectives

The key aim of this project was to explore the possibilities to protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice. The principal research question is:

1. What are the opportunities for protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice through policy interventions?

In addressing the key aim, the following research sub-questions have been answered:

2. How does localism impact on enactment of Froebelian principles?
3. How has practitioner' early years education and training informed their understanding and enactment of learning through play?
4. What form of policy intervention in early years practitioners' education and/ or training could protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice?

To address the key aim, I have explored the possibilities/spaces available to enact Froebelian principles in practice in contemporary early years contexts. In doing this, the project data provides qualitative insights into the contemporary enactment of Froebelian philosophy in early year's education, the role of theory in practice, practitioner views on learning through play and their perceptions of their professional status.

The study was premised on research that argues young children learn most effectively when learning through play (Curtis and Carter, 2003: Urban, 2008: Tovey, 2013). Thus, the project has investigated the possibilities for early years educators to provide opportunities for children to follow Froebel's philosophy of learning through play, whilst following the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) policy agenda.

2) **The Grant.** Please provide a summary outlining what you have achieved during the grant period, and assessing the progress of your research in comparison to your original proposal, detailing any changes in objectives, procedures or locations.

In the original grant application I identified 6 key areas of dissemination. In what follows I outline how I have achieved these goals and highlight some minor changes that I had to make due to taking a period of maternity leave:

- A pamphlet to be circulated to TACTYC members, disseminating the key findings, planned next steps and inviting members to a dissemination event at the University of Roehampton.

The pamphlet has been produced (see appendix 1) and is ready to send to TACTYC for circulation to their members once I receive Froebel Trust approval of this research report and the key findings.

- 2 peer reviewed journal articles will be submitted to the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*

The four journal papers for the project have been co-written. I have led on two of the journal papers for the project and I am the first name author on these papers.

I have submitted (21/12/17) and had accepted with very minor revisions (16/4/18) an article entitled 'Protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice: exploring the importance of learning through play' to the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. The paper will receive a DOI and be available online in the next few weeks.

On 29/5/18 I submitted an article entitled 'Higher education provision and access for early years educators: localised challenges arising from national policy in England' to *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education* and it is currently under peer review.

- 2 peer reviewed journal articles will be submitted to the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*

Dr Sue Smedley, the research assistant for the project, has led on two of the peer review journal articles. On 25/6/18 we submitted an article entitled 'Early years practitioners' understandings of professionalism: where do theory, practice and qualifications fit in?' to *Early Childhood Education Journal* and it is currently under peer review.

On 28/6/18 we submitted an article entitled 'Finding a place for Froebel's theories: early years practitioners' understanding and enactment of learning through play' to *Early Child Development and Care* and it is currently under peer review.

- A conference paper will be presented at the 7th Biennial Conference of the International Froebel Society in June 2016 to disseminate findings related to approaches to protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice through policy interventions,

Due to taking maternity leave in 2016/2017 I was unable to attend and present at the 7th Biennial Conference of the International Froebel Society in June 2016. Therefore, Sue

Smedley and I travelled to Bologna in August 2017 and presented two papers at the annual European Early Childhood Education Research Association conference. Both papers were well attended and we have developed these presentations into two peer review journal articles.

- A conference paper will be presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference in Newport, Wales in December 2016 to disseminate findings related to early years teachers education, training and development.

Sue Smedley and I presented two conference papers at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference in Newport, Wales, but due to my maternity leave this took place in December 2017 rather than December 2016. Again, the papers were well attended and we have developed these presentations into two peer review journal articles.

- A dissemination seminar to present the key findings from the 4 journal articles, to be held at the University of Roehampton for practitioners and academics.

The dissemination event took place on Wednesday 21st March 2018 at 2pm at Froebel College, University of Roehampton. The event was well attended by practitioners, academics, students and representatives from the Froebel Trust.

3) Research activity. Please detail the specifics of the research undertaken, including sources and/or methods used, and problems encountered.

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 Sibieta, 2011). Thus, the design takes account of the situated complexities arising from localism, and the demographic coverage has enabled 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 and sharing data at conferences and in seminars to consider the multiplicity of data interpretations (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.

4) Conclusions and achievements. Please describe the extent to which objectives were met, the conclusions reached, the degree to which an original contribution to theoretical and/or practical knowledge has been achieved, and an assessment of the significance for other research in the field.

In what follows, I outline the key findings in relation to the original contribution to knowledge in terms of theory and practice. The findings in relation to each research question are as follows:

1. How does localism impact on enactment of Froebelian principles?
 - Localism influenced access to higher education in rural, urban and suburban locations
 - The local area shaped the sorts of opportunities available for higher education with far more choice for participants in urban locations

- Prohibitive travel time and expense to access higher education for those in rural areas
 - Uneven access to high quality higher education in different areas
2. How has practitioner' early years education and training informed their understanding and enactment of learning through play?
 - Play was described by practitioners as an essential part of children's cognitive, social and emotional development
 - Practitioners think about professionalism in terms of relationships with children
 - Theoretical understanding is perceived as separate from practice
 - Qualification-based divisions in early years teams
 - Paper qualifications tend to be seen to over-ride practical experience
 - Capable but unqualified practitioners could be undermined
 3. What form of policy intervention in early years practitioners' education and/ or training could protect and extend Froebelian principles in practice?
 - Explicit reference should be made to the work of Froebel in BA and Level 2 & 3 qualifications, particularly ideas around learning through play.
 - Tensions between graduates and non-graduates could be eased by a policy to provide 'developmental professionalism' – education aimed at developing professionals from where they are in their practice. We have argued in our publications that such an approach could be approached in a Froebelian way, as discussed in point 8 below.

In addition to addressing these research questions, in the process of data analysis we also identified the importance of play to the majority of our practitioners. We found that;

- Froebelian ideas were implicit in the practitioner's pedagogical practice. Explicit knowledge of Froebel was limited
- Lack of time and space for play
- Policy context that marginalises play
- Schoolification (emphasis on testing and targets) of Early Years
- Differences in parental understanding of the value of play for preschool children and babies

The key aim guiding the research is 'what are the opportunities for protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice through policy interventions?' The key findings that address this aim are as follows:

- Play was described by practitioners as an essential part of children's cognitive, social and emotional development
- Froebelian ideas were implicit in the practitioner's pedagogical practice. Explicit knowledge of Froebel was limited

From these findings, we have developed the following government policy recommendations:

- To strengthen the link between theory and practice by providing rigorous accessible training for all practitioners regardless of their local context.

- Such training could take the form of ‘developmental professionalism’, which is discussed in point 7 below.

Once I have received Froebel Trust approval for this report, these policy recommendations will be shared with the government through a briefing paper. In addition, I will disseminate the key findings to TACTYC members, to Nursery World through a short summary article, and to the Times Higher Education and the Guardian Education supplement through a press release co-ordinated by Brunel University London.

5) **Learning.** Please provide your personal evaluation of the research project, including any lessons learned, which elements have more successful and which have been less successful.

In the process of conducting the research I was pregnant and that resulted in my seeking an extension for the project. Whilst I had anticipated that this might be problematic, the Froebel Trust were very accommodating and I was able to pick the project up upon my return to work. My maternity leave meant that I was unable to present at one of the conferences I had identified, but I presented at a comparatively scaled international conference which provided excellent networking and dissemination opportunities.

The data collection was extremely successful and we gathered a wealth of qualitative data to analyse that addressed not only the research aim and objectives, but also provided further insights that have led to a follow up grant application to be submitted to the Froebel Trust in July 2018 as outlined in section 10 below.

Overall, the project was successful and provided significant personal satisfaction of deepening my own knowledge about Froebel and sharing it through attending and presenting papers for peer feedback at conferences as well as through the project dissemination event.

6) **Ethical issues.** Did you encounter any ethical issues during the grant period, and if so, how did you overcome these?

N/A

7) **Implications.** What are the implications for this work? Please include details of any anticipated changes to policy and/or practice as a result of this research.

Our data has shown that local context influences early years settings’ possibilities to enact national, top-down government policy agendas. The tensions created for the practitioners and managers working in rural locations attempting to access higher education revealed significant disparities in opportunities available to them when compared with those working in urban and suburban locations. We found that over half of our sample perceived graduate status in a negative light, pointing to how potentially divisive an issue graduate status is in the early years. But we also encountered several participants – half of our sample – who could be helped to develop their practice if the narrow policy requirements on the early years in England could be challenged to become more inclusive and less prescriptive. Our research findings highlight that the key route available for our participants to develop their

professional identity is through higher education participation, and for some in rural locales the options are distinctly limited and involve prohibitively long journeys. Over half of our participants would struggle to get posts if they left their current setting due to the credentialisation of the sector and this would mean losing experienced practitioners. Thus, our key findings from the project indicates implications for the early years sector in terms of the need to reconsider and re-evaluate national policies that pay little attention to complexities arising from challenges related to geographical context.

In our publications from this project (listed below) we argue that a lot of the practice discussed in our interviews is Froebelian, even if not overtly identified as such. Thus, we argue that an alternative way forward would be through the idea of developmental professionalism. By raising the theoretical voice and philosophy that encompasses a Froebelian approach, we could enhance the professional status of many practitioners who we found to be integrated into their community and identified by the managers in all of our settings as providing quality care and education to young children. Developmental professionalism is about taking a different, inclusive approach to professionalising the workforce that is more in the control of the practitioners and requires them to take a holistic approach to what it means to be an early years practitioner. Such an approach could enable those practitioners who are not currently compliant according to narrow governmental conceptions of what makes a successful early years practitioner within the sector to find a theoretical voice and philosophy to further underpin their practice and enable compliance with the English government's policy agenda.

8) Other funding. Have any other funding bodies supported this research project? If yes, please provide details.

N/A

9) Publications and other outputs. Please provide a list of any publications which have already appeared, been accepted for publication or are to be submitted for publication and give details of any other sort of dissemination of the results of the research, which has taken place or is planned (i.e. lectures, seminars, conferences, exhibitions). Copies of publications should include acknowledgement of Froebel Trust support and should be sent as attachments with this report.

Publications:

Hoskins, K. and Smedley, S. (accepted) Protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice: exploring the importance of learning through play in *Journal of Early Childhood Research*

Hoskins, K. and Smedley, S. (under peer review) Higher education provision and access for early years educators: localised challenges arising from national policy in England in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education*

Smedley, S. and Hoskins, K. (under peer review) Finding a place for Froebel's theories: early years practitioners' understanding and enactment of learning through play in *Early Child Development and Care*

Smedley, S. and Hoskins, K. (under peer review) Early years practitioners' understandings of professionalism: where do theory, practice and qualifications fit in? in *Early Childhood Education Journal*

10) **Future plans.** Please describe any future research plans in this field for those involved in the project.

The key findings from this project provided some fascinating and timely insights into the role and place of qualifications in early years practitioners' education pathways and opportunities. We are now interested in researching the real potential of raising the theoretical voice of Froebelian principles in practice, particularly for those participants working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with generally limited access to outside space and varied activities in the home environment. Further, from our data analysis, we identified the importance of parental partnerships with early years practitioners to enable children to develop and flourish socially, emotionally and academically. Participants from all of our settings identified the particular challenges facing children from disadvantaged families. As such, Dr Sue Smedley and I are intending to submit a grant application to the Froebel Trust that will build on our work and explore 'Parents' perceptions of their involvement in play: an examination of the possibilities and potential benefits of extending Froebelian play principles into the homes of socio-economically disadvantaged families'

The aims and objectives of the proposed research are as follows:

Parental engagement in their child's/children's education is a crucial aspect of securing educational success, starting from the early years (author reference). Policymakers in England are increasingly recognizing the early years is an effective site for policy interventions that are focused on improving social, emotional and academic outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (REF). The recent policy plan to improve social mobility through the early years highlights that 'good early years education is the cornerstone of social mobility – and we are making record investment in this area' (DfE, 2017: 8). Government investment includes the introduction of the Early Years National Funding Formula, which will provide pupil premium funding for disadvantaged three and four-year olds, 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two year olds and 15 hours of free childcare per week for all three and four year olds (DfE, 2017: 11). This level of financial support highlights the government commitment to improving outcomes for disadvantaged families.

To further improve outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged families, we argue that parental involvement is crucial. Our research with early years practitioners highlighted that parents were constructed as significant

stakeholders in their child's/children's education. But little is known about disadvantaged parents' perceptions of the value of play and their engagement with play in the informal spaces of the home/community. Therefore, the aim of this project is to understand parent's perceptions of their involvement in their child's/children's play and to examine the potential benefits of extending Froebelian play principles into the homes of socio-economically disadvantaged families.

To address the aim, we have developed the following research objectives:

- To investigate parental involvement in their child's/children's play to establish how they support learning through play in the home/community;
- To build on parental knowledge of play by introducing/expanding on Froebelian play principles as a social justice response to address inequality;
- To raise the profile of the potential of Froebelian principles of play amongst disadvantaged families.

I would like to end this report by thanking the Froebel Trust for the funding that has enabled myself and Dr Sue Smedley to carry out detailed empirical research to examine the potential for protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice.