

Project title

Telling Life Stories: developing a Froebelian approach to documenting children's experiences in the early years

Project summary (250 words max)

This project was a small piece of action research, undertaken at the Cowgate Under 5's Centre, a Froebelian nursery in Edinburgh.

As public investment into Scottish early learning and childcare (ELC) increases, so does the requirement to observe, assess, and track young children's learning against developmental outcomes. At the time we applied for this grant, Cowgate Under 5's Centre was using a commercial, online learning journal tool, which replaced their previous, paper-based system of documentation. Practitioners were also transitioning to a 'Lived Stories' approach, which involved narrative observations addressed directly to the child. However, there were concerns at the nursery about how well the online journal meshed with Froebelian principles, if the online journal was amenable to a Lived Stories approach, and whether there were better ways to document children's learning and Lived Stories.

Our action research project investigated the views of children, families, and staff about how children's experiences were being documented, and tested ways to bring documentation into harmony with Froebelian principles.

The original project objectives were:

1. To answer the question, "What do children, parents, and staff think is important in how we document children's experiences at nursery?"
2. From this learning, to experiment creatively with documentation, grounded in Froebelian principles. This may include digital and/or paper-based approaches, or a blend of both.
3. To engage in knowledge exchange and dialogue about the learning from the project, in both academic and practice networks, nationally and internationally.

Key Findings (250 words max)

The Lived Stories were deeply entangled with the complexities of participants' lives, going far beyond a simplistic understanding of tracking learning. Participants valued these complexities and appreciated the liberty of having diverse and multiple ways of recording Lived Stories. We believe Froebelian principles,

PROJECT DETAILS

Researcher Name: Lynn McNair (PI)

Institution: Cowgate Under 5s Centre

Grant programme: Open Call Grant

Project start date: 01/12/2017

Project end date: 31/10/2019

Publications: Blaisdell, McNair, Addison and Davis. Telling Life Stories: Tracing the entanglements of children's participation rights in digital Learning Stories. (Abstract accepted to special edition of European Early Childhood Research Journal, edited by Ioanna Palaiologou, Elisabetta Biffi and Rikke Wettendorff).

Article in the Westminster Parliamentary Review, March 2020; Care and Compassion booklet.

specifically, 'knowledgeable and nurturing educators' and 'learning through self-activity and reflection' (Tovey, 2020) offer a particularly rich support for this kind of holistic, complex thinking about pedagogical documentation and 'tracking' of learning. Tovey (2020) reminds us of the critical importance of children's reflection. The Lived Stories provided a rich platform for knowledgeable and nurturing educators to empower children's reflection on their learning experiences. Furthermore, throughout the project, the practitioners became more knowledgeable about what they were doing and why. This Lived Story project enabled practitioners the opportunity to examine an issue with a rationale and methodology that can be explained or defended. Practitioners were then able to share their findings with others, and therefore this project supported practitioners to move beyond personal reflection or personal enquiry. Overall, this research supported practitioners to deepen their thinking and understanding, which radically and affirmatively influenced transformational change.

Children negotiated fluid and shifting positions in those entanglements. One child in particular was very aware of the digital platform and would ask staff to photograph and write about what he was doing, so that he could share it with his mother. This finding helped us see the potential for authorship with children rather than only about children.

Next Steps (150 words max)

Lynn McNair has four further presentations to do, one of them this year in Boston, at the Froebel in Boston conference (October 2020). We are exploring the possibility of hosting a creative hands-on workshop at EECERA 2021 in Glasgow. We plan to put in further grant applications to explore and support Froebelian principles.

