



Froebel Trust Podcast

Transcript: Episode 17

May 2025

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:35:01

Colin

Hello and welcome to episode 17 of the Froebel Trust podcast. Now, throughout the episodes of this podcast so far, we've been exploring what a Froebelian approach to early education is all about and what it looks like in action. We know that Froebel was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education. We know the principles of his approach prioritised play and learning in and through nature.

00:00:35:03 - 00:01:03:16

Colin

But how were the ideas of Froebel relevant in today's society? How can they be applied to support the education, learning and development of young children today? And what impact can they have? In this special episode, we're going to be going on a journey through the Froebelian landscape, exploring Froebel's ideas, the resurgence of academic interest in his teaching, and the relevance of Froebelian, principles and practice today.

00:01:03:18 - 00:01:38:10

Colin

Why Froebel? What does it mean to be Froebelian in the 21st century? What can the translations of Froebel's writing tell us about the eight Froebelian principles, and how can they guide us in our practice today? And taking us on this journey is Jane Whinnett who started studying Froebel in 2005 at the University of Roehampton. Jane was previously the head teacher of two Edinburgh inner city schools and now tutors at the University of Edinburgh, where she contributes to both the Froebel in Childhood Practice, and MSc

00:01:38:10 - 00:02:12:19

Colin

Education: Early Childhood Practice and Froebel pathway courses. Jane teaches the Froebel Trust's Short Courses and Online Course as an experienced Froebelian Travelling Tutor. In 2019, Jane received an MBA from His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales for services to early education. She and her co-authors were also awarded the 2021 Nursery World Professional Book Award for 'Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice,' and that was authored by Bruce, McNair and Whinnett and published by Routledge.

00:02:12:21 - 00:02:36:05

Colin

Jane presented this keynote speech of 'Froebelian Paths in Bewildering Times' at the Froebel Trust Conference, Inspiring Early Learning, which took place in Sheffield at the end of March this year. You can find highlights of the conference online at the Froebel Trust website: froebel.org.uk. Now over to Jane.

00:02:36:06 - 00:03:01:13

Jane

Okay, 'A Froebelian path in bewildering times.' I chose this title to challenge my thinking. When you have believed in something for a long time, it's easy to become complacent, accepting and unquestioning. It's also possible to become evangelical and, believing there's only one way to do things and persuading others of that.

00:03:01:13 - 00:03:37:07

Jane

We. And when you've had a long career and done a lot of thinking about every possible eventuality, of every pedagogical decision you've made on your own or with others, it's easy to think you've done it all. And there's no more need to think. So when I started Froebel, started studying Froebel in 2005 at the University of Roehampton, I already had a practical grounding in Froebelian practice, influenced by tutors and other educators that I worked with.

00:03:37:09 - 00:04:12:13

Jane

So why Froebel? A recent article on 'Bewildering the Pioneers' provoked my thinking. I started to collect other recent work that spoke to or with this idea. It's easy to see why the, the ideas of a white German man living at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century would seem irrelevant today. And yet there's been a recent resurgence of interest in Froebel witnessed in recent publications.

00:04:12:15 - 00:04:52:13

Jane

These articles or books will guide my thinking today. So let's start with the first article and the idea that inspired the title of my presentation. This will be the start of a journey through the arguments and my responses. Snaza coined the phrase 'bewildering education.' Bewildering is a concept and practice that challenges the colonial collection connections and implications of the pioneer as a civilizing force heading into the wilderness to prepare the way for the production of certain types of idea.

00:04:52:15 - 00:05:20:15

Jane

Froebel is often referred to as a pioneer, and figures a lot in literature for anyone studying early childhood education and care. And Froebel was a great traveler. In his time, when travel was mainly on foot or on horseback, or in horse drawn carriages, he wanted to spread his ideas throughout Germany and at one point considered going to the USA.

00:05:20:17 - 00:05:55:20

Jane

After the kindergartens were banned and closed, his followers carried his ideas across Europe to USA and further afield to Japan, New Zealand, and these journeys continue today. Often the followers were women and part of missionary projects so Froebel could be considered to be a pioneer in the sense Osgood describes. In fact, his followers in the UK who began the free kindergartens could also be seen as colonising the urban poor.

00:05:55:22 - 00:06:27:10

Jane

Jane Reed questions the depiction of children living in slum areas in the 20th century as both at risk and a risk to society. Focus tended to be on, as Reed says, 'views about the inadequacy of working class parents, specifically mothers, to supervise and nourish their children with the potential for an undisciplined urban population and physically inadequate workforce.'

00:06:27:12 - 00:06:56:22

Jane

She goes on to conclude that, 'If we value children and their contribution, we need to reflect on these lessons from history and interrogate the motivations underpinning social policy, ensuring an acknowledgment that children learn skills through the built environment as well as the natural world and that they need to connect socially through play in the streets, as well as in the kindergarten and forest school.'

00:06:56:24 - 00:07:23:23

Jane

However, Froebel was also a pioneer in the other sense of the word, being the first to do something, or the leader in the field in the same sense as a pioneering heart surgeon who perfects a new technique. Froebel's view of children as essentially good, as being members of society, of being competent and having agency were at the forefront of

00:07:23:24 - 00:07:58:19

Jane

thought in his time. The view of play as fundamental to learning and education was cutting edge. His views of training and women becoming educators was ridiculed in his time. And yet these ideas have become foundations of current early education and care today. It's time to call out in the early years, education space. Helga Smith, asks, what does it mean to be Froebelian in the 21st century?

00:07:58:21 - 00:08:29:10

Jane

He highlights the role that the Froebelian thinking can play today to advocate for children's well-being in a post-pandemic world by resisting, current global education reform movement and thinking, and developing alternatives. ??? highlighted that Froebel believed that all children have a right to education. Education must embrace the child and the totality of his being and acting.

00:08:29:12 - 00:08:46:17

Jane

Children need to be self active in the learning process. Children need guidance and nurture through a stimulating environment and intentional interactions organised by cognizant and intentional adult.

00:08:46:19 - 00:09:27:01

Jane

Helen Tovey's assertion that a Froebelian approach is not a method, means that it can travel more easily across different contexts and not be stuck in a particular time or place. Larry Prochner described Froebel as an 'indigenous foreigner,' someone whose ideas can be accepted as the educators own. A Froebelian approach is not a method. There's no formula or recipe or set of equipment to purchase or prescribed curriculum to adhere to, nor is it a series of ideas and activities which practitioners can dip into and out of.

00:09:27:03 - 00:09:59:14

Jane

Rather, it's a whole way of thinking about children based on values and principles. In 2021, Tina Bruce, the most eminent current Froebelian in the UK, reexamined Froebel's pedagogy with a more critical eye. She used the metaphor of unearthing hidden treasure by return to Froebel's principles and linking them to practice. She advocated for reconnecting principles and practice in ways that make sense today.

00:09:59:16 - 00:10:20:04

Jane

She says, 'By the 1960s in the UK, to suggest that reading Froebel's writing in a serious way that went beyond reading history with an aim to practically engage with how he did things, was out of the question. His actual practices were regarded as obsolete and his language arcane.'

00:10:20:10 - 00:10:52:21

Jane

Froebel developed his educational equipment for children to experience his ideas in concrete form through their play. Give two introduces the law of contrasts. What is the same? What is different? And consider the cube and the sphere. The Bloomsbury Handbook collects international authors, both researchers and educators, as well as artists, museum curators, actors all working with Froebel's ideas in different contexts

00:10:52:21 - 00:11:37:08

Jane

today. There are contributions from Germany, Japan, USA, UK, Australia, Lebanon, New Zealand, Israel, South Africa and Brazil. Section one is about connections, searching for the authentic Fredrick Froebel. Two about disconnections and transitology, the transfer, translation and transformation of Froebel's study and practice. Section three reconnecting, exploring and working with the challenges of Froebelian Practice and section four inter-connecting, exploring, and finding links between the essentials of Froebelian principles and practices and current research and theories.

00:11:37:10 - 00:12:06:05

Jane

Okay, so we have surveyed the landscape. It's time to set off. How do we know where to go? If we return to Froebel's original writings, we can read his original principles. Translating these from German is a challenge and translating them into ideas that are meaningful today, just as much of a challenge. Fortunately, we have both Tina Bruce and Helen Tovey who've helped us on this journey.

00:12:06:07 - 00:12:38:15

Jane

They each have written about how the principles continue to be relevant and what they look like in practice. The Froebel Trust has used Froebel's writing, as well as Bruce and Tovey's to inform the principles here. Principles help us to guide us in our practice. They provide a framework to try out ideas in. Having consistent principles across a nursery community brings coherence and a sense of direction.

00:12:38:17 - 00:12:56:08

Jane

They underpin all of our pedagogical decisions and it's about all of the principles. They are all part of a coherent whole. Now, going on a journey of ideas and we'll stop off and ponder.

00:12:56:10 - 00:13:24:06

Jane

And what should we do with the children on Monday? And this is about, you know what, the 'how to.' I'd like to think about how the Froebelian principles and how they relate to practice and how they can guide us today. There are eight, they're not hierarchical or sequential. So today I'm going to start with autonomous learning.

00:13:24:08 - 00:13:49:20

Jane

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 Froebelian education.

00:13:49:22 - 00:14:19:05

Jane

A Froebelian approach starts with the unique child, and that way we can see the child and learn who and what is important to them. It's about learning by doing things, by yourself, for yourself, and getting the help that you need when you need it. So Froebel wrote about self acted activity from infancy. Everyone having intrinsic motivation and agency.

00:14:19:07 - 00:14:26:00

Jane

So we need opportunities for yet very young babies to have choice and make decisions.

00:14:26:12 - 00:14:45:09

Jane

Thinking about the adult's role in relation to these, freedom with guidance, Tina Bruce speaks about observe, support, extend, Froebel aimed to cause thought and test materials and provoke this.

00:14:45:11 - 00:15:19:00

Jane

The Gifts and Occupations are sequential to encourage thinking about links - same and different. They move from three dimensions to, plain or flat shapes or or surfaces, then to rigid, rigid or flexible lines and points returning to the most malleable material of all - clay. They provide opportunities to act in and on the real world rather than on screens.

00:15:19:02 - 00:15:49:11

Jane

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family, educators and wider community are valued. Relationships sort of central importance in a child's life. Froebelian pedagogy is a relational pedagogy. How we connect to each other matters. We each depend on the others. Becoming isolated can make us ill and affect our sense of self. Froebel valued community.

00:15:49:17 - 00:16:31:23

Jane

We are both individuals and members of communities. Everyone connected to our settings needs to feel that they belong. Play part of being human and helps children to relate their inner world of feelings, ideas and lived experiences, taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and 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. Froebel is often a cited as the pioneer of play in education.

00:16:31:23 - 00:16:57:14

Jane

Play is when children have ownership of what they do. for Froebel one of the essential features of play was for the child to reveal their inner being, making the inner, outer and the outer inner, and this applies to their thoughts and feelings. It's a way of recognising the child's identity. Although children have ownership, that doesn't mean there's no role for adults.

00:16:57:16 - 00:17:09:23

Jane

Play gives insight into children's experience of cultural contexts, which they connect with others, with nature and the wider world.

00:17:10:00 - 00:17:38:11

Jane

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own ways, 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 and over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced. For Froebel the representations that children make may be forms of everyday life, beauty or knowledge.

00:17:38:13 - 00:18:05:24

Jane

They communicate what they know and what they have experienced. When using the symbols, they may create something that has beauty. For Froebel this was essentially linked to pattern and symmetry. Froebel saw some of the adult's role as guiding children on the journey towards understanding that symbols are objects, sounds, marks or movements that stand for something else.

00:18:06:01 - 00:18:33:14

Jane

He encouraged children to explore these for themselves. Create in personal symbols in a variety of media, music, dance, the arts, and writing. From a recognized, innate role of movement and learning. Children need to move to learn. The more they move, the better control they develop of their bodies. So movement, not sitting still, is important. Froebel observed and wrote about a baby:

00:18:33:19 - 00:18:58:20

Jane

'You can see how his love of moving his body, the movement and use of his limbs, the activity of his senses all turn towards and to relate to one point. Life must be grasped, experienced and viewed in oneself as a single thing, amid all its diversity and through all apparent difference and contrasts.' He recognises the baby's agency in relationships.

00:18:58:22 - 00:19:38:19

Jane

And this struck a chord with me. And I returned to reading ??? work. He says, 'Eyes, head, hands and arms and legs dance in harmony. And the mouth sings. Inspired by the pulse of a secret melody that attracts and responds to affectionate companionship that supports actions and feelings of the whole body.' His Book of Mother or Family Songs was a collection of supportive advice for parents and educators, linking the lyrics, music, illustrations and gestures to the child's journey to making and using symbols.

00:19:38:21 - 00:20:08:18

Jane

Children need adults to show them how symbols work. Reading, singing, painting, modeling and building are all part of Froebelian Practice. The songs related to relationships, family life, nature and experience of work in the community. Those real experiences of gardening, woodwork, sewing and weaving, cooking and baking and clay that children have in settings reflect those experiences.

00:20:08:18 - 00:20:34:12

Jane

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. This is the most fundamental of Froebel's principles and connects to all of the others.

00:20:34:14 - 00:21:05:07

Jane

It refers to Froebel's concept of unity. It's relevant in almost every area that you think of: personal relationships, the food we eat, water, biodiversity, pollution, sustainability and it's central to the ethics of human behavior. Froebel's approach to practice is underpinned by observation, finding out about the child and acting with the child and family to support that child's development.

00:21:05:09 - 00:21:34:14

Jane

It's a non-judgmental, strength based approach that sees the child as competent. Froebel used observation to understand children, but also to develop games, songs and resources that he thought would interest them and support their development. It was the basis of his approach. Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in life. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

00:21:34:16 - 00:21:58:21

Jane

On our journey through life, we need to pause and live in the moment and enjoy the stage we are at. Alyson Clark tells us that being with children is an essential feature of slow pedagogy, as well as having the flexibility to go off track and to dive deep into things that are interesting. Tim Ingold calls this 'wayfaring.'

00:21:58:23 - 00:22:25:02

Jane

It's an approach that chimes with Snaza's 'bewildering education,' where the journey is the learning, not reaching the goals as quickly as possible. Shannon Clearly says early childhood is a time for building a positive self-identity, a time when children need to explore who they are and a time for understanding and making sense of their place in the world.

00:22:25:04 - 00:23:01:12

Jane

Having time means using an unhurried approach. Froebel's is a slow pedagogy. 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 interrelationships of all things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change. To understand our place in nature, we need to spend time in it with other people who value it too.

00:23:01:14 - 00:23:35:02

Jane

In the same journal as the first article I mentioned by Osgoode, Sacker and ??? article called, 'Reimagining the Froebelian influence on early childhood education as a dynamic and ever changing web of encounter' argues we need to reimagine what counts as ripples influence, so that goes well beyond the sayings and doings of one individual. They use ??? ??? entangled genealogies, and use the material histories of the book.

00:23:35:04 - 00:24:20:15

Jane

The web of encounter that they create draws in complex national, cultural, economic, and material contexts, along with the contribution of multiple individuals, many of whom have been forgotten or sidelined. They argue that exploring and documenting Froebel's influence in this way can support critical and lively reflection on the past, present, and future of early childhood and care. You are part of that dynamic and ever changing web of encounter today as you bring your diverse understandings of Froebel, whether this is your first encounter or you're well versed in Froebel's writing and ideas.

00:24:20:16 - 00:25:13:20

Jane

McNair and Powell, illustrate a new era and for in education aligned with the concepts of revolutionary critical pedagogy and educator activism through examples from Scotland and New Zealand, where education is first and foremost for children, as it was in Froebel's kindergarten, a garden for children. Froebelian principles, demand political and cultural contestation when regimes of truth lose sight of children's humanity, To swim against the tide of educational doctrines that promote reductive and transmissive views of young children's capabilities and signs of learning demands the kind of courage the early Froebelian travellers have displayed, and which contemporary Froebelians martial in their everyday work.

00:25:13:22 - 00:25:42:16

Jane

Finally, we reached the last principle: knowledgeable and nurturing educators. 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 interest through freedom with guidance.

00:25:42:18 - 00:26:11:16

Jane

The Froebel Trust has a wealth of resources to support understanding of a Froebelian approach. Website, podcasts, pamphlets, research reports and recorded webinars. It has its own training, both face to face and online for individuals and whole settings. These courses are aimed at educators working directly with children. It also endorses Froebel courses at the University of Edinburgh and University of Roehampton.

00:26:11:18 - 00:26:45:06

Jane

And there's an intensive summer course coming up in Edinburgh for anyone who might be interested. As well as funding training, the trust funds research and has recently supported two three year projects using an innovative design bringing educators and researchers together. One of these projects was developed by the Froebel partnership including Guildford Nursery School and family centre, Seven Stars Nursery in New Zealand and researchers from Crec.

00:26:45:08 - 00:27:11:04

Jane

They came together as a community of practice communities of these kind of spread and across the UK in the work of networks. The Edinburgh Froebel network worked together to develop a series of case studies based on storytelling. Each educator observed practice. Analysed their observations in relation to reading, and further developed their approach based on what they found out.

00:27:11:06 - 00:27:39:10

Jane

The case studies were edited and collected as the book 'Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice.' Froebel partnership's work is featured on their website and an article on the approach they both developed and used is documented in the article featured on this slide. They describe how they used Froebelian principles and practices and the findings of their work.

00:27:39:12 - 00:28:21:24

Jane

We view Froebel's principles and practices as an architectural framework to enable critical reflection on the cultural, temporal and spatial locations of the practice which forms the focus of the professional development process and our evidence suggests the support has improved the well-being of educators and has enabled them to flourish in four domains: professionally, personally, psychologically and civilly, civically countering some of the key challenges faced in the early years workforce in England that are generating a crisis in recruitment and retention.

00:28:22:01 - 00:28:35:02

Jane

Just like a child who climbs a tree for the first time and finds a new and different perspective on the world following a Froebelian approach can bring a new and different perspective to early childhood practice.

00:28:35:02 - 00:28:58:18

Jane

At the beginning of our journey today. Our feet were grounded in Thuringia Germany, where Froebel was born and lived for most of his life. There's a path that runs from Keilhau Froebel's school, to Bad Blankenburg, where the first kindergarten was founded. It's not an easy path as there are some steep inclines. Traveling along it feels like walking in Froebel's footsteps.

00:28:58:20 - 00:29:24:21

Jane

We're nearing the end of our journey now. The bewilderment of the trees is beginning to thin out. The deciduous trees have given way to conifers. The air is clearer and we're moving towards a different view. So some final thoughts. What does Froebel offer today? Principles that connect to practice. A web of encounter that includes different perspectives and cultures.

00:29:24:23 - 00:29:58:23

Jane

An alternative path to the pressures of a standardised approach. An architectural framework for professional development. Community of practice and making our own alternatives. This is the highest point on the path. It's called the Blick. There's a monument there designed and made by one of Froebel's students. The view's magnificent. It's what Froebel called the Valley of Education, linking education from the earliest years to later school and lifelong learning.

00:29:59:00 - 00:30:01:24

Jane

It's an inspiring prospect.

00:30:01:24 - 00:30:10:18

Jane

To finish, the most frequently used phrase I've heard in Sheffield has been, 'I think it might be this way.'

00:30:10:20 - 00:30:19:06

Jane

So I'd urge you now, to stop and think about Froebel and I hope you'll say, 'I think it might be this way.'

00:30:25:14 - 00:30:50:10

Colin

So there you have it. 'A Froebelian Path in Bewildering Times' by Jane Whinnett. It is important to remember that, although Froebel lived at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, his ideas have become foundations of current early years, education and care today. And his approach, and it is an approach not a method, still inspires and informs modern educators across the world.

00:30:50:12 - 00:31:21:19

Colin

If you want to know more about Froebelian principles and practice today, visit the Froebel Trust website: www.froebel.org.uk. There you can find out more about the Froebel Trust and the training and support available. You'll also find a library of free resources and guides for educators working with young children. There's an extensive collection of short films, posters and resources available, and all are free to download to support you in your early years or nursery school setting.

00:31:21:21 - 00:31:45:12

Colin

And if you've been inspired to hear more from Jane, she has authored the Froebel Trust pamphlet 'Froebel gifts and block play today' and co-authored 'Sewing with young children.' You can find links to each of these and resources for further learning referenced within the episode description on the Froebel Trust website, you'll also find our full archive of podcasts with transcripts and notes.

00:31:45:14 - 00:32:22:17

Colin

And if you'd like to contact us with questions about this podcast or suggestions for future episodes, please get in touch. You can email: office@froebeltrust.org.uk and wherever you listen to podcasts, remember to subscribe and then you'll get every episode as soon as it's released. Thanks again to Jane and of course, thanks to you for listening.