

Creating a curriculum with young children

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This summary emerged from a research project completed in January 2022 which aimed to develop inclusive and responsive approaches to curriculum planning, pedagogy and provision.

**Details about the research are available at:
froebel.org.uk/research-library**

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Froebelian principles

Unity and connectedness

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. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

The value of childhood in its own right

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

A living curriculum

This summary combines Froebelian principles with insights from contemporary research to explore how early years educators can build a curriculum in partnership with children.

Examples from practice illustrate how educators can develop a vibrant and responsive curriculum that is attuned to children's ideas and interests. Prompts for reflection offer starting points for thinking about the curriculum in your own setting.

A curriculum guided by Froebelian principles recognises that children and educators play an active role in building a curriculum together through spontaneous and planned experiences.

This dynamic process can be thought of as a living curriculum that unfolds in response to the interests and ideas that children and educators explore in their play and interactions.

A living curriculum...

- values learning experiences that have relevance for all children in a diverse and changing society
- engages with the many ways in which children express their ideas and make sense of their worlds, and with things that matter to them
- recognises that even the most routine experiences of everyday life can become springboards for shared thinking, exploration and enquiry
- is built on respect for children's capabilities and membership of diverse families and communities
- incorporates learning goals and outcomes set out in national policy frameworks.



Knowing children and their worlds

**‘everything must be a living, interlocking whole which secures and advances the interests of its members’
(Froebel, cited in Lilley, 1967, p. 168)**

Respectful and responsive relationships are at the heart of a living curriculum. The following pages will enable you to explore three starting points for developing a curriculum that connects with children’s lives:

- 1. Building relationships with children and their families**
- 2. Valuing children as thinkers, investigators and inventors**
- 3. Recognising children’s interests and enquiries**

A Froebelian approach to education is built *‘in close and living relationships with the people’s lives’* (Froebel, cited in Lilley, 1967, p. 168).

1. Building relationships with children and their families

Getting to know children and their families helps educators to create a curriculum that has meaning and relevance for children's lives. Children build knowledge and skills through participating in family life in different social and cultural contexts. These experiences make an important contribution to children's learning and identities.

Curriculum content within an inclusive educational context, which connects with the diversity of family and community experiences (Manning-Morton 2021), can help children to develop a sense of belonging (Pemberton 2022), enabling them to play an active role in the life of the setting.

Building a curriculum within an atmosphere of shared respect means that every child, family member and educator is valued, welcomed and able to make an active contribution to the setting.

Practice example

Educators Sally and Naomi noticed that their morning routine offered limited opportunities for informal conversations with families. They decided to introduce a self-registration system and to move their time for gathering as a group to later in the morning.

These changes enabled Sally and Naomi to greet children and their families when they arrived at nursery. As a result, relationships between families and educators were strengthened.

Sally and Naomi gained insights into families' lives, and this helped them to become attuned to the experiences and relationships that were important to children.



Reflecting on practice

- What do you do to get to know children and families?
- Do they have opportunities to get to know you?
- How do you ensure that children and families feel welcomed and comfortable to share their lives with you?
- What opportunities are available for informal conversations and sharing news on matters that are important to children?
- Do you use community languages and positive images to welcome children and families?

2. Valuing children as thinkers, investigators and inventors

**'Question after question crowds out of [the child's] enquiring mind - how? why? when" what for? - and any passably satisfactory answer opens up a new world'
(Froebel, cited in Lilley, 1967, p. 125)**

Young children are curious and interested in the people, experiences and things that make up their worlds. Children use talk, play, drawing and other forms of expression to think about and make sense of what they encounter. In this process of making sense, children build connections between familiar and new experiences, connecting 'snippets of knowledge' to devise 'working theories' (Hedges, 2011) about the world.

Working Theories develop through children's everyday experiences and interactions. Children are constantly forming, refining and modifying their theories as they connect their existing ideas with new experiences.

Careful observation of play enables educators to recognise children's investigations and problem-solving and to value children's emerging ideas.

Adults can help to guide children in asking questions, exploring and investigating. They also support children to understand what they have discovered, and what are the next steps to take, or ideas to follow. But 'developing accurate ideas and knowledge is not necessarily an aim' (Hedges, 2021, p. 32) - instead, the role of the educator is to recognise children's working theories and to introduce new experiences in which children can test, refine and extend their ideas. Respectful and responsive interactions lie at the heart of building a curriculum with children.

Practice example

3-year old Salma noticed lots of small green caterpillars on the plants in the nursery vegetable plot. She ran to Farah (educator), taking her hand and leading her to the plants.

Salma pointed at the caterpillars, saying excitedly 'Look! Baby snakes!' Instead of correcting her, Farah showed Salma how to use a magnifier to look closely at the caterpillars. They talked about what they could see and Salma realised that the caterpillars had legs. Later, Salma and her friend used chalk to draw hundreds of wiggly-lined caterpillars with tiny legs on the playground surface.

The following day, Farah and Salma used a Tablet to gather more information about snakes and caterpillars. These experiences enabled Salma to make sense of her discovery and to modify her working theory about baby snakes.



Reflecting on practice

- What opportunities does your setting offer for children to express their ideas about the world?
- How do you respond to children's emerging ideas and working theories?
- What resources are available for children and educators to be inventors, information gatherers and investigators?
- Can you think of a time when you collaborated with children to investigate, explore, and extend an idea?
- What factors enabled this to happen?

3. Recognising children's interests and enquiries

'Interests begin at birth, connected with curiosity, inquiry, and making meaning of life experiences.'

(Hedges, 2022, p. 13)

Children are motivated to learn through connecting new experiences to what they know and are interested in. Taking children's interests seriously helps educators to recognise and respect children as capable learners and curriculum makers. But educators may not consistently recognise children's 'genuine' interests or use them effectively to inform responsive curriculum decision-making.

For example, a child who regularly chooses to play with sand might lead educators to identify sand as an interest for the child. But an activity-based interpretation of interest tends to underestimate the complexity of children's thinking that is represented in their choice of activity. Instead, it is important to dig deeper and to think about what the child is doing with the sand, the motivations that might be driving the play and how this connects with other experiences in their lives.

‘The concept of ‘funds of knowledge’ ... is based on a simple premise: people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge’

(González, Moll and Amanti, 2005, ix)

Learning can be greatly enhanced when educators connect the curriculum with children’s diverse funds of knowledge. This begins with getting to know children and their families.

Research indicates that children’s interests develop through their relationships with the people, places and experiences they encounter in their lives. Children’s involvement in family and community activities enables them to build ‘funds of knowledge’ that enable them to play an active role in the lives of their families and communities.

Recognising children’s funds of knowledge enables educators to gain a deeper understanding of the interests that children are exploring in their play. These insights can help educators to build a curriculum that is respectful of children’s identities and responsive to their ideas and experiences.

Practice example

Educators noted that four-year old Ellie frequently 'chooses to play with play-dough, it's a big interest for her and has been for some time.'

A visit to the family home revealed that Ellie and her mum often baked together. Ellie had her own baking apron and utensils and talked with knowledge about how to make a cake and cook biscuits.

These insights enabled educators to gain a deeper understanding of how Ellie's interest connected across home and school contexts.

As a result, their interactions and curriculum decision-making became more responsive and respectful of Ellie's everyday family experiences.



Reflecting on practice

- What opportunities are available for children to explore interests that connect with their funds of knowledge and family experiences?
- How do you recognise and interpret children's interests?
- In what ways do children's interests inform your approach to curriculum making?

Bringing the curriculum to life

Educators get to know children well by taking time to observe them, talk and play with them. This close attention helps educators to recognise and build on children's interests, and to design a curriculum that has meaning and relevance.

Curriculum decision-making takes place within spontaneous moment by moment interactions and in planned experiences through which children can build upon their interests over time.

In child-led activities, learning occurs spontaneously through children's goals, interests, motivations and play. In adult-guided activities, educators build relationships with children to support their learning and socialisation, including their language and conceptual development (Hedges, 2022). Curriculum is created within and between these activities. This dynamic process involves:

- a) Being attuned**
- b) Being responsive**
- c) Building connections**
- d) Being inclusive**

a) Being attuned

‘Observation is more than watching, it means listening carefully, being open and wanting to know more.’

(Tovey, 2017, p. 112)

Children think with their hands and bodies as well as with their minds. They use materials to make sense of their worlds, explore their interests and represent their thinking. They use play, creativity, movement and gesture symbolically to express what they know and want to find out about. As children gain experience of exploring materials, they become increasingly familiar with using materials with intention. So it is important to create a variety of spaces in which children can express and make sense of their ideas and interests using all their senses.

Respectful observation enables educators to become attuned to the questions that children are asking and exploring in their play and interactions. Observation involves being alert to the details of how children are expressing their ideas as they paint, dance, run, build, make up stories and participate in all aspects of life in the setting. Being open to children’s intentions means that adults need to take their interests seriously as a source of curriculum making.

Practice example

Two-year old Aasir placed his hands on a frosty bench and screamed with surprise. He repeatedly lowered and lifted his hands, looking intently at the handprints that appeared as the warmth of his skin caused the frost to melt.

Selina, Aasir's key person, joined him and copied his actions. They laughed at the feeling of intense coldness on their fingers.

Selina verbalised Aasir's discovery, saying 'our hands are warm and they've melted the frost.'



Reflecting on practice

- Does your setting offer a range of materials, equipment and tools that enable children to express their ideas and make sense of their experiences?
- Do your routines give you enough time for sensitive and careful observation of all children, in a range of contexts?• In what ways do your observations help you to understand what is important for children?
- How do you work together as a team to interpret your observations in relation to what you already know about children, their families and prior experiences?

b) Being responsive

'The crucial dimension is the sensitivity of the adult, the ability to adjust his or her interactions to the child and the context, and the understanding to make informed judgements.'

(Tovey, 2017, p. 111)

Careful observation informs meaningful interactions which might involve a combination of talk and non-verbal communication. These interactions constitute everyday moments of curriculum making that connect with children's ideas and intentions.

The aim is to support children's thinking in dynamic and responsive ways.

Practice example

James and Eli discovered a snail inside a large water container in the nursery garden. Eli expressed concern that the snail would drown and wanted to rescue it. However, the children could not reach the snail because the neck of the container was too small. James asked Daniel, an educator, to help. Daniel listened carefully to the children's account of the problem. Eli suggested they could lower a piece of string into the container. James said that grass might work better.

Daniel respected the children's suggestions and helped them to collect string and grass for the rescue mission. When their attempts were unsuccessful, Daniel recognised the children's frustration and invited them to recall what they knew about snails. Together they identified that snails have slime to help them stick to things, and that they have a shell to protect them.



Daniel's interactions were attuned to the children's concerns whilst also guiding them towards understanding that the snail would be able to move out of the container when it needed to.

The following day James and Eli checked the container and noticed that the snail had gone away.

Reflecting on practice

- What situations came up when you could have responded to children's ideas and interests?
- Can you remember what you did?
- And what did you say?
- In what ways did your response support and extend children's thinking?
- Did anything prevent you from offering a meaningful response?
- If so, what could you change?

c) Building connections

The previous section highlights the importance of responsive and respectful interactions in the moment by moment unfolding of curriculum. But a living curriculum must also enable children to revisit, apply and extend their interests and ideas over time. This enables children to build connections in their learning through a curriculum that weaves together child-initiated, adult-facilitated, and adult-led experiences.

Shared explorations that develop over time enable children to test out, modify and consolidate their ideas about the world, leading to deeper knowledge and understanding. Knowledgeable adults who are attuned to children's interests play an important role in this process.

Educators use spontaneous and planned experiences to sustain children's enquiries by supporting their thinking, introducing new information and guiding them in making connections.

Children revel in their new skills, capabilities and understanding, and enjoy putting them to work with creativity and invention. In this way, the interests and explorations that children explore in their play are valued whilst educators draw upon their deep knowledge of children to facilitate new opportunities for learning.

Practice example

Chelsey, aged five, spends a lot of time at her grandad's allotment and has developed a deep interest in plants and gardening. One day she noticed some pigeons flying around the nursery vegetable plot. She told Kate, an educator, that they needed a scarecrow to get rid of the birds. The following day Chelsey brought a photo of a scarecrow that she had made with her grandad. The photo generated a lot of interest from other children, and Kate suggested that they could try making their own scarecrows. A range of materials and tools were made available and by the end of the week the children had constructed several scarecrows that were erected in the nursery garden. During this process, a child asked 'How do scarecrows get rid of birds?' and this initiated a lively conversation in which children expressed a range of ideas, including 'their coats blow them away' and 'they move around when we go home'. In the weeks that followed, the children



observed, repaired and adjusted the scarecrows and started to modify or clarify their initial ideas. Some children's enquiries focused on the materials used to create the scarecrows, while other children became more interested in the growth of the plants. Kate and her colleagues helped the children to reflect on their learning by listening carefully and talking about their ideas. They sustained the investigation through planned activities linked to the vegetable plot and by offering new information from stories, reference books and the internet.

Reflecting on practice

- In what ways does your curriculum enable children to revisit, apply and extend their interests and ideas over time, and in different situations?
- In what ways do educators model enquiry skills and demonstrate collaboration, problem-solving, and wondering in their interactions with children?
- What opportunities do you offer for children to build their knowledge and understanding in meaningful contexts?

d) Being inclusive

A living curriculum recognises, values and incorporates knowledge, skills and understanding arising from all children's experiences, home languages and family cultures. Children need to see themselves and their families in the resources and materials available to them. This promotes a sense of belonging and enables children to pursue and build upon their interests that arise from family and community funds of knowledge.

“For Froebel, understanding the individual child was dependent on three things: Equity – recognising, valuing and supporting each child's diverse experiences, unique attributes, qualities and ways of being. Equality – experiencing fairness as their relationships with the world around them expand. Diversity – understanding the relationship between the whole of humanity and the multiplicity of different groups that make up that whole’ (Louis 2022, p.11).

Respectful relationships with families enable educators to understand how children's interests connect with the activities, relationships and experiences they engage with at home. Listening to parents and caregivers helps educators to understand aspects of children's play that might otherwise go unnoticed. Working together and valuing everyone's contribution helps to build an inclusive curriculum.

Practice example

Elian, aged four, regularly engaged in playfighting at nursery, both with his friends and using toy animals. His play often included characters from popular culture, particularly The Karate Kid and Black Panther films.

Some of the educators were struggling to understand the origins of this boisterous activity and were unsure how to respond and so they shared their observations with Elian's mum, Dee. Dee explained that Elian and his dad spend a lot of time playfighting at home and that they had watched the Karate Kid and Black Panther films many times. She also mentioned that Elian's dad, Ryan, did boxing as a hobby.

Dee's insights enabled educators to gain a deeper understanding of Elian's play interests. They were able to recognise that fighting was an artform for Elian and that it played an important role in his identity and in his relationship with his father.



Reflecting on practice

- Do the resources and activities in your setting enable every child to make connections with familiar experiences from their homes and communities?
- What opportunities are available for sharing and reflecting on observations with children and their families?
- Whose interests get noticed and incorporated into the process of curriculum making?
- Is the curriculum inclusive of every child's interests and experiences?

Bringing everything together

A living curriculum involves educators recognising, revisiting and extending children's interests, ideas and enquiries over time. This approach facilitates children's learning through planned and spontaneous opportunities to connect their existing knowledge and understanding with new experiences.

Of course, in some contexts, curriculum making may also require educators to pay attention to national learning outcomes and goals. A living curriculum integrates child-initiated, adult-facilitated and adult-led experiences to incorporate children's interests as well as any learning goals that are laid out in policy requirements.

Educators build the curriculum in collaboration with children, families and communities in order that national outcomes are applied through experiences that are relevant and meaningful to local contexts.



Reflecting on practice

- Do you have a national curriculum?
- How does it relate to a living curriculum approach?
- If you have national curricular goals and learning outcomes, how might you connect local examples from a living curriculum approach to one or more curricular goals or learning outcomes? What else do these examples illustrate about children's lives and learning?

References and recommended reading

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