A FROEBELIAN APPROACH

Froebel's principles and practice today

by Helen Tovey

FROEBEL TRUST

This pamphlet has been produced by the Froebel Trust as part of a series focussing on various themes closely associated with Froebelian practice today. The pamphlets are an accessible e-resource for those supporting children 0-8.

Introduction

Friedrich Froebel, a nineteenth century German educator and creator of the kindergarten, is arguably the most significant of the pioneers of early years education and care. His principles underpin much of the excellent provision and practice today.

What are Froebel's principles? How are they relevant today?

This pamphlet sets out some of Froebel's key principles and what they might look like in practice today.

Froebel's kindergarten

'I wanted to educate people to be free, to think, to take action for themselves'.
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:41)

Froebel's kindergarten

Froebel created the first kindergarten, a place where children can grow and develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults. Froebel saw children as active, curious, creative learners who learn best through activity, play, talk, and self-reflection. They thrive when they are emotionally secure and in close relationships with others, including the family and wider community.

Froebel rejected the tradition of teacher-led education which viewed children as passive learners. Rather he believed in education through activity and enquiry. He saw the earliest years of a child's life as the most formative and play as the leading form of development. These ideas and their practical applications in the kindergarten were radical concepts at that time.

Froebel's key principles

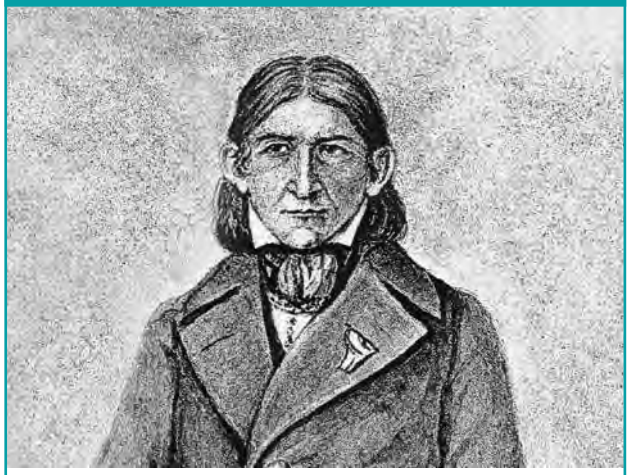

Fig.1: Friedrich Froebel 1782-1852

- Freedom with guidance
- Unity, connectedness and community
- Engaging with nature
- Learning through self-activity and reflection
- The central importance of play
- Creativity and the power of symbols
- Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Freedom with guidance

'[The] child is free to determine his own actions according to the laws and demands of the play he is involved in. Through and in his play he is able to feel himself to be independent and autonomous'.
(Froebel in Liebschner 1992:69)

Freedom for Froebel was about helping children to think for themselves, make choices, solve problems and pursue their own interests and talents. It was about allowing uniqueness and individuality to flourish within a strong, supportive community. In Froebel's kindergartens, children were free to move, explore, play, create, participate and to learn at their own pace.

However, freedom, he argued, cannot be given to children; rather, they have to attain it for themselves through their own efforts. Often this involves a struggle. So, for example striving to do things like mastering the use of tools develops a sense of autonomy with less dependence on adults. New understandings can open up new areas of thought. Ultimately Froebel saw education as freedom.

Fig.2: Gaining skill involves struggle and practice.

Fig.3: A well-planned block area includes freedom to choose and adult guidance in sharing the space.

Froebel's notion of freedom was not just licence to do anything and everything. Clearly some children's freedoms interfere with and constrain those of others. Freedom can only operate within a framework of responsibility and respect for others, the resources and the natural environment.

Adult guidance was therefore central to Froebel's notion of freedom. The adult played a significant role as a sensitive guide helping children to gain and use their freedom in worthwhile and mutually respectful ways.

Fig.4: Open-access, independent cooking area. Adult guidance includes a well-planned environment and pictorial recipe books. Children take responsibility for the area including the washing-up.

Froebel's notion of the adult making rich provision, guiding children in their play and interactions, opening up possibilities rather than constraining them, helping children develop autonomy and self-discipline within a framework of respect for others remains a powerful approach today. Freedom is not just about removing barriers, it requires opportunity and encouragement. The role of the adult is therefore essential in ensuring that all children's freedoms are protected.

Fig. 5: Adults offer guidance in using woodwork tools in safe and effective ways.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH to freedom with guidance includes:

- **Helping children make choices** from a range of options, for example supporting them in selecting the resources they need for a particular purpose.
- **Providing opportunities to move freely,** indoors and outdoors.
- **Helping children to do challenging things for themselves,** like using real tools. This involves guiding children in safe ways of using them.
- **Helping children to think for themselves,** listening to and respecting their ideas. 'That's a good idea, shall we try it?' 'That's interesting, what made you think that?'.
- **Helping children develop self-discipline** through gradually understanding the consequences of their actions and the feelings of others.

Unity and connectedness – 'link always link'

'It is all a unity; everything is based on unity, strives towards and comes back to unity'.
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:45)

Fig.6: The circle was symbolically significant for Froebel as it represented unity and an 'unbroken whole'.

Froebel believed that everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world.

Underpinning this idea of unity is a view of 'the whole child'; that all aspects of a child's life - thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships - are interrelated. Children thrive when there is a close connection between the kindergarten and the family and culture of each child. Respectful partnerships with parents were therefore essential.

Learning, Froebel argued, should be connected to children's own lives and experienced as a meaningful whole so that children can connect new ideas to what they already know. 'Start where the child is' is a Froebelian maxim, which means begin with the child's own interests, experiences and understandings and build on these.

Froebel valued the uniqueness of each individual but he also placed great emphasis on the community. He argued that individuality and community are not opposites. Rather, the community is enriched by the diversity and uniqueness of individuals. So in turn individuals gain a sense of belonging and connection from the community.

The kindergarten was closely linked to the local community. Froebel took children into the town square to play games so that he could explain the value of such play to the onlookers. Visits to local tradespeople such as the baker or the blacksmith helped children make links between such important work and their own lives. Children were encouraged to give some of the produce from their gardens to the poorest in the community. Such practices were underpinned by principles of unity, connectedness, relationships and respect.

Fig. 7: Making connections between the flow of the water and the rotation of the wheel.

Today the notion of connectedness is fundamental to our understanding of young children's growth and learning. Humans are relational beings, born to connect with others. Such intimate, reciprocal relationships are vital for our sense of belonging and wellbeing throughout life.

Similarly, connectedness is vital in forming the neural pathways of the brain. The growing brain seeks out experience, meaning and patterns in the world around and builds connections with existing understandings (Robson 2019).

Fig. 8: Link and flow between different areas of provision. These children moved between the workshop area and the investigative area to find batteries, wires and bulbs to create a robot with flashing eyes.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH
to 'connectedness' includes:

- **Providing 'whole', unified experiences** not fragmented activities. These must have meaning and be connected to children's own lives.
- **Developing link and flow** between different areas of provision and between indoors and outdoors.
- **Observing and enriching** children's patterns of thinking which connect seemingly diverse aspects of experience (Louis et al 2008).
- **Embracing unity within diversity.** For example, finding the common threads and shared experiences, which can weave a diverse community together.

Engagement with nature in **all** its aspects

The child should experience nature 'in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour'.

(Froebel in Lilley 1967:148)

Experience and understanding of nature were central to Froebel's ideas. His garden was a place for activity, curiosity, investigation and play. Froebel saw it as a spiritual place of beauty, wonder and harmony where children could be 'at one' with nature.

Each child had their own small garden plot. Here they could dig, plant seeds, tend the growing plants and harvest the produce. They could experience first-hand the effect of sun, shade, rain and wind and investigate the worms, snails and insects nearby.

Froebel argued that through gardening children could begin to see a connection between the growth of the plants and animals and their own lives such as the shared need for food, water, shelter and care.

This, he believed, deepened the children's emerging understanding of themselves and the inter-connectedness of all living things.

Froebel emphasised that children should experience **all** aspects of nature, not just plants and animals. This included the universal laws of nature such as forces, gradient, gravity, motion, energy, light, sound, properties of materials and their transformations. One of the best ways children can experience nature, he argued, is through their play outdoors in the garden and in the wider natural environment.

Fig. 9: Connected experiences of growing, harvesting, cooking and eating potatoes.

Fig. 10: Planting beans and finding worms.

Today Froebel's ideas of unity and interconnectedness resonate strongly with contemporary understandings of ecology and concern for sustainability. As children are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, his ideas have renewed importance and urgency. Experience of nature is therefore central to Froebelian practice. However, it must be a 'whole' and connected experience. For example children should engage with the whole life-cycle of growing plants from seed to harvest to compost. This might include sieving soil, writing labels, solving problems such as how to support the plant stem, making a scarecrow and beginning to understand the significance of worms and bees.

Fig.11: Exploring laws of nature - force, action and reaction.

Fig.12: Froebel encouraged children to test their limits and play adventurously outdoors.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH to nature also includes:

- **Engaging with nature through play;** for example, making dens, climbing trees, exploring streams, so that children can be immersed in the natural world. This includes regular visits to green spaces such as local woodland.
- **Adults who are deeply attuned to nature,** who show a joyful, curious approach, and a desire to connect children to the beauty and wonder of the world around them.
- **Ensuring that children experience all aspects of nature,** including for example, physical processes of gradient, gravity, speed, energy and forces.

Learning through self-activity and reflection

'To learn a thing in life and through doing is much more developing, cultivating and strengthening than to learn it merely through the verbal communication of ideas'.
(Froebel 1885:2)

Froebel saw young children as curious, investigative learners with an innate impetus for self-activity from birth. They learn through doing, exploring, playing, taking things apart, and posing questions in their effort to understand the world around them.

Figs.13 and 14: From birth, children are active, curious learners trying to understand the world around them.

Froebel argued that all learning is rooted in young children's early activity. A seed of understanding if nourished with rich experience will grow over time.

However, Froebel argued that on its own self-activity is not enough. Children should also become more aware of their own learning so that they know something in a deeper, more reflective way. Helping children to reflect and become more self-aware was a key feature of Froebel's approach.

Fig.15: Simple materials like pulleys offer problems to be solved through trial and error.

Fig.16: Observing garden snails provokes reflective questions such as 'How does he eat without any teeth?'

Fig.17: Active exploration of cause and effect and the flow of water.

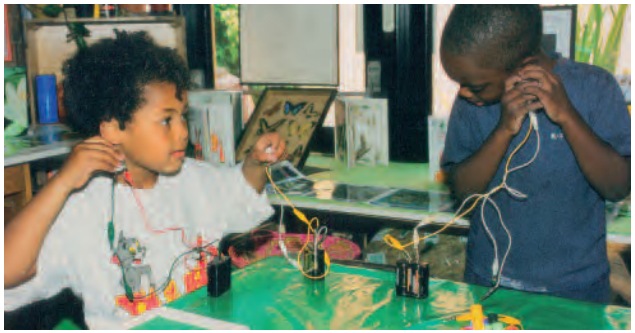

Fig. 18: Reflecting on the sound and movement of the battery-operated motors. 'They're singing' and after watching them rotate on the table - 'they're singing and dancing'.

Fig.19: Froebel's fifth gift.

Fig.20: Sticks and peas offer exploration of line, shape and space.

Fig.21: Clay offers rich opportunities for moulding, creating and representing ideas.

Gifts and occupations

Froebel devised a series of simple but deeply thought about materials he called 'gifts' and 'occupations' for use in his kindergartens. The gifts included small crocheted balls on strings for babies and a series of increasingly complex boxed blocks in the shape of a cube, subdivided in different geometric configurations.

The occupations included sewing, weaving, paper folding, paper pricking, clay, sticks and peas for construction, parquetry and woodwork. Crucially they were seen as inter-connected parts of a whole approach.

Through play with these resources children could simultaneously explore and represent

- **Forms of life,** creating and representing things and experiences from the world around them.
- **Forms of beauty,** for example aesthetic aspects of pattern, order, symmetry and harmony.
- **Forms of knowledge,** for example exploring mathematical forms and scientific concepts.

These illustrate Froebel's holistic approach to learning - everything links.

Many of the resources in early years settings today have their origins in the gifts and occupations Froebel provided for children in his kindergarten; for example, wooden blocks, clay, woodwork, painting and drawing. Treasure baskets and heuristic play for the youngest children build on Froebel's emphasis on sensory-rich, natural, open-ended resources with infinite possibilities and combinations. Froebel's underpinning principles remind us that, although varied resources offer unique exploratory, sensory and symbolic possibilities, they should be seen as part of a whole approach – unity in diversity.

Fig. 22: Unit blocks, similar in form to Froebel's blocks, and hollow blocks offer opportunity for large-scale, collaborative construction.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH
to self-activity and reflection includes:

- **Rich provision** of two- and three-dimensional material for exploration and play, indoors and outdoors.
- **Resources that are provocative** and challenging for children of different ages and experience; for example, pulleys and ropes in the sand-pit.
- **Continuity of provision** so that children can gain proficiency with materials such as clay and woodwork on a regular basis.
- **Helping children to reflect** on their activity, for example through putting actions into words, posing a 'wondering' question or making a connection with previous experience.

The central importance of play

'Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling. …It…constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child… At this age play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant'.
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:84)

For Froebel play was part of being human and of being fully alive. In play the whole child is active - moving, feeling, thinking and willing are integrated. He argued that play helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences with the wider world of things and people and to see a connection between them. Froebel saw play as being 'deeply significant' because:

- **Play helps children reflect** on and understand themselves as well as the people and world around them.
- **Play develops awareness** of symbols and symbolic thought where children operate at their highest level.
- **Self-chosen play activities help develop determination,** concentration, persistence and satisfaction, which are important features of work-like activities in adult life.
- **Play is increasingly social** and fosters friendship, fairness, understanding of rules and care for others.

Fig.23 (left): This child is 'razoring the grass'. He integrates real-life experience of razors and mowers. The ladder stands for the mower. His thinking moves from the literal (the ladder) to the abstract (the mower).

Fig.24: Play can develop determination, concentration, persistence and a satisfying sense of 'I did it!'

‘For Froebel, play was not located in discourses of outcomes or accountability’.
(Flannery Quinn 2017:29)

Fig.25: Play is a powerful context for posing and solving problems – how to get the wheelbarrow up steps.

Today, while few deny the value of play, in practice it can be misunderstood, marginalised, reduced to occupying, superficial activities or replaced by adult-directed tasks disguised as ‘playful learning’.

Fig.26: Simple resources can be transformed. These three-year-olds negotiate and agree the pretence. ‘Let’s play breakfast! Yes and I am the Mum and you are the sister. Yes and these are our pancakes’

Froebel’s vision of the power of play to take children to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating requires a deep knowledge of children’s play, a willingness to relinquish some control and the sensitivity to see where players need support or are best left alone.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH to play requires:

- **Rich, first-hand experience.** Exciting experiences out and about, which extend children’s interests and open up new possibilities.
- **Time.** Play takes time to get going. It does not thrive if it is squeezed into short time slots or constantly interrupted.
- **Open-ended resources.** Simple but good quality resources can be transformed into many different scenarios.
- **Choice and control** for children to have ownership of their play.
- **Adults as sensitive co-players** who offer freedom with guidance to enrich the potential of play as a learning context.

Creativity and the power of symbols: 'Ideas given visible form'

'Man is deprived of one of the principal means of self-education and self-knowledge if one takes away from him that power to create symbols, to see ideas given visible form'.
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:47)

Fig. 27: Connecting actions to marks to meaning.

For Froebel creativity is the essence of being human and fundamental to learning. All children have the potential to be creative if it is nourished and encouraged. Creativity enables children to connect their inner worlds of feelings and ideas and their outer world of things and experiences and to reflect on them both.

Through the use of symbols children can begin to see their ideas given visible form. They can reflect on them and share them with others. A symbol is when one object, idea, gesture, sound or mark is used to stand for something else. Through symbols, thought is no longer confined to the here and now but can recall past events and predict and imagine the future. Growing confidence in the use of symbols helps children move from concrete to more abstract thinking and is essential for subsequent learning, including literacy and numeracy.

Froebel valued each child's individual and unique creativity but he also valued the creative arts of the community. Art, music, song and dance were a vibrant part of the kindergarten culture.

Fig.28: 'The people inside the nursery. They're looking out the windows'. Froebel's forms of life (her own experience) beauty (balance and harmony) and knowledge (inside/outside spatial relationships) can be seen in this representation.

Fig.29: Using fingers and hands to 'stand for' ducks swimming. Froebel devised a range of finger plays and songs for parents and young children to share together.

'A new world of ideas and objects opens before him. For one begins to understand that which one strives to represent'.
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:87)

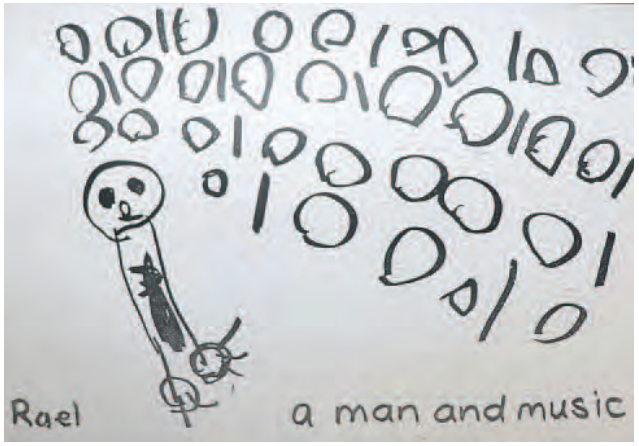

Fig.30: Use of lines and circles reveals this child's emerging understanding of musical notation.

Fig.31: Combining wool with blocks to 'stand for' a spider's web.

Froebel's notion of 'the surmise'

Froebel observed that in their active quest for understanding children develop a 'surmise' or tentative explanation as to why or how something works. Today we might say a hunch, conjecture or hypothesis.

For example, Emily, aged 4 years, is struggling to explain where water comes from.

'It comes from the North, from the ice. The people who live there, they make the water. Ice and cold and warm, they mix it up. Then some water. They haven't made it yet! They use a big new spoon in each pot and then they stir it up and then they put it in someone's tap with their pipe'.

Here, Emily shows her understanding of a possible connection between cold and the North, and between ice, warmth and water. She knows water, pipes and taps are linked and she surmises that just maybe people mix and spoon the water into a pipe.

Froebel argued that playing with ideas and creative use of imagination reveals the active way children make meaning from the world around them. They build understanding gradually, linking new experience to what they already know and 'surmising' possible explanations. The adult role in supporting and extending such thinking is crucial. For example, adults made further provision for Emily to experience ice and water, to play with hose-pipes and taps in the garden and to join a group visiting a nearby reservoir.

A Froebelian approach to creativity

A Froebelian approach to creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way. As children gain experience and understanding of the symbolic potential of materials, ideas can be explored with increasing complexity. It is not about copying and assembling adult-designed artefacts or filling-in pre-drawn outlines.

Creativity is a process which can be found in all areas of learning. It is closely linked with play, imagination, problem-solving and innovative, creative thinking. Research suggests that child-initiated play, particularly pretend, collaborative play outdoors is a powerful context for creative thinking (Robson 2017). See Figs. 32 and 33.

Fig.32: Open-ended play provides a powerful context for creative thinking. Here the children are negotiating how to build a house with boxes and tape.

Fig.33: Creating imagined scenarios and narratives. Transforming soil and water to create medicines and potions.

Fig.34: An open-access workshop area provides choice of materials.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH
to creativity and symbolic representation includes:

- **Rich, first-hand sensory experience** – lots of things to want to talk about, communicate and represent.
- **Choice** of materials through open-access workshop areas with painting, drawing, blocks, sewing, clay, recycled materials or woodwork.
- **Opportunity to play** with images, ideas and feelings; to imagine; take risks and make original combinations and connections.
- **Freedom** to try things out combined with a growing understanding of the possibilities and limitations of materials. This tension between freedom and constraint was an important aspect of creativity for Froebel.
- **Guidance** from adults who support children to pursue and achieve their intentions, offering help when it is needed.

Knowledgeable, nurturing, reflective educators

Fig.35: Educators should observe and support, not interfere or dominate.

Fig.36: This adult's sensitive interaction, observation and reflection help identify the child's emerging understanding of writing and plan further provision.

'Let us learn from our children. Let us attend to the knowledge which their lives gently urge upon us and listen to the quiet demands of their hearts'.
(Froebel 1885:92)

‘Let us live for our children; then will their lives bring us joy and peace and we shall ourselves begin to grow in wisdom’.
(Froebel 1885:92)

Froebel believed that young children are entitled to knowledgeable and well-qualified educators who are attuned to the distinctive nature of young children’s growth and development. He founded the first training colleges for kindergarten teachers.

Just as gardeners tend their plants so educators should nurture and support children’s growing potential as autonomous, thinking, feeling, creative learners. Relationships with children should be warm, respectful, interactive and intellectually engaging, not interfering or dominating. Educators should share in the joy and delight of finding out about the world.

A key to this was close, informed observation of children together with thoughtful reflection which leads to planning. To observe without reflection was, Froebel believed ‘empty observation’ which could never lead to real understanding. He also pioneered the keeping of records of significant events in each child’s development. These would help guide the adult in how best to support the child.

Froebel saw educators as learners and learners as educators. Through studying children adults could gain a deeper understanding of their own lives as well as those of their children.

Fig.37: Active engagement in this Froebelian training session on woodwork helps practitioners embed theory and principles in their own practice.

Today, the value of appropriate training and qualifications is well recognised and closely linked to high-quality provision and practice. Yet the early years workforce as a whole remains under-paid and under-qualified. Excellent provision remains vulnerable to the political and economic climate rather than embedded as a fundamental entitlement of every child. The need for advocates for young children is as important today as it was to Froebel.

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH - The role of the educator includes:

- **Observing, supporting and extending** children’s play and learning (Bruce 2015).
- **Reflecting on observations,** often in dialogue with others, as a way of deepening understanding of children’s lives and learning.
- **Working in close partnership with parents, families and community.** Froebel argued that any nursery or school should be in ‘close and living relationship with people’s lives’ (Froebel in Lilley 1967:168).
- **A commitment to reflective practice** and further study. This includes ongoing professional development within a strong learning community.

Final thoughts...

Fig.38: Froebel argued that educators should share the joy and delight in learning.

Looking closely at Froebel's principles helps to deepen our understanding of the roots of current practice in ways which can help us move forward with greater strength and confidence.

However, it is not about choosing parts of Froebel's ideas in an eclectic way. Instead we need to look at the wholeness of his ideas and the principles which underpin them in relation to the varied contexts and demands we face today.

Developing a Froebelian approach takes time. It requires critical reflection, discussion, and a willingness to question taken for granted ideas. In challenging times we need strong advocates for young children, their families and communities so that together we can work towards shaping a better future.

References

Bruce. T. (2015). *Early Childhood Education*. 5th Ed. London: Hodder Education

Flannery Quinn, S (2017) Locating play today in Bruce et al *The Routledge International Handbook of Early Childhood Play* Abingdon: Routledge

Froebel, F (1885) *The Education of Man*, transl by J. Jarvis. New York: A. Lovell & Co.

Froebel, F (1886) *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel*, transl by Michaelis and Moore. London: Swan Sonnenschein

Liebschner, J. (1992) *A Child's Work. Freedom and Guidance in Froebel's Educational Theory and Practice.* Cambridge: Lutterworth Press

Lilley, I. (1967) *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from his Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Louis, S et al (2008) *Again! Again! Understanding Schemas in Young Children*. London: A & C Black

Robson, S (2017) Play, creativity and creative thinking in Bruce, et al *The Routledge Handbook of Early Childhood Play.* Abingdon: Routledge

Robson, S (2019) *Developing Thinking and Understanding in Young Children: An Introduction for Students.* 3rd Ed. London: Routledge

Tovey, H. (2017) *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*. 2nd Ed. London: David Fulton

Further Reading

Brosterman, N (1997) *Inventing Kindergarten* New York: Harry N .Abrams, Inc.

Bruce, T; Elfer, P; Powell, S, Werth, L (2019) *The Routledge Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice.* Abingdon: Routledge

Bruce, T (Ed) (2012) *Early Childhood Practice: Froebel Today.* London: Sage

Photo Credits

With thanks to the following early years settings for permission to use photos:

Annan, the Froebel School, Sussex

Bayonne Nursery School, London

Earlham Early Years Centre, Norwich

Somerset Nursery School and Children's Centre, London

The former Redford House Nursery. Froebel College, University of Roehampton.

With thanks to the following individuals:

Lesley Telford for Fig. 6

Lucy Parker for Fig. 21

Anna Tovey for Fig. 29

Debbie Hunter for Fig. 31

The author

Helen Tovey was Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Roehampton University. She is a Froebel trained teacher with twenty years experience of working in nursery and primary schools. For eight years she was Head of a nursery school in an inner city area of London, and was involved in setting up and developing a challenging outdoor environment.

Helen is author of numerous books and articles including *Playing Outdoors, Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge* published by Open University Press and *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice* published by Routledge. Although retired from lecturing Helen is a member of the Froebel Trust and still teaches on Froebel related courses.

FROEBEL TRUST

Clarence Lodge, Clarence Lane, Roehampton, London SW15 5JW
Registered Charity No.1145128
www.froebeltrust.org.uk

Design: © Solutions Design Consultants Limited, SW20 0TJ 08/2017 PRINCIPLES Design/Print 01/2020