

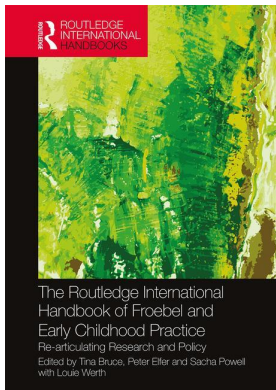
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Ownership and autonomy in early learning

A brief review of the Froebel Research Fellowship Project 2002–2015

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and Hiroko Fumoto*

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief review of the main phases and findings of the Froebel Research Fellowship (FRF) project, which has been funded by the Froebel Trust (previously the Incorporated Froebel Educational Institute) since 2002. The project is investigating the extent to which Froebelian ideals might be met within the demands of contemporary early childhood education and care. We have completed five main phases of the project, and a sixth is currently under way. In Phases 1–3 (2002–5) we investigated practitioners' attitudes to the development of children's personal, social and cognitive skills in the Foundation Stage curriculum using interviews, observations and questionnaires. In Phases 4a–c (2005–8), our focus narrowed to the study of children's creative thinking, and to the effects of social relationships upon it: children's, parents' and practitioners' views were investigated in Phases 4a, 4b and 4c respectively. Phase 5 (2009–11) focussed primarily on the distinction between play and learning at *home* and at *school*. Our shift in attention to the *cognitive* aspects of creativity in Phases 1–3 to its *social* dimension in Phases 4 and 5 has now moved towards *emotional* and *motivational* issues in Phase 6 (2012–15), in which we are investigating children's well-being.

Links with Froebel

Friedrich Froebel placed great emphasis on the growth of knowledge from inside rather than from outside the child, which involves the unfolding of principles rather than merely learning rules by heart:

what the pupils know is not a shapeless mass, but has form and life. Each one is, as it were, familiar with himself

Accordingly, he opposed education which seeks to impose knowledge from the outside:

We possess a great load of extraneous knowledge, which has been imposed on us and which we foolishly strive daily to increase . . . we have very little knowledge of our own that has originated in our own mind and grown with it

(Froebel, 1826b: 156)

Another of Froebel's fundamental concepts was that of *unity in diversity*: the notion that ideas and objects gain their power from the dynamic relationship that they display with their opposites. This led to a focus on the relationship between our inner and our outer selves: 'We become truly Godlike in diligence and industry, in working and doing . . . we thereby represent the inner in the outer . . . we give body to the spirit, and form to thought' (*ibid*: 31). The idea of the creative tension between our inner and outer selves serving as a source of learning and creativity is very similar to the idea of a *dynamic equilibrium*, which is at the heart of Jean Piaget's monumental developmental theory.

Piaget held that the dynamic equilibrium between what he called assimilation and accommodation – between the child's internal world, and the people, places and things he/she encounters in everyday life – is the primary source of cognitive development. Froebel stated this same idea explicitly: 'When we are being creative we give body to thought: we render visible the invisible' (*ibid*: 31)

Piaget and Froebel both held that it was the child him/herself, and not parents or teachers, who provide the driving force for these changes: 'Self-activity of the mind is the first law of instruction . . . from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract, so well adapted to the child and his needs, he learns eagerly as he plays' (*ibid*: xv).

The FRF project is investigating the extent to which such Froebelian ideals might be met within the demands of contemporary early childhood education and care. In the UK, this is a highly active and important part of current education policy with a prominent political profile. The project has now given rise to many publications in the academic and professional literature (see Appendix 1), and the results have highlighted a range of areas of current concern in early childhood education and care, which we have disseminated in presentations to numerous professional groups. Our book *Young children's Creative Thinking* (Fumoto et al, 2012) expands upon these broader issues. In this chapter we briefly summarise the main stages of the research programme.

Phases 1–3 (2002–2005): Practitioners' views of the development of children's cognitive skills in the foundation stage curriculum

Phase 1 collected in-depth interview and observational data from a small sample of teachers and their classes/groups of 3- to 5-year-old children. The focus was on teachers' attitudes towards pupils' thinking, and we found (a) a high level of commitment amongst the teachers towards extending children's thinking; (b) differences in their views about intervening in children's activities, and about the government's Foundation Stage; (c) clear differences between those who worked in nurseries (3–4 years) and in reception classes (4–5 years); and (d) an emphasis on the importance of ensuring time to enhance children's thinking.

Phase 2 was a questionnaire study of 80 practitioners which pursued some of these issues, and which confirmed that they emphasised the importance of children's thinking, and were also concerned about the time available for children to complete activities. We also found that they

evaluated their own effectiveness in terms of their ability to ensure (a) and (b) (Fumoto and Robson, 2006).

Phase 3 followed up the issues raised in Phase 2 with an in-depth interview study of 13 of the practitioners who had taken part in Phase 1. This revealed the importance of prioritising the development of thinking in professionals' day-to-day interactions with children, of the promotion of shared understandings between team members and of their confidence in working within a statutory curriculum.

Phases 4a-c (2005–2008): Effects of social relationships on children's creative thinking: children's, parents' and practitioners' views

The three strands of Phase 4 of the project investigated the ways in which social relationships in early childhood settings support and influence children's creative thinking. We approached this issue from the points of view of the children, their parents and the practitioners involved. The data in each strand was drawn from different participants in a children's centre, a private workplace nursery and a Foundation Stage Unit in a primary school in London, UK.

Phase 4a looked at the children's perspectives on their activities by making video recordings of episodes of children's play, and by having reflective discussions on these recordings between 12 3- to 4-year-olds and their teachers. The video data were analysed by means of a specially-devised coding scheme which was based on Sternberg's (2003) conceptions of the key elements of creative thinking. The *Analysing Children's Creative Thinking (ACCT)* Framework identifies 10 aspects of creative thinking behaviour, organised into three categories. Category 1, *Exploration*, comprises Exploring, Engaging in new activity, and Knowing what you want to do; Category 2, *Enjoyment and Involvement*, comprises Trying out ideas, Analysing ideas, Speculating and Involving others; and Category 3, *Persistence*, includes Persisting, Risk taking and Completing challenges.

The data from the reflective discussions were analysed using the CIndLe framework developed by Whitebread et al (2007, 2009): this showed that children used talk in various ways, including to comment, to give reasons for and to reflect upon their own and others' actions, and to demonstrate metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive regulation and emotional and motivational regulation. Our general conclusion was that children in this age group demonstrated a wide range of types of creative thinking and metacognitive and self-regulatory behaviour, both when engaged in activities and also when reflecting upon what they have done.

Phase 4b investigated parents' perspectives on these issues, since parental involvement in their child's education has a powerful impact on children's attainment. We took video footage of two children from each of the three settings in the study so as to provide examples of their creative thinking in the settings, and the parents were then invited to share the viewing of video episodes of their own children with us and to engage in 'reflective dialogues' which explored their views of creative thinking at home and in the settings. These revealed tensions between some parents' assumptions about their involvement and relationships with teachers in some settings, and about their knowledge of their children's creative thinking, as is demonstrated by the following parent's remark:

'No. (pointing to video) that's not Daniel, not at all. He's always got children telling him what to do. He don't play on his own.

Daniel . . . he'll try something once and if it goes wrong he won't go back and do it again he just walks away. Yet here he's completely different.'

Phase 4c investigated the effects of teacher–child relationships on children’s creative thinking by assessing six teachers’ perceptions of their relationships with 65 4-year-olds at the beginning and at the end of a school year by means of the Student–Teacher Relationships Scale (STRS: Pianta, 2001): we also specially designed and administered the Evaluation of Children’s Creative Thinking Questionnaire (ECTQ), which was based on the previous work of Hennessey (2003) and Sternberg (2003), and carried out semi-structured interviews and informal observations in order to explore the teachers’ views about teacher–child relationships, and of how they tried to facilitate children’s creative thinking.

Statistical analysis of the results showed that teachers’ evaluation of children’s creative thinking was a significant predictor of their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with them at the beginning and the end of the school year, whereas their promotion of environments to enable that thinking was not a significant predictor at either of those points. Whilst teachers’ evaluations of children’s creative thinking may influence the ways in which they perceive their relationships with them, they seem to promote environments for creative thinking regardless of their perceptions of those relationships.

Phase 5 (2009–2011): the home and the school

In this phase we followed up our Phase 4b finding of a possible tension between parents’ views of their relationships with teachers in the setting and their home-based knowledge of their children’s creative thinking by asking ‘what are the main differences between children’s play and creativity at home and at school?’ In our interviews with parents they generally made positive comments about the nursery and other pre-school settings, and felt that their children were happy there. However, they also generally felt that the nursery practitioners had little time available to communicate with them, and therefore felt uncomfortable about expressing their concerns as this might take up too much of the practitioners’ valuable time. This may also relate to the general issue of trust between parents and practitioners: some parents felt that practitioners may not ‘believe’ what they said about what their children did at home. It remains a challenge for practitioners to develop trusting relationships with parents, and vice versa.

Our Phase 5 work also included some home visits to parents, in which we showed videos of their children at nursery: This initiated discussion about issues of general concern, and also specifically about their children’s creative thinking. At first, they were generally reticent about providing details of what their children enjoyed doing at home, and as far as creative thinking was concerned, they mentioned activities such as songs and dancing and reading and writing: they were much less likely to provide instances of activities that had appeared in the video recordings of nursery school activity, such as playing football, or social activities with others. Nevertheless, there was some general appreciation amongst parents that ‘investigation’ was an important part of their children’s development, and that pretend play, for example, could be valuable in developing creative thinking. In general, however, our results forced us to the conclusion that the gulf between home and school was still too wide, and that various strategies such holding one-to-one feedback meetings between practitioners and parents and providing more examples of nursery activities would be greatly beneficial.

Phase 6 (2012–2014): well-being, creativity and early learning

Looking back, our focus since 2002 has moved from the *cognitive* aspects of creativity in relation to Froebelian concepts of autonomy (Phases 1–3) towards an interest in the effects of *social* relationships and contexts on those cognitive factors (Phases 4–5), and in the latest, current phase of

the project we have shifted the focus towards the *emotional/motivational* aspects of early learning by investigating children's well-being, which almost certainly underlies the other two dimensions. If children have low levels of well-being, which partly derives from their social relationships, then it is very unlikely that they will be able to demonstrate creative thinking, such that well-being may well be fundamental to everything else. This finds support in some of Froebel's ideas, as well as in Csikszentmihalyi's celebrated studies of flow, creativity and well-being (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

The investigation of well-being is also very topical from various other educational and social points of view. In the UK, Layard and Dunn's (2009) *A good childhood* – the report of The Good Childhood Enquiry – stimulated a national debate about the possibility that 'toxic childhood' could be an unfortunate aspect of contemporary life: that the pressures on young children from educational institutions, from their parents, from their peers and in particular from the images and concepts they gain from the media – have become intolerable, such that children cannot cope, and either drop out or turn away from this pressure.

Since the notions of well-being, quality of life and happiness are currently so prominent, and since these ideas fit naturally within a Froebelian approach, this seems to be an obvious direction for the current Phase of the FRF to follow. Phase 6 of the project will explore the extent to which it is possible to investigate well-being in young children, and will look in particular at (a) what parents, practitioners and children themselves understand by well-being in young children; (b) what methods might be used to assess children's well-being; and (c) the inter-relationships between these measures of well-being and those of creative thinking that we have developed in previous phases of the FRF project. Phase 6 is currently under way, and full details will be reported in journal articles and conference presentations in due course.

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