

Investigating children's participation in a Froebelian context

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Children's participation is broadly defined as the involvement of children in all matters affecting their lives (Tisdall, 2015b). However, the standards of 'involvement' became contested, and the participation literature advocates listening to children and implementing their perspectives into the aspects of their lives by celebrating the diverse capabilities of children of all ages (Lundy, 2018; Tisdall, 2015a, 2015b). Considering that participation is the right of the children as enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), Scotland is in a unique position to make children's rights part of its laws full and directly, which would galvanise the discussions around to what extent children's right to participate could be made real (Scottish Parliament, 2020). The debates and disputes in the emerging field of children's participation further highlight the necessity of contemporary studies investigating meaningful participation in children's everyday lives in early years (Blaisdell, 2016).

Building on the Froebelian approaches that emphasise the integrity of childhood in its own right, children's participation prevails as an essential element of this pedagogy (Tovey, 2017). As a prominent discourse in the early years, Froebel coined child-centredness that emphasises the curriculum is driven and in harmony with children's participation (Bruce, 2012, 2021). Therefore, investigating children's participation within a Froebelian context would reflect more of the contemporary practices of his theory. It would also help construct an in-depth understanding of children's participation in a context where Froebelian values are embedded. To this end, this PhD project study investigates how children's participation is lived and negotiated by children and practitioners in one Froebelian nursery setting in Scotland. The research mainly focuses on exploring the potentialities and limitations of children's participation within a Froebelian contextual lens.

The methodological approach of this qualitative research is ethnography involving approximately six months of fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with practitioners; and participant and direct/non-participant observation with children and practitioners. Research ethics concerning respecting children and practitioners as research participants have been a primary consideration throughout the project. I obtained children's informed consents verbally through using picture books which allowed me to negotiate and re-negotiate children's participation in research. I also obtained practitioners and families'/caregivers' informed consent in a written format at the beginning of my fieldwork.

As the research is still in progress, the findings are constantly evolving. However, the initial analysis suggests that Froebelian approaches offer ample insightful principles to promote children's participation in their everyday lives. Play, essentially, opens up many avenues for children to freely express themselves and prioritise children's wishes and concerns for practitioners. However, there are also challenges of embedding children's participation into daily life in a nursery context due to the misconceptualisations of participation in early years, leading to the complex power dynamics between adult and children being disregarded. Further findings are expected to provide more in-depth understandings into the reconceptualisation of Froebelian pedagogy to offer insights into the opportunities and hardlines of children's participation within a nursery context.

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