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Principled Encounters in Daycare for Babies: Froebel's Legacy

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REPORT SUMMARY





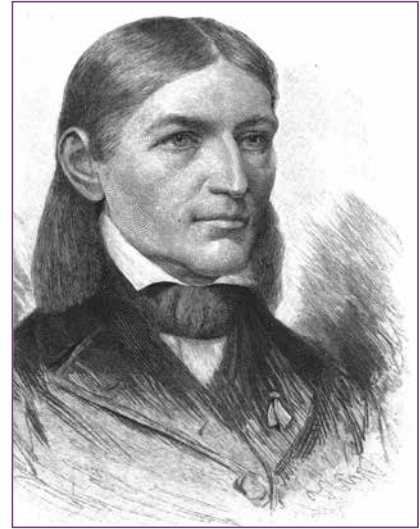
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1. INTRODUCTION

This document summarises the context, aims, methods and key findings and conclusions from a research project that was funded by The Froebel Trust in 2013 and 2014.

The project, 'Mother Songs in Daycare for Babies', drew on the philosophical and pedagogical writings of the 19th century German educator, Friedrich Froebel. The project explored the nature and purposes of singing with babies (birth to two years), according to the practitioners who care for them in nursery settings. 29 'baby room' practitioners from private day nurseries in southeast England were involved in a series of research-informed professional development sessions over the course of two academic years.

Data consisted of field notes documented during development session discussions; filmed practice in baby rooms and subsequent, recorded interviews and group discussions, aided by video recall; an online survey designed to audit singing repertoires and practices; and documentation in project folders that the practitioners created.



2. THE CONTEXT

In England, an estimated 500,000 babies and toddlers (under two years) are registered in formal childcare settings (Powell and Goouch 2012). These 'service providers' are regulated and inspected and the quality of their Early Years provision is judged by the national education inspectorate, Ofsted. It is not clear what constitutes good quality in provision for babies and toddlers, but internationally, academic enquiries and reviews of research suggest that babies should experience attentive, responsive care from knowledgeable adults in safe and thoughtfully arranged environments (see for example David et al 2003, Goldschmied and Jackson 2003, Mathers et al 2014; Dalli et al 2011).

With government funding for free early education for children aged two years and older, coupled with an indication that more highly qualified staff seem more frequently to work with the older children than the babies (Hadfield et al 2012) a clear discrepancy emerges. The myriad explanations for this apparent, two-tier system incorporate political, economic and sociocultural factors (Vincent et al 2007).

Less research focused on Early Years pedagogies for children under two than those aged 2 to 7 years has been published in England and little is known about the principles and practices that are employed in the education and care of infants and toddlers in formal day care settings. This may help to explain why opportunities to engage in relevant professional development and participatory research enquiries appear to be rare for those employed to care for the babies (Goouch and Powell 2013).

3. SINGING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The project sought to explore the possibilities that singing may offer for extending the pedagogical repertoires and philosophical reservoirs from which practitioners might draw in their 'baby room' work. Practitioners were supported to explore their own beliefs, question practices and consider theories about babies' care and their role in relation to this and to consider the expression (and management) of emotion through these musical encounters, particularly within lullabies. Friedrich Froebel's influence on practice appears to be timeless as singing continues to be promoted as an educational activity for the nursery, and songs and finger rhymes are tools to enhance children's learning experiences.

Although we found that singing was predominantly employed as a functional tool – to distract, calm, soothe, corral or manage babies and young children, the purposes of singing ranged over many educational intentions including language development and social participation. However, these activities occur within a particular curricular framework, infused with contemporary socio-political ideology and the motives that practitioners expressed for singing with babies did not necessarily resonate with Froebel's (19th century) philosophy about babies and their learning in the company of adults.

While Froebel's legacy places singing firmly within the repertoire of Early Years practices, the underlying rationale may be distinctly different in 21st century England.

4. EXPLORING SONG AND SINGING

Singing is a universal human activity that crosses but is also shaped by cultures (Potter and Sorrell 2014). Examining the exaggerated musicality in so-called 'motherese', Malloch (1999) developed the concept of 'communicative musicality', later elaborating this with Colwyn Trevarthen to suggest that 'musical narratives allow adult and infant...to share a sense of sympathy and situated meaning in a shared sense of passing time' (Malloch and Trevarthen 2008: 4). Their concept, which has been criticised (Black 2010) derives from Stern's (1985) belief that babies and their intimate carers can attune to and share one another's internal, emotional states, focused attention and sense of self (or subjectivity), thereby becoming 'intersubjective'.

This contemporary perspective resonates with Froebel's belief that babies were born with innate capabilities, which nurturing relationships could help to unfold; and that singing was a conduit for emotional exchange (Elkind 2015; Spratt 2012).

Our project invited practitioners to engage critically with these ideas, to explore their own beliefs about singing and to reflect on its place, features, functions and effects in the settings where they worked with babies and toddlers.

5. FROEBEL REVEALED, REVERED, REFRAMED

Friedrich Froebel's philosophy for the care and education of children through play emphasised the importance and value of singing and its beneficial effects for babies and their carers. He believed that anyone who worked with young children needed to be specially trained in children's songs and to have a liking and capacity for singing; and that babies and young children needed to sing and to be sung to by their mothers and other carers. None of the project participants had heard of Friedrich Froebel when our project sessions began. We introduced some of his ideas to the groups to raise awareness of Froebel's immense and enduring contribution to early childhood practice and to involve the groups in a critical exploration of their own and others' philosophies and theories. We focused on singing as a pedagogical tool, making clear that deconstruction of the practice of singing was a vehicle for investigating underlying or associated beliefs and assumptions (especially about the communication of affect) and highlighting Froebel's principled approach to the promotion of singing within a pedagogy for the Early Years. We also shared recent research evidence and theoretical propositions concerning babies and 'infant directed singing' (Trehub et al 1993)

6. FINDINGS

The participants' inexperience and initial reluctance to explore ideas about emotions became evident during the sessions. Our language and use of the term 'intimacy' in relation to engagement with babies created a visible and audible discomfort among participants but the fact that this term was felt to be so risky and to have inappropriate connotations helped to unravel some complex issues about emotional bonds more generally. The nature of interactions, the cause of interactions and the effect of interactions, again, were unfamiliar explorations, with the group agreeing with one participant who claimed: *'It's an instinctive thing. You're taught to change a nappy but you're not taught how to interact'*.

Singing to 'cheer up' a sad baby was evidently a common occurrence and indeed 'happy' or 'sad' were the only emotive terms used in reference to the effect of singing. Singing as part of the working day rather than in close interactions with babies, as a way of cheering up tasks as well as babies was also a feature of working practice: *'if we're sweeping we'll just sort of sing while we're sweeping or washing our hands or I think it's just done naturally and the children pick it up as well...'* (Participant interview).

Through this, and previous projects, we have become concerned about what we now describe as the 'performance of care' and what that might mean. Although childcare is frequently seen as 'a service industry' (Holloway 1998:30), those engaged in the service are perhaps inevitably entwined amongst competing demands and conflicting roles, serving many masters. In the complex debates about professionalism and loving encounters with babies in out-of-home care, practitioners find themselves anxiously treading what they describe as an invisible line between not duplicating a maternal role or attempting to recreate or mirror the emotional bond between a parent and a child, nor becoming a task-driven technician. This was particularly evident in the discussions about whether or not 'special' songs or lullabies from home should be shared or replicated.

Considering their roles, responsibilities and practices in relation to the words and work of Froebel offered the practitioners in this project a way of sitting outside this dilemma and looking in at their world. The project clearly had an impact, both personally and in adapted practice:

'You are cut off in your own little nursery bubble and it is nice; those sort of sessions show that actually you are all doing the same thing but kind of you...I mean in an ideal world you'd go and see other baby rooms, but of course you never can.' (Participant interview)

7. CONCLUSION

The philosophical underpinning provided by Froebel's work offered a point of reference, without which practitioners in nurseries are simply reliant on national policy documents, business models and regulatory bodies: *'You go by Ofsted most of the time'* (participant interview). As a consequence, roles, relationships and issues of identity are often diversely constructed, unequally distributed and invisibly monitored to ensure compliance. In this project, we have been struck by the ideological tug-of-war in relation to the impetus for care (economic and early intervention) and any theoretical approach to the care of babies. For example, does the day-to-day care of babies require only the delivery of a practical service or is 'affect', or warmth of encounter a necessary aspect of the work? If it is, then how is 'warmth' taught, modelled, regulated and judged? Or is a warm relationship simply assumed? The 'performance of care' seems to require a subtlety in modes of behaviours, relationships and responses. However, 'performance' in the context of baby room practice is frequently and narrowly defined as, for example, being jolly; singing to babies; making them happy; keeping them occupied or diverted.

While singing is part of the assumed agenda in baby rooms, the rationale is not clearly understood, nor clearly articulated. 'Good' songs are those that have been inherited in the nursery, or remembered from childhood and the 'good-ness' of singing is perhaps, without careful and critical reflection, part of an idealised notion of baby room practice or appropriated to fulfil curricular outcomes. The complexity of the work of practitioners in baby rooms cannot be underestimated. Perhaps by nudging forward a pedagogical device (singing) and attempting to raise the level of affect in this way, as researchers we are also guilty of inscribing practice, and practitioners as palimpsests, 'tablets on which successive scripts are written' (Bryan 2004: 142), rather than allowing an intuitive, affective and responsive practice with babies to emerge. Throughout the project, we were challenged by the question 'What good is singing?' and additionally:

- Can the 'increased engagement' that occurs during singing be described as intimacy?
- To what extent does singing further the managerialist agendas over and above more principled approaches to the education and care of babies, such as that advocated by Froebel or vice versa?
- Whose songs belong in the nursery and whose songs are excluded (and why)?

Importantly, 'closeness', 'stillness' and being 'in the moment' with a baby seemed to be rare events, with participants appearing anxious about being seen as inactive, not working. This project helped to legitimise the practice of 'lulling' a baby other than when sleep was imminent. In this project, participants were able to hold singing and songs up for examination, considering and articulating the benefits that could often be 'read' in the faces of the babies in their project films. Supporting practitioners in seeing for themselves the benefit of singing with babies, through the lens of Froebel's principles, ideas and songs, in part began the process of adapting practices, not because

of Ofsted, managerialist agendas or curricular outcomes, but simply because they were able to recognise the benefits in the faces of the babies with whom they sang, which in turn injected a 'feel good' factor into what for some seemed to be less than positive work experiences. Legitimised too, was the practice of singing when the mood took them - 'it's almost like talking to yourself' and to make light of tasks that, at times, appear thankless. While 'Row, row, row your boat' was frequently at the top of participants' 'hit list' of songs in baby rooms, the project helped them to look beyond the obvious, to introduce songs from their own histories as well as from contemporary cultures, while attending to babies, their interests, their home cultures and especially their responses to song. The project challenged participants to use songs and singing, vocalisations and motherese, to support the mutuality of engagement promoted by Froebel. Above all, the participants were helped through discursive opportunities, centred on pedagogical enquiry and reframing, to look at the babies, to notice expressions of emotion, and to better understand 'inter-action'.

This document is an abbreviated version of the full research report,
which is available from the authors.

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