



Froebel Trust Podcast

Transcript : Episode 19

November 2025

00:00:00 - 00:00:23

Colin Kelly

A world of unprecedented change and massive technological shifts, and the German inventor of kindergarten who died more than 170 years ago. Where do the teachings of Friedrich Froebel fit in today's early years landscape? What does the future hold and is there anything we can learn from what might feel to some like an increasingly distant past.

00:00:23 - 00:00:30

Colin Kelly

Welcome to episode 19 of the Froebel Trust podcast. I'm Colin Kelly, and in this episode, I'm joined by a panel of six guests discussing the past, present, and future of Froebelian education. The International Froebel Society Conference 'Froebelian Pasts Present and Futures' took place earlier this year, and this podcast will build on some of the themes discussed.

00:00:48 - 00:01:16

Colin Kelly

You'll hear conversations with two guests for each time period. Larry Prochner and Kristen Nawrotzki discussed the Froebelian past. Karen Vincent and Donna Kilpatrick will discuss the Froebelian present, and to look to the future I'll be joined by Andrea Schmidt, Grace Choi. You can find more details on all my guests in the podcast description and a full transcript and links to additional resources on the podcast pages at the Froebel Trust website.

00:01:17 - 00:01:46

Colin Kelly

That's at froebel.org.uk. Well, let's begin with a look at how important and relevant Froebel's ideas around early years education are just now, how they've gone in and out of fashion since the mid-19th century and what the future might hold. Larry Prochner and Kristen Nawrotzki joined me to discuss the past, and I began by asking Kristen why it was important that people involved in Froebelian education today have an awareness of the past.

00:01:47 - 00:02:07

Kristen Nawrotzki

So, I think it really is important. I think it's important for several different reasons. One is, you know, every context is different, every place, every setting that you might want to be introducing Froebelian education is different from any other. In different countries, it's different too, and it's also different in different time periods.

00:02:08 - 00:02:39

Kristen Nawrotzki

So, it's not that looking at the history gives you a clear roadmap like step one, do this or step two, this is how others have done it. What it does do is give you, first of all a sense of the very long history of the community in which you are taking part, that these methods, these interests, these concerns about young children and their development and ways of providing support for their development are really longstanding.

00:02:40 - 00:03:57

Kristen Nawrotzki

And you're part of a professional community that has succeeded in many places over very long periods of time and often under circumstances that were pretty tricky for all different sorts of reasons. So, I think that's important just to know that you're not alone. even though you might face resistance or you might feel a little bit unsure. Could this work here? The others I'm working with don't seem so interested. A lot of people have been in that position, and they've found ways of introducing Froebelian pedagogy that have benefited children, whole communities, whole societies. I think also knowing about the history can point to some ingredients that helped individuals and groups, organisations to be successful in implementing Froebelian pedagogy in lots of different circumstances. So, the various forms or sources of resistance, financial limitations concerns that maybe emanate from educational authorities around you or the manager of a nursery setting or from parents.

00:03:58 - 00:04:19

Kristen Nawrotzki

There are longstanding histories of ways that people have approached those and it's not a clear recipe, but I think you can find a kind of toolkit for approaches that you can try that have been tried and true in at least some other circumstances. And I think that can be really helpful.

00:04:20 - 00:04:25

Colin Kelly

And Donna Kilpatrick, what do you think? Is this a good time to be involved in Froebelian education?

00:04:26 - 00:04:57

Donna Kilpatrick

I do, I have been inspired by other leaders within the authority who have set up networks who are there to support us, and the Froebel community itself is an amazing resource where we can all learn and we can all contribute to, and I think it's a very exciting and inspiring time. Everything about Froebel for myself helps me to meet the needs of my

children and helps me to get it right for them and think about what's important for them and put them at the heart of everything we're doing.

00:04:58 - 00:05:12

Colin Kelly

And Karen, what about you then? If we think outside the confines of the, of the conference and we just look at education in general, is Froebel enjoying a resurgence in popularity or are things more challenging just now?

00:05:13 - 00:05:30

Karen Vincent

I think things are challenging, particularly in England. I mean, you know, Donna and I had lots of conversations at the conference. We were fortunate enough to meet on the, the first day. And you know, I think England is very challenged, to be perfectly honest with you in many ways, particularly in the early years.

00:05:31 - 00:05:58

Karen Vincent

You know, our early years Foundation stage is supposed to go up to five. Our children start school at four. But I think in terms of Froebelian principles, it sort of offers an alternative that is very educator centred. So, it's not like a formula that's applied. It's not a curriculum that is rolled out.

00:05:59 - 00:07:03

Karen Vincent

It's a way of thinking about education that puts the child at the centre that really has a very sound value base that I think offers teachers and educators opportunities to make sense of it as learners in their own right. So, you know, they are offered all sorts of provocations about ways of thinking about education, you know, the idea of nature, the idea of relationships, the idea of play, unity and connectedness, those autonomous individuals, creativity. You know, all of those sorts of ideas offer us a way of thinking about educating young children that is more than just phonics and maths and those things that can be measured. And I think that's the thing about Froebel is, it's not about those more instrumental measurement tools.

00:07:04 - 00:07:23

Karen Vincent

It's really very much about that young child blossoming to coin a natural phrase, at their own pace. And I think that for many English educators is so refreshing because it gives them their own freedom to decide and to flourish as educators.

00:07:24 - 00:07:50

Colin Kelly

Now Donna, I know you had a very special experience. Earlier this year you attended the International Froebel Society Conference, and as part of that trip, you actually got to visit a place of great significance. The school that Froebel founded in Kielhau in Germany, and he

built it. It's still operating today, and you have been up close and seen and touched that history. How does that help you in your day-to-day work? Why is that important?

00:07:54 - 00:08:36

Donna Kilpatrick

Absolutely. On our, one of our visits, we went to visit the school that's currently still used by students. And the tour that we were given was so inspiring. And the, the three principles that they are very much led by were that of Passion. Play. And skills-based learning. And that was something for me that I thought, that's everything I believe in. It's everything I want for my school and my nursery. And being able to take that back and share the examples albeit of a different age range, 'cause this was for older children, but being able to say, do you know this was so successful and the.

00:08:37 - 00:08:58

Donna Kilpatrick

You know, to see the success stories they were having and a different view of what education and curriculum looked like was really important. And for me, it's about starting with our children and where they're at and developing them individually to ensure that they have everything they need to be able to grow and blossom and to be the very best they can be.

00:08:59 - 00:09:18

Colin Kelly

There's Donna Kilpatrick, and I wonder if we can start to think about moving from the present into the future and what the future might look like for Froebelian education and what are the key principles that we want to take with us? Andrea Schmidt, would you like to start us off?

00:09:19 - 00:10:35

Andrea Schmidt

I can repeat my introducing words at the Froebel conference. I had some points. What I think they are very important, and the first one is. By embedding Froebel's pedagogy in a comprehensive view of the human being and an overarching philosophy of the sphere, it still stands on solid foundations and theory and practice today. So, this is still necessary, these historical things for today and the invention of a variety of games, songs, activities, materials, and gifts, continues to make an extraordinary contribution to the professionalisation of educators to this day. So, it's still important for today and for the professionalisation. And I think it's a great contribution to inclusive education too, because in his engagement with educationally disadvantaged children and young people affected by poverty and disability, Froebel is already regarded as a pioneer of inclusion and a school for all, I think.

00:10:36 - 00:10:56

Colin Kelly

Absolutely. When I hear people talking about the future generally and the speed of change and you know, things like the impact of technology and, and AI - Grace Choi, let me ask you

just a very fundamental question. When we look to the future of Froebelian education, is there a future?

00:10:57 - 00:11:21

Grace Choi

I think we have to find a way. I would say it's going to be a very difficult battle. Um, AI and this technology is going to be definitely cost efficient. So, yeah for admin, administrators and kindergarten principles, it will be much more easier to adapt this cost cutting down tools if you are just talking about pure economics.

00:11:22 - 00:11:48

Grace Choi

Yeah, it's much more easier. That's why I was kind of talking to the IFS attendees that I think we should really get together and have more of these roundabout table round tables discussions about how we could really, um, speak our voice about the importance of play, importance of hands-on activities and more of to the policy making level.

00:11:49 - 00:11:55

Colin Kelly

And Grace, just staying with you for a moment, how, how important do you think it is that educators embrace new technologies?

00:11:56 - 00:12:16

Grace Chio

I think it's important for us as Froebelian educators to start talking about it and start being aware of what's really coming ahead and start having more discussions and what could really happen in our classrooms and in our daily lives and to our jobs.

00:12:17 - 00:12:18

Colin Kelly

And Andrea, do you want to come back in here?

00:12:19 - 00:12:47

Andrea Schmidt

If you consider PRG, for example, or Bruna, it is very important for children to learn by acting with the hands and the bodies and not only with the brain or not only at the cognitive level. So, if young children learn and they couldn't do this with AI or with the computers or tablets.

00:12:48 - 00:13:06

Andrea Schmidt

They should work with the materials. They should sing songs. They should use this fluid material so they can learn, and they can build the skills and the knowledge about how to think and to solve problems, for example.

00:13:07 - 00:13:08

Colin Kelly

Grace, do you want to come in on that as well?

00:13:09 - 00:13:17

Grace Chio

I totally agree with Andrea, and you know, as we all know, that's really, I believe the core of early childhood education.

00:13:18 - 00:13:45

Grace Chio

You know, hands-on kids really putting their hands in and experiencing it. And, you know, just, just play with it. We don't need to have the actual goal for children to play, but for them to really discover and just understand their world and the world around them, just through pure play without real goals or benchmarks or a standardised skill test.

00:13:46 - 00:14:03

Colin Kelly

So that connection to the past helps us make sense of the present and prepares us for an uncertain future. Could it also be that the challenges Froebel himself faced 170 years ago aren't that different to what practitioners are dealing with today? Here's Larry Prochner.

00:14:04 - 00:14:33

Larry Prochner

Um, here I'll borrow a thought from Tina Bruce, who has said that the key to Froebelian practice is having a vision that guides that practice. And that's something that was provided by the early pioneers. So, understanding what those pioneers actually said and how they came about interpreting Froebel for practical reasons or ideological reasons is really important. Having a vision to guide practice is important no matter what approach you are taking to education.

00:14:34 - 00:15:29

Larry Prochner

We do understand that when we are referring to modern Froebelian principles, they are not directly Froebel's words. So, if we want to understand better what, what Froebel actually had to say about this, what he experienced, what some of the early pioneers, um, did to respond to those ideas to make them [00:15:00] more easily understood, by parents, by teachers, by whoever was in charge of various educational systems is important. And just following on what Kristen was saying about community building. Early years educators are part of a profession and part of one of the characteristics of a profession is having a common history that becomes and knowing that becomes part of our professional socialisation and builds community.

00:15:30 - 00:15:50

Colin Kelly

Yeah. And another challenge that comes up again and again when we speak to educators on this podcast is they're very concerned about time. Do they get enough time with the children? Are they swamped with paperwork and administration and safeguarding lots of very important things. Does it get in the way, or could it get in the way of the time spent with children?

00:15:51 - 00:16:05

Colin Kelly

And I'm wondering, you know, we've seen the expansion certainly in the UK, the expansion of early years provision. Can you tell me maybe a little bit about how that's changed over the years and is that something a Froebelian approach can help with? Can it help with the pressure of time?

00:16:06 - 00:17:02

Larry Prochner

That's a really interesting question around time. In a Froebelian kindergarten, children are afforded a long periods of time to play, in which the role of teachers in that context is partly to be reflective observers. But then to use the results of that observation to perhaps later, take some notes, develop some plans, consult with their colleagues, perhaps communicate with teachers and it is a time intensive approach. Thinking historically one of the aspects of most of the 19th century, early 20th century, US and Canadian kindergartens would've involved parent meetings in the afternoon, parent meetings, home visits, I should have said, in the afternoons.

00:17:03 - 00:17:20

Larry Prochner

So, with reference to the burden that the teachers would've had, as well as the benefit of course, of visiting the families. The families of 70 children would've been visited in the afternoons because there would've been a different set of teachers in the afternoon, from the morning kindergarten.

00:17:21 - 00:17:40

Larry Prochner

So, the morning kindergarten, teachers. Home visits in the afternoon. That's something that was continued in the kindergarten that I was associated with here in my hometown of Edmonton where all the children did have home visits. And it likely is a characteristic, some characteristic of many Froebelian kindergartens today.

00:17:41 - 00:17:54

Colin Kelly

Wow. That's fascinating. And Kristen, is there anything you'd like to add to that as well, just in terms of the challenges of time, which I hear is one of the big pressures today. Do you think that's something Froebel could relate to even?

00:17:55 - 00:18:28

Kristen Nawrotzki

I think Froebel himself probably would've seen it as a, as a great asset like, not a luxury but something that's essential. It's essential to the business of growth and development, not only of the individual child, but of their experience of themselves in community. It's a huge asset to the educator, to have time not only for all of the tasks that are put on an educator in, in the UK or elsewhere but also to develop relationships.

00:18:29 - 00:18:59

Kristen Nawrotzki

Because those relationships, the connection to the children is essential to being able to observe and reflect in a way that's really meaningful and to make use of a professional training that one has. So, I think that's maybe one of the biggest challenges that Froebelians face are trying to advocate for Froebelian approaches is that it takes time within a day, within a week, within a year.

00:19:00 - 00:19:21

Kristen Nawrotzki

And it pays off, but it's hard to see that in context in which time feels like money. And that's challenging. It requires a change in perspective, and it can be achieved, but I think that's where a lot of us face, face a challenge.

00:19:22 - 00:19:39

Colin Kelly

And moving to the present day, there was an international dimension to the recent conference. And so, I wondered if the challenges facing the Froebelian movement were universal and shared between different parts of the world or does Froebel appeal more easily to some nations? Here's Karen Vincent.

00:19:40 - 00:19:48

Karen Vincent

Well, I mean, I suppose, you know, internationally, we know that in England, children do start school far sooner, which offers its own set of challenges.

00:19:49 - 00:19:59

Karen Vincent

I think every educational context has challenges, whether that is down to resourcing education. I think that particularly in this phase of time in history, England is particularly challenged. But you know, there is so much hope out there. So many people are doing such amazing things, and I think Froebel is just one way of making sense and reconciling some of those challenges.

00:20:20 - 00:21:04

Karen Vincent

Every education system has accountability. There are quality assurance. There are all sorts of reasons why education systems have to be justified. Mm-hmm. But I think that, you know, it really is about collegiate responsibility, about working with policy makers. About educating people who make those decisions about curricular and working with all sorts of

people in all sorts of contexts so that there is diversity of experience and knowledge that can inform decisions that are taken.

00:21:05 - 00:21:28

Colin Kelly

When I look at coverage in the media about education, and I hope it's not too much of an issue in the early years, but it might be, and it's certainly an issue in primary and secondary schools, is educators saying that they are facing violence. Can the Froebelian approach help with that, Karen, or is that asking too much of it?

00:21:29 - 00:21:59

Karen Vincent

I think it's very socially and emotionally based. It's very much about that young child's wellbeing and I think, you know, if you can enable that child to feel safe, cared for, thought about, considered, I think you know that that will go so far to enabling them to be in the right frame of mind, to be learning. Yes, there can be violence.

00:22:00 - 00:22:15

Karen Vincent

You know, verbal violence, physical violence, children come from so many backgrounds, we have lots of children who have experienced violence in their own domestic situations or in their countries, different countries if they've come to live here with their families.

00:22:16 - 00:22:41

Karen Vincent

But I think Froebel offers a way of giving them, I suppose, space to develop at their own pace. It's not about adults deciding what that child needs, it's about the child communicating that through their behaviour and through their actions and Froebelian educators are very adept at interpretation.

00:22:42 - 00:23:01

Karen Vincent

They're full of respect, I think, for the child, which enables that child to develop in whichever way they need. So yes, I do think to some extent it can help to address some of those concerns because it keeps child in a safe place.

00:23:02 - 00:23:17

Colin Kelly

And of course, the financial challenges, which are pressing many early year settings right now, implementing Froebel's teaching and providing the materials does cost money. How serious are the financial challenges right now? I put that to Donna Kilpatrick.

00:23:18 - 00:23:35

Donna Kilpatrick

There certainly is, and there are challenges around that. I've spent my time in my, my post from when I was there was acting to, to being substantive, fundraising, working with

charities. I'm fortunate to say that every single one of my classrooms now have full sets of blocks for my children.

00:23:36 - 00:24:08

Donna Kilpatrick

We are adding our resources as we can. Depending on what our children need and what's right for our children. So yes, all resources are expensive. However, the resources that are very Froebelian based are resources that will last us for life. Our blocks will last for a long time. And the advantages these resources bring our children outweigh the costs. And yes, it is difficult to access things, however, there are ways to do it.

00:24:09 - 00:24:18

Colin Kelly

Karen, just the same for you. Why is it important that it, you know, that it's clay? Why not something else, a bit like clay?

00:24:19 - 00:24:47

Karen Vincent

Well, I mean, children live in the real world. They don't live in an artificial world. They're part of the world. So, you know, they do need to experience these natural materials. And really, they are so much more sustainable. You know, young children always want the real thing, don't they? They know the difference between a plastic coin between, you know, the object in the home that's used to do the washing up and the pretend one in the, you know, in the, in the small little sink that isn't quite the same thing.

00:24:48 - 00:25:11

Karen Vincent

They want to be part of the real world. They have a real kind of thirst for that. So, I do think it is important. But you know, there's mud, there's sand, there's loose parts, there's natural materials, there's water. There's pebbles, and I mean, obviously we're talking about different ages of different children, and we have to really consider what is age appropriate and experience appropriate.

00:25:12 - 00:25:36

Karen Vincent

But yes, children do need to be in the real world. They do need to be in nature. They need to be experiencing the feel of the grass, the mud, you know, the trees, the bark, the flowers, and really engaging in that. The digital world is part of their world. You can't deny children a real experience, but they do vote with their feet and with their hands.

00:25:37 - 00:26:04

Karen Vincent

You know, you see little people pushing away their parents' phones. They want the attention; they crave the interaction. They are so adept at getting that attention in whichever way they deem suitable. They're crying out for those interactions that they have so much curiosity and that really drives that experience.

00:26:05 - 00:26:19

Karen Vincent

You know, young children, yes. You know, they will engage with the phones and the iPads and the screens, but also, they just love the real experience. There's nothing like it that you can see the sort of joy on their faces.

00:26:20 - 00:26:34

Colin Kelly

And what about the challenge of time? Donna Kilpatrick is undergoing Froebel training courses, but that's in addition to all the commitments around her day job. So, I wondered how much time was required to develop Froebelian practice and how demanding that was.

00:26:35 - 00:26:57

Donna Kilpatrick

It's been the best training I've ever done. And I've spoken to so many people to say to them, 'if you get this opportunity, it's transformed myself as a leader. Um, but also as a practitioner and an educator,' yes, it takes a bit of time to study and learn, but that's part of our working time agreement.

00:26:58 - 00:27:31

Donna Kilpatrick

We do that as part of what we do as educators. So, I built that time into my plan for the year. And even this year, I've still got parts of my year built in for allowing me the time to develop further. We know that that really good quality learning that we can have can inspire us to make a difference to our teams and our children, and the impact says for it all. Do you know that that little bit of work I would say has actually made my job easier.

00:27:32 - 00:27:50

Colin Kelly

Now, depending on where and when your own education took place, you might have experienced a real shift in the way children with additional support needs are treated. I asked Kristen Nawrotzki if Froebel believed that every child could be educated together, or did he think in his day that some children required extra support?

00:27:51 - 00:28:14

Kristen Nawrotzki

You know, such an important aspect of Froebel's pedagogy and philosophy is the idea of a kind of natural development and unfurling and obviously embedded in that is a sort of supposition that every child can develop, can be unfurled. How far they develop, and the exact shape of that development is left to nature.

00:28:15 - 00:29:10

Kristen Nawrotzki

So, there's room in Froebel's philosophy for the individual to develop in their way and without having a kind of predetermined goal in mind, but rather to take cues from the developing child to nurture their gifts and their own development. So, I think there's an

openness there that accommodates not only lots of different types of children but also the expansion we've seen in that philosophy in the 20th and 21st century with diversity, welcoming, inclusive, Froebelian pedagogical concepts and integrating 21st century visions into this understanding of individual development.

00:29:11 - 00:29:31

Kristen Nawrotzki

I'd like to also point to another historical example if I might. Two of them actually: free kindergartens in the late 19th century in the United Kingdom and the United States and other places. There were charity kindergartens which were set up to serve children in economically disadvantaged communities.

00:29:32 - 00:29:58

Kristen Nawrotzki

And we have some literature, a diary of a free kindergartner, Lillian Hardy from Edinburgh. And also, a fictionalised account, the story of Patsy from San Francisco. And both of those tell about the communities of children who were living in poverty, and families living in poverty, who are as a result of their living, uh, conditions, suffering from chronic illness, for example.

00:29:59 - 00:30:24

Kristen Nawrotzki

Um, and how the community of kindergartners, of the kindergarten teachers and their social contexts, try to support those families and include those children and lead with empathy and support. And I think that's true to Froebel's vision and also provides a really helpful model for how we can see kindergarten education today.

00:30:25 - 00:30:31

Colin Kelly

And Donna Kilpatrick told me, tapping into the history and community of the Froebelian movement helps her today.

00:30:32 - 00:31:17

Donna Kilpatrick

I've been able to reflect on the pedagogy around it and saying, why are we still where we are just now when this was going so long ago and worked? Why haven't we fully adopted more of this? To get it right for our learners is really important, and it was something that I spent a bit of time reflecting on and questioning when we were finding out about, you know, how the school was built to meet all learners' needs, our neurodiverse learners, our children with additional support needs. And you know, way back then, those things probably wouldn't have been spoken about or acknowledged. But Froebel had fantastic beliefs in what his children could achieve through having spaces, through having the opportunity to play, to learn and develop skills at their own pace.

00:31:18 - 00:31:23

Donna Kilpatrick

And that's something I'm really passionate about. Ensuring that we deliver within what we offer in our school and nursery.

00:31:24 - 00:32:00

Colin Kelly

Yeah, and, and Karen, just to sort of take that a bit further, when we had the past discussion, Froebel couldn't have anticipated the expansion of early years. Probably couldn't have anticipated what we have now in terms of the awareness, I guess maybe of children with additional support needs and the idea of probably everybody being accommodated together. So, things have certainly changed a lot, but what Donna is saying is that actually these principles help us navigate that. Is that something that you agree with?

00:32:02 - 00:32:48

Karen Vincent

I completely do. Yeah. I mean, my work really is, I suppose you have that young child in mind but supporting the educators to support the children is very much in that professional learning domain. And I think that, you know, the idea of professional learning based on freedom with guidance, and the idea that people have their knowledge that they know, needs to be developed. I'm not saying there isn't a place for expertise, but that if you can work from where the learner is and enable them to develop their knowledge of their children through observation, really is just so contemporary and always has been.

00:32:49 - 00:32:54

Karen Vincent

So, I mean, Froebel in a way was sort of streets ahead I think with these, with these sets of principles.

00:32:55 - 00:33:04

Colin Kelly

In our future conversation, I asked Andrea Schmidt and Grace Choi if they could each think of an opportunity and a threat to Froebelian teaching.

00:33:05 - 00:33:55

Andrea Schmidt

So, the opportunity is that the Froebelian thoughts and his gifts will survive even today. And I think we are going to work on Froebel and this idea of kindergarten, we'll get an intangible, world cultural heritage. So, I think that would be a great opportunity. And a challenge or a threat will be to convince the parents and the educators and the researchers that, for example, Sweden and Denmark, they go back to paper and pencil in early education and in the education up to 11 to 12 years because this.

00:33:56 - 00:34:32

Andrea Schmidt

Basic things, how to play and to sing songs and to work with your body. They are the basic for problem solving in the future and for higher learning in high schools, for example. So, I think that's a challenge to reach out to the human beings, to the parents, to the teachers, to

the educators, that these are the basic, basic things, that are needed for learning in the future.

00:34:33 - 00:34:43

Colin Kelly

Excellent. Yeah. Thank you, Andrea. And Grace, you've had a little bit more time to think. Just the same for you. Please, if you can, an opportunity and a threat.

00:34:43 - 00:34:59

Grace Choi

Opportunities are, like I mentioned earlier, it will be a great place, it could work as a platform for all the Froebelian educators from around the globe could be connected in a more of a micro level.

00:35:00 - 00:35:51

Grace Choi

For example, if, if anyone is running for belly in kindergarten or a principal, a preschool, you know personalised learning could definitely help alleviate a lot of administrative burden for teachers and the managers and supervisors. I mean, it could also cut down a lot of costs. In terms of education my biggest concern is how this will impact our children. If there are AI teachers who are humanoid kindergarten teachers, how will they, treat our children or how would they create a classroom environment and dynamics? Will they try to create this utopia like classrooms? Then how will that classroom setting impact our children?

00:35:52 - 00:36:38

Colin Kelly

Well, it's clear technology's having an enormous impact across every sector, including education. And my guests had lots to say about the opportunities and threats technology represents, and so we'll be exploring that in a dedicated technology episode of this podcast coming soon. Well, let's begin to draw this episode to a close by exploring a key Froebelian principle, and that is the freedom to make mistakes. Now it's clear that the past and present of the Froebelian movement by design is rather messy. There's never been a formula or a blueprint, so none of us can say with any certainty what the future will look like. Getting comfortable with that seems to be part of being Froebelian and of course, giving children the freedom to make their own mistakes.

00:36:39 - 00:37:03

Colin Kelly

We've talked in all these episodes about children learning with their hands, children playing, children moving their bodies, being free to be just what they want to be, making mistakes. If we look back to the 19th century and go forwards, can you tell me a bit about - have those ideas gone in and out of fashion or has that, has that always been something educators looked at?

00:37:04 - 00:37:11

Colin Kelly

Have there been sort of peaks and troughs in terms of that approach and where Froebel fits in?

00:37:11 - 00:37:27

Kristen Nawrotzki

You know, Froebel's own thinking there was some sort of tension or maybe two poles between a kind of freedom and a kind of discipline and children needed to operate between those. But so did the adults in giving children space.

00:37:28 - 00:38:05

Kristen Nawrotzki

But maybe not too much space. And when kindergarten pedagogy was translated into schoolish environments, let's say with large numbers of children, the discipline aspect seemed to be the most urgent, right? Like, 'sit here and do this,' and with a long list of things that you shouldn't do. My sense is that some of the hope of the Froebelian educators at that time was that, at least there some other aspects of what Froebelian pedagogy served, for example, spiritual development, that that might be allowed more freedom even at a time in which maybe physical freedom was not possible in this, these kind of classroom environments.

00:38:06 - 00:38:33

Kristen Nawrotzki

But we see in other aspects of schooling as well, not just in early childhood and not just in Froebelian inspired or Froebelian education definite ebbs and flows in terms of the freedom that children are permitted or allowed and how things like mistakes are seen. You mentioned mistakes earlier, and Larry and I are part of a larger project that is looking at materials of schooling like chalkboards and slates over time.

00:38:34 - 00:38:56

Kristen Nawrotzki

And, you know, the thing about those is that you can erase mistakes, but if you write in ink, you can't erase mistakes. So, your learning is different, and the expectations are different. And those have really changed from decade to decade, I would say, in a lot of different contexts. Sometimes a lot more freedom, often promoted by Froebelians and that has been a real success that they've had.

00:38:57 - 00:39:06

Kristen Nawrotzki

And other times, perhaps a kind of pendulum swing in the other direction, impelled by other priorities, often, um, political ones.

00:39:07 - 00:39:12

Colin Kelly

And turning to the present, here's Karen Vincent, on the importance of risk taking.

00:39:13 - 00:39:22

Karen Vincent

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, risk taking is so important, isn't it? To learn your own limits and boundaries in that sense.

00:39:23 - 00:39:54

Karen Vincent

And to be able to make that judgment for yourself and to fail, you know, it is so important that we can fall over ourselves sometimes, literally and metaphorically and pick ourselves up. Start again. It's building in that resilience is what learning is about. Learning is really hard. And you see children who are so adept at trying and trying again, they're very persistent.

00:39:55 - 00:40:14

Colin Kelly

Is there ever any pushback on that, Donna? You know, if you, if you said to a parent today, we took some risks or a head of education or another educator, other, other, some that think, oh, I don't know if we could do that. We'd rather do something sort safe and neat and tidy?

00:40:15 - 00:40:40

Donna Kilpatrick

I was one of those educators. My journey has been really transformational. At my heart I just want to keep every child safe. And when I started my Froebel journey and I was listening to, you know, guidance with, you know, allowing children to take risks, I actually had to take a big sharp intake a breath and stop myself saying. 'Are you being safe?'

00:40:41 - 00:40:59

Donna Kilpatrick

And actually, saying to the children, 'oh, let's have a think about what risk assessments do you think we need'. And my language has changed how I am with the children. My fears are still there because ultimately, I am fully responsible for the health and wellbeing of all my children, in my setting.

00:41:00 - 00:41:59

Donna Kilpatrick

But being able to understand the importance of not putting my fear onto the children is really important. My parents are fantastic supporters of what our journey is. And because our children are now very used to the language of our risk assessments and they are becoming equipped to be able to understand safe features right on from nursery our wee ones in our nursery use the safe principles, um, from Samoa and the children will say to me, oh, we need to get Samoa. We need to think about how we make this safe. So, to hear that in our three year olds is really, really inspiring and it's helped me on the journey not to feel so worried about them wanting to climb a tree or do work with woodwork, you know, in school where there are risks.

00:42:00 - 00:42:20

Donna Kilpatrick

And I think allowing our children, as Karen said, to experience everything in its full, to make those mistakes for us as educators, to make those mistakes with our children and to model, 'oh, that didn't go well. Okay, what would we think we could do to make that better? Or how could we make it safer next time?' Is really, really important.

00:42:21 - 00:42:30

Colin Kelly

And Grace Choi had a concern as she looked to the future where AI might be playing a role in early years education and reducing the number of mistakes that are made.

00:42:31 - 00:42:42

Grace Choi

You know, one of my favourite phrases, 'life is messy.' You know that unpredictability, it's part of being alive and that makes us human.

00:42:43 - 00:43:14

Grace Choi

But if AI starts making everything more predictable, you know. Too much listening, too much coping with children's emotions and over empathising with their every little emotions and eliminating conflicts or failure. Then, I mean can you really call that education? You know, or are we just creating this, you know, sheltered classroom? And how do we bring out inner being of child through that kind of environment?

00:43:15 - 00:43:20

Colin Kelly

Andrea, we're getting, we're getting very futuristic here. Can you help us find the balance, help us make sense of this?

00:43:21 - 00:43:31

Andrea Schmidt

A good and inspiring relationship between real people is still the basis of learning and of being human, I guess.

00:43:32 - 00:44:04

Andrea Schmidt

And I think we have to offer a culture of mistakes, as you call it, because everybody can do a mistake, and that would be learned. Even AI can give wrong recommendations. You don't know if this is true or not. I think we should offer more high-quality education and training courses.

00:44:05 - 00:44:30

Colin Kelly

Well, good that you mentioned that, Andrea, and we'll certainly link to the Froebel Trust training courses in the podcast description. I'm just thinking it would be good, wouldn't it if we could use technology where it helps, but that also perhaps if it provokes us to spend

more time together. Now the recent conference, obviously there was an international dimension to that. Now here, Grace, you're in China right now, Andrea, you're in Germany.

00:44:31 - 00:44:50

Colin Kelly

And Grace, you were talking about, you know, you said you like it when things are messy. Andrea, you mentioned, a culture of mistakes, but when I think of China and when I think of Germany. I don't think of things being messy, and I certainly don't think of a culture of mistakes. I think of things being organised and efficient.

00:44:51 - 00:45:10

Colin Kelly

I'm in Scotland, so perhaps I'm stereotyping a little bit, but I wonder when you look around the world or you look at your own countries, what are the different attitudes they might have towards Froebel? Because I can't imagine Grace, for example, the Chinese government being as enthusiastic about things being a bit messy maybe as you are.

00:45:11 - 00:45:39

Grace Choi

Well, China is a big country with a lot of people, so in terms of government wise, they can't really see anything messy. But you know, if you, if you come down to a micro level, you know, we're just human being. We're not perfect. Nobody's perfect. And I think embracing that is important and just accepting the way you are.

00:45:40 - 00:46:14

Grace Choi

And actually, a lot of young Chinese parents are now realising that because they had a such a hard time growing up. Pushing themselves to be this perfect student, you know, perfect wife, perfect parents, and a lot of them are actually getting burned out. Among young parents there is a big movement of really taking the pause and accepting the fact that that's who they are and embracing their own children the way they are. So, there's definitely a change happening.

00:46:15 - 00:46:26

Colin Kelly

And Andrea, how about you? How do you think the, the Froebel philosophy fits with the sort of stereotypical German narrative?

00:46:27 - 00:47:00

Andrea Schmidt

I think that Froebel stands for democracy because he talked to his children and to his students and to his colleagues, and they found a solution, which fits probably to all, I think in terms of women's rights, for example, Froebel he brought employment to women, which was not usually in, uh, in his times.

00:47:01 - 00:47:20

Colin Kelly

So, democracy and the treatment of women in the workplace. Issues, perhaps as relevant today as they were in the 19th century when Friedrich Froebel was developing his ideas. Well, there's a flavour from three very interesting conversations looking at the past, present, and future of Froebelian education. Thank you to all my guests.

00:47:21 - 00:47:50

Colin Kelly

You can find their full biographies, links to additional resources. Including the various Froebel Trust training courses and a transcript for this episode in the podcast description and at froebel.org.uk. Thank you for listening. Subscribe or follow this podcast and you'll receive new episodes automatically as soon as they're released.