



Inside Out Project Report

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INTRODUCTION

The Inside Out research project, funded jointly by the Froebel Trust and the Royal College of Music (RCM), was inspired by Froebel's philosophy that children are unique, autonomous and creative beings. He believed their inner and outer worlds are connected and they learn about themselves and the world around them through diverse experiences, centred around play, creativity and relationships. However, the notion of unity and connectedness, where everything in the universe is linked, was Froebel's key principle. Where and how the inner and outer worlds of children connect and how they evolve through and from each other, was the basis of his philosophy.

The research project used this philosophical idea to look more closely at the work of Magic Acorns, an early years arts organisation based in Norfolk in the East of England. Over the past few years, Magic Acorns has developed a way of working based on sound-play as a means by which children can express themselves. Their innovative approach to music education, using words sparingly, encourages and incorporates an openness to possibility, seeing beyond narrow outcome-based education goals which can emphasise the importance of talk. By attuning to what children offer and seeing them as fully competent, Magic Acorns offers an open-ended musical-play space for children and their families. It offers an alternative approach to learning, which looks to deprioritise the use of words and their perceived significance. This 'word-less' (i.e., reducing the quantity of words rather than removing words) way of working, as well as a focus on listening, was at the forefront of the Inside Out project, investigating the ways that connections are made amongst a child's inner world and the world around them, a central tenet of Froebel's thinking.

After various iterations, the questions we posed for the purposes of our research were:

- How do children express their inner worlds through sound-play?
- What happens when educators and artists practice a pedagogy of listening – where the quantity and quality of adult talk is measured and attuned; listening to children's sound-play is prioritized, as is joining children in their own playfulness?
- How do these findings relate to Froebel's writings about children and education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand more about Froebel and his philosophy, a review of the archives was undertaken. The review was appropriate for a small scale, one-year project and highlighted how Froebel, a radical of his time, believed in giving children a voice and recognised play as a central tenet of learning. As Froebel wrote, 'play, then, is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul' (Chief Writings on Education, 1912, 50). His main belief though was that there is unity and connection between all things in the universe and that nature has a particularly important part to play in children's development as well as in helping adults understand more about the natural unfoldings of children's inner worlds.

The literature review led the researchers to an unexpected link with ideas of posthumanism (see below), which became an additional lens through which to analyse the data. Connecting a 19th Century philosopher/educationalist with 21st Century posthuman thinking may not seem like an obvious match. However, Froebel's main belief as detailed above, of the connectedness of all things, resonates with posthuman ideas of the 'more-than-human' i.e. that humans should not think of themselves as the pinnacle of evolution, that animals, plants, objects have an equal part to play in the world and that the connection between all things is what holds the universe together (Barad, 2003). Humans are an integral part of nature, but they are not above it. Posthumanism is about looking at the world from a different perspective and not accepting the way things are just because they have always been like that. It is a way of questioning the status quo by flattening the hierarchy of human dominance and in so doing, allowing new and emerging 'intra-actions' to form. It also promotes acceptance that there are more than binary options available in the world. It is not either/or; rather and/and/and. Mind and matter, knowing and being are inextricably linked and in relation with each other all of the time, making multiple possibilities in a continually evolving world. As Davies (2014, 9) says 'Each of us is a multiplicity in connection with other multiplicities.' Magic Acorns situate children at the centre of their work, based on an ethics of care (Noddings, 2015; Belfiore, 2022), and their deeply principled practice sees the child, and their caregivers, as figures of rich, creative potential.

Further reading around play, creativity and slow pedagogy – an unhurried approach to practice (Clark, 2022) - was undertaken. The notion of slowing down seems contrary to today's world where everything seems to be about reaching the next goal, achieving the next target, catching up. It is as if life is a race and yet, if we are always striving for the next thing, how will we ever be satisfied; how will we ever finish? A never-ending race sounds stressful and exhausting. Embracing a slow pedagogy allows the inner to become outer and vice versa, allows what is within to unfold in its own time. It allows for being with, listening, in the present moment and this idea of unfragmented time allows for greater depth of understanding (Clark, 2022).

DATA COLLECTION and ANALYSIS

Over the course of the project, data were collected via several methods that were consistent with a small-scale, qualitative, interpretivist research project:

- slow-motion video analysis (MacLure & MacRae, 2021) from two Magic Acorns' projects was undertaken;
- in-person observation; and

- semi-structured interviews with two artists.

METHODOLOGICAL FINDINGS

1. An iterative approach to analysis of video data was found to be generative of fresh ideas about interconnections between sounds, humans and materials.
2. Using the slow-motion method of video analysis enabled the researchers to see beyond the more obvious, highlighting the importance of all things (including the objects, instruments, textures, acoustic environment, the sounds made, movements, eye contact, lighting, the positioning of the camera and the humans) and the part they played in the intra-actions.

FINDINGS

Through iterative analysis of film and interviews, it became clear that:

- the artistic practice of Magic Acorns aligns well with the philosophies of Froebel;
- sound is highly intra-active – it passes across time and space readily e.g., through film observation, sound crossed the boundary of the screen and entered the watcher's being, affecting their thinking and emotions;
- children will express themselves and their inner worlds through their intra-actions with their environment;
- the right environment not only means the resources that are provided, but also time and space, as well as an attuned play partner;
- using fewer words enables inner worlds to emerge and allows for better attunement;
- it is imperative to listen and observe beyond what we think we see, to tune in with all our senses;
- slowing down is essential for this to happen;
- being open to new possibilities and not being constrained by binary ways of thinking, allowed children to express themselves.

UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS THROUGH THE POSTHUMAN LENS

The connections between all things human and non-human came into focus. Objects became important, movements became part of the 'conversation', sounds connected all parts. The differing light, sounds, colours, spaces, textures, shadows, bodies, toys, instruments, echoes, shapes, movements, facial expressions, rhythms, silences all played a part in the emerging landscape of possibility, everything contributing to the creative process. Spaces were speculative, emergence was celebrated, the unknown was embraced, the emphasis on generating questions rather than finding answers.

The Froebelian/posthuman notions of connection, emergence and entanglements, were revealed through the sensitive way the artistic practice disrupts a world dominated by words. The artists talked about 'acts of resistance' against 'the tyranny of adult talk that interrupts thinking'. Their emphasis is on noticing, being, valuing, celebrating the child's explorations, 'staying with uncertainty and the unfolding of the present moment', 'preparing the conditions for emergence.'

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PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

We realised the value in observing with a purpose. If we observe without a purpose, we may miss what is important. If we observe with a particular purpose, we may miss other things that are important. Froebel was key to getting a deeper understanding of the world. He said, 'My teachers are the world and nature'. He was a faithful, trustful scholar' (Froebel, in Munn, 2010, p. 10).

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Questions we asked ourselves

Observing

Looking at the objects in the space - how
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Observing
Looking at the objects in the space - how are they connecting/engaging with the child?
What is the child doing? What are the objects doing? Are we using all our senses to try to observe even deeper?
How are the bodies moving? What sounds are they making?

How are they connecting with the things/people around them?
What impact is the environment having on the child?
What more can be included in the observation?

Reduce use of words

What is generated by copying/mirroring a child without commentating?
What impact does leaving room for non-verbal expression have on us? On the child?
The significance of non-linguistic ways of communicating or meaning making came to the fore.

Leave space for things to emerge

What happens when we leave space, i.e., not filling it with words, take a back seat, become a play partner - wait, listen, watch.
How do we feel in the silence?

Slow down

What happens when we slow down?
What is it like to be in the moment?
Can we allow things to unfold/emerge in their own time?
What do we see when we video children's play and then slow it down? What do we notice that we did not see when played back in real time?

Music

What does children's music look like?

We found:

Tapping, banging, scraping, moving rhythmically;

Use of gestures, vocalising, playing with objects in a rhythmical way, repeating patterns with body, voice, or objects.

We heard snippets of known songs combined with spontaneous melodies.

Children's musical worlds might challenge our ideas of what music looks and sounds like. It can be noisy and unstructured. We thought about visual 'making' and how this was a sound version. Visual play is perhaps easier to identify and accommodate.

CONCLUSION

Using Froebel's principles as the lens through which to approach the research, it became clear that, by foregrounding and celebrating the myriad ways that children express themselves in sound-play, with objects, materials, with movement, with peers and adults, with no notion of outcomes or having a set idea of what something should be, Magic Acorns offer children the time and space to make connections (Unity and Connection). This pedagogical approach starts with what children can do, welcoming their creativity and viewing them as competent and able to express themselves. (Autonomous Learners). Adults who are attuned to the sensitivities of children are essential (Knowledgeable, nurturing educators) – being playful, authentic, interested (Relationships Matter), with the need to listen/watch with all our senses. Rejecting the idea that early childhood is a steppingstone to later phases in life they value children as creative beings (The Value of Childhood). In this way, fresh understandings of the importance of play and creative expression (Creativity and the Importance of Play) are

revealed. By celebrating children's competence as creative communicators, artistic practice can open up a world of far-reaching possibilities, just as Froebel opened up an alternative model in his time. The adult role is to attune sensitively to the environment, celebrating and supporting the sound-play as a playful collaborator, being open to the unexpected, and contributing creatively alongside the child/ren. As Wasmuth (2022) suggests, Froebel's principles are not a set of solutions, but rather a way of thinking and questioning which allow for 'the many moments on the edge of becoming and an abundance of potentials' (Pool, Rowsell and Sun, 2023, 142).

FURTHER INFORMATION

A more detailed look at the emerging findings can be found [here](#).

Blogs were written throughout the course of the research, access them [here](#).

[More about the EY arts company](#)



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