

## Froebel Network Wales Launch

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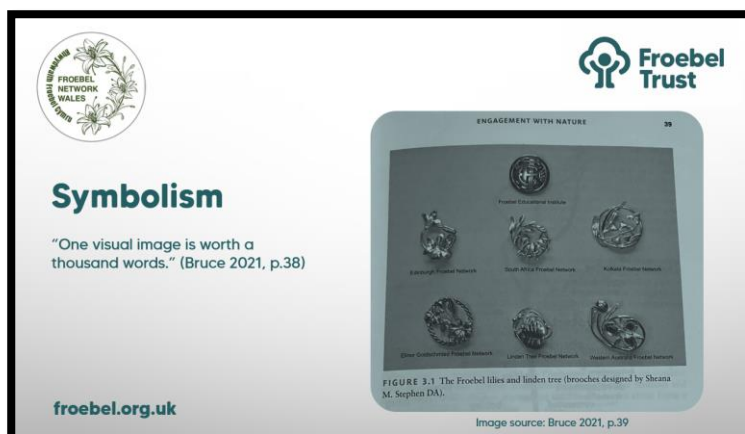
### Interconnections

I am so pleased to be able to celebrate this very special day with you as you launch the Froebel Network Wales.



### Symbolism

As friends and members of the network who are inspired and informed by Froebelian principles, you will already know that symbolism plays an important role in helping to create and express a sense of self (*this is part of who I am or who we are*) and manifesting outwardly a person's inner thoughts, feelings and sensations.



Symbols can demonstrate or consolidate connectedness and belonging, and creativity, aspiration, knowing and doing of a person or group.

Symbols can also distinguish an 'us' from a 'them' and indicate what is **not** as well as what **is**, who **belongs** and who does **not**.

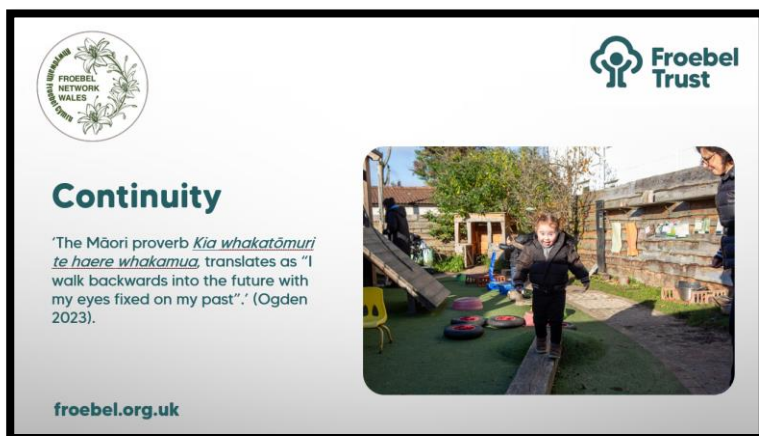
Your logo, together with those of other networks that have been crafted into brooches, “encapsulate the Froebelian philosophy” in an image that Professor Tina Bruce argues “brings a sense of belonging, continuity, a connection with Froebel’s philosophical influences, with nature, the universe, *Unity*, the *symbolic life*, and the *Forms*...One visual image is worth a thousand words.” (Bruce 2021, p.38).

## Continuity

The older I become, the more I notice cycles in which policy and practice trends ebb and flow. In contrast, Froebelian principles provide an anchor that is neither a short-term fix, nor a proscribed method at risk of becoming an irrelevant orthodoxy. Contemporary networks make them ‘fit for purpose’ in today’s society.

Recognising, not replicating, what has come before, and who has walked the path in advance of us, is important. We build on their learning just as we apply Froebel’s 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy for 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts.

To have what Alison Clark terms “the long view” (Clark 2023) - when she refers to key themes of Slow pedagogy within a Froebelian approach – is part of the continuity to which Tina Bruce refers. The long view matters for children and their families and it matters for educators and organisations like the Froebel Trust. Our history shapes us as individuals and our collective stories make us as communities and cultures.



In some cultures, representations or concepts of past and future are inverted in comparison with how we might understand these in the UK. In Maori culture, for example, the past is in front – because it can be seen and is known – and the future is behind because it cannot be seen and is not known. In this sense, as we plan for the future, we do so seeing the past laid out in front of us, offering opportunities to learn from what we can see and explore there.

There is a Māori proverb (*Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*), which translates as “I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past”. (Ogden 2023).

For Froebelians, the past, present and future are entwined in the pursuit of what Froebel termed, “Life Unification” or *Unity*.

There has been a surge of interest in Froebelian education in Wales recently, thanks in part to close alignment with the curricula (Welsh Government 2019, Education Wales 2022). Today’s

launch of the Froebel Network Wales is a clear indicator of this revitalized Froebelian movement.

But what can we learn from the past that lays out in front of us if we care to look for it?

What do you know and what can you discover about traditions of Froebelian education and Froebel's legacy in Wales that set today's launch within a continuous history?

The long view is likely to have ruptures and pauses as well as flows and ripples. These are all part of a story that may include chapters about flourishing – like today – as well as chapters about surviving in the shadows.

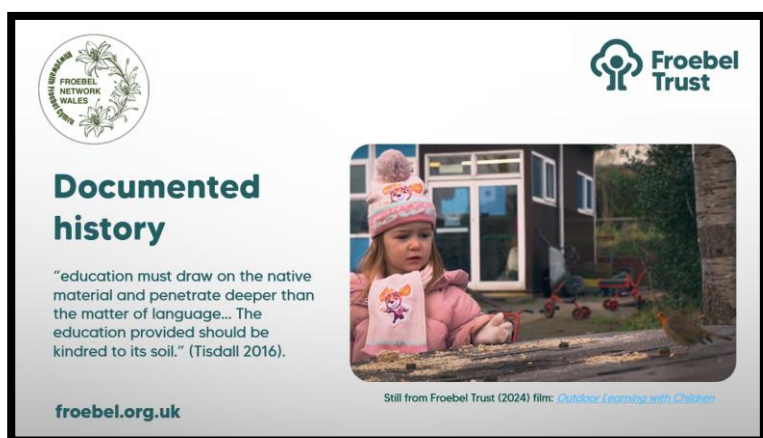
### **Documented History**

The *Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice* (Bruce et al 2019) includes a chapter recalling the development of the Edinburgh Froebel Network (Baker et al 2019). The authors, Maureen Baker, Stella Brown, Tina Bruce, Catriona Gill, Chris McCormick, Lynn McNair and Jane Whinnett open their introduction with the following, notable statement:

“The development of powerful communities of practice more often than not remain undocumented. Yet the fascinating ways in which such networks of early childhood educational practice have developed and influenced policy are useful to ponder and give important lessons for the future of policymaking and relevant research” (p. 231).

Their chapter shares valuable firsthand experience about the processes involved in the development of their Network and signals the value of recording or recalling such stories for future generations, especially when accounts such as these are difficult to locate.

I am not an historian and have to admit to making what is really a fairly cursory search of the Froebelian story in Wales. But from this search, it seems to me that the documented history is patchy and found in disparate sources. The story so far has yet to be written; there appears to be no published history of Froebelian education in Wales that I could find (but I don't speak or read Welsh!). But I did uncover some connections.



Perhaps a notable place to start is the 1870s when America's famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright was a young boy living in Wisconsin. His mother, Anna Lloyd-Jones bought him a set of

Froebel's Gifts that Frank later acknowledged as an influence on his architectural style. Anna was born in West Dyfed and her family emigrated to the USA during her childhood ([Sittig 2019](#)).

Froebelian education is often described as child-centred (although I tend to think of it as relational). Although not overtly labelled as Froebelian, child-centred education is not new in the Welsh education system.

“As the headteacher of the first Welsh-speaking school, founded in Aberystwyth in 1939, put it in 1943: ‘When I think of the term “Welsh Education”, I mean something infinitely more fundamental than using Welsh as a medium of instruction. The education must draw on the native material and penetrate deeper than the matter of language... The education provided should be kindred to its soil’.” ([Tisdall 2016](#)).

This deeply infused connectedness to place, time, environment, tradition, culture and people is highly reminiscent of the [Froebelian principles](#) of ‘Unity’ and ‘Relationships Matter’. The headteacher’s view that “education should be kindred to its soil” resonates with the authenticity that Froebel advocated in and for young children’s learning about themselves and their place in the world, and with his emphasis on connected learning: in and through the environment, especially the Nature that surrounds each of us. Learning is or should be contextually meaningful in a holistic way - situated and embodied.

Researchers of the history of education in Wales, like Alice Tisdall (quoted earlier), have cautioned that child-centred approaches have sometimes become idealised and, when this happens, educational experiences can deny or downplay the unique interests and strengths of many children who do not fit with the idealised image of ‘the child’. Some children are actively disadvantaged when expectations dictate that education must lead every child to fit a uniform definition.

That is when education becomes the factory model that Sir Ken Robinson bemoaned in one of his popular [TED talks](#). Sir Ken also famously described schools as “educating people out of their creative capacities” with a focus on just one side of our brains, so much so that our bodies just become a form of transport for (one side of) our heads. This narrow, disjointed and hierarchical view of subjects that matter in education is endemic and it’s the antithesis of Froebel’s vision of educating the whole child according to their strengths, needs and interests.

So, where a history of child-centred education in Wales may make the case that schools have fallen foul of deterministic pressures, this is by no means particular to this country. We’ve seen universalizing and normalizing trends and expectations for children in swathes of education and developmental research and practice take hold across the world. Examples include the dominance of [PISA tables](#) as a competitive measure of success between nations of the OECD. The [IELS programme](#) is an Early Years version of PISA (sometimes referred to as ‘baby PISA’). England is one of just 8 countries that have agreed to take part and the only one to have agreed to do so twice despite massive criticism from the sector.

Unlike England, Wales has not been involved with IELTS, and recent curricular frameworks have taken a very different approach, drawing heavily on Froebel's legacy and aligning closely with Froebelian principles.

For example, as Jennie Clement and Jane Waters noted in their contribution to the *Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice* (Bruce et al 2019), the Welsh Assembly Government's 2008 *Framework for Children's Learning* (aged 3-7) advocated that:

“Children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of ‘play’ providing the vehicle. Through their play, children practice and consolidate their learning, play with ideas, experiment, take risks, solve problems and make decisions individually, in small and in large groups. First-hand experiences allow children to develop an understanding of themselves and the world in which they live.” (DCELLS 2008, p.6 cited in Spratt et al 2019, p.290).

But connections in Wales to Froebelian education go back much further than 2008; they can be found at least 125 years ago.

The catalogue of the Froebel Archive, which is housed at the University of Roehampton in London, doesn't (yet) list specific references to Wales but historical papers, such as the syllabus and examination papers of the National Froebel Union show that, in 1897, Penarth was the first location in Wales to appear as a Froebelian “centre of training”, the institution being listed as St. Maeburne. The first student's name that appears in the records is that of Edith S. Taylor.

Between 1901 and 1906, other Froebelian teacher training centres appeared: in Barry, Cardiff (University College) and Bangor (University College), with a handful of students graduating each year<sup>1</sup>.

In his doctoral thesis dated 1988, Kevin Brehony (who became Froebel Professor of Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton and President of the International Froebel Society) refers to the inspection of kindergarten classes in the early 1900s. Brehony's historical account reports that,

“Among the inspectors only Miss Callis reported encountering any good Froebelian practice in elementary schools. She had inspected twenty-one schools in Barry, Cardiff, Newport and Swansea as well as seventeen in London. Despite the London schools having a higher proportion of certificated teachers than the Welsh ones, seven of the teachers in Wales, all employed by the Barry Council, were Froebel trained. Miss Callis commented that...the Froebelian teachers, who had a 'wider knowledge of the principles underlying the education of young children', [were]... 'eminently successful'... within the classes she detected, 'a happy, wholesome spirit of freedom and activity' which she attributed to the way the teachers assisted, 'the natural unfolding of their powers, mental and physical, by surrounding them with a suitable environment'.” ([Brehony 1988, p.617](#)).

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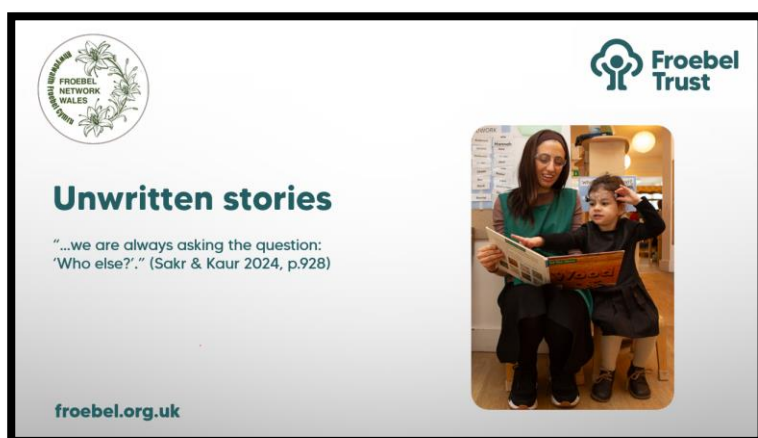
<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Froebel Archivist, Kornelia Cepok for her help unearthing these historic records.

In her doctoral thesis dated 2012, Dr Jane Read (now Editor of the [Froebel Trust Pamphlets Series](#)) also wrote about Miss Callis's time as one of five influential inspectors of elementary education.

“On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1904, five women HMIs began investigations into attendance in elementary schools by children under five...Their reports made a significant contribution to deliberations of the 1908 Consultative Committee on whether children under five should attend elementary schools. References to Froebelian pedagogy...were evident but also revealed differences in conceptions of professional role...Louisa Callis joined the Froebel Society Council and...In her report she rejected work with small sticks, beads and threads proposing instead the use of blocks ‘larger than [those] in Froebel’s “Gifts”’ for group work on the floor. She approved some Froebelian occupations, such as sand-work, clay-modelling and ball games, but proposed that drawing should be on blackboards and slates rather than graph paper, as Froebel suggested.” ([Read 2012, p.98](#))

### **Unwritten stories of interconnectedness**

By following the example of the authors of the chapter about Edinburgh's Froebel Network, a process of uncovering and documenting a new - as well as retrospective - history of Froebelian education in Wales could give overdue acknowledgement to those whose significance may have been largely forgotten or overlooked in Froebelian histories. Names rarely encountered - like Edith S. Taylor or Louisa Callis.



We might look for those who have been left out or even written out of history in a way that acknowledges both Froebel's own influence and his principle of Unity and connectedness, as well as the tendency for Froebel to be positioned (unintentionally) in front of the many who have advanced his philosophy without acknowledgement. Dr Mona Sakr and Veerma Kaur have described how they applied a “prosopographical” approach to their own study of Froebelian leadership. They say that:

“A fundamental part of re-imagining Froebel's influence through a web of encounters is to highlight the interconnectedness of various individuals, including those who have been silenced and lost in history...When adopting a prosopographical approach, we are always asking the question: ‘Who else?’” ([Sakr & Kaur 2024, p.928](#))



A group of nine women are standing in a row, smiling for a group photo. They are in an indoor setting, possibly a community center or a meeting room. The background includes a bulletin board with several colorful, abstract paintings and a whiteboard with handwritten notes. The women are dressed in a variety of styles, ranging from casual to professional. From left to right: a woman in a blue sweater and black pants; a woman in a pink top and a colorful patterned skirt; a woman in a green long-sleeved shirt and black pants; a woman in a dark green leather coat and black pants; a woman in a white and black striped shirt and black pants; a woman in a black top and black pants; a woman in a green jumpsuit and a denim jacket; a woman in a bright green dress; a woman in an orange top and dark pants; and a woman in a grey jacket, a light blue scarf, and patterned pants. The overall atmosphere is friendly and professional.

A map of Europe is displayed on a dark red surface. Several small, torn pieces of paper are pinned to the map, each containing a small, dark, rectangular object, possibly a piece of wood or a small figurine. The objects are arranged in a way that suggests they are being placed on the map, perhaps to indicate specific locations or events. The map itself is a standard road map of Europe, showing major roads and geographical features. The pieces of paper are of various sizes and shapes, some with multiple objects pinned to them. The overall scene suggests a project or a collection of items related to European geography or history.









The Froebel Network Wales could also be described as a developing community of practice, which is designed to be much more than a loosely gathered group of early childhood educators. The Network's purpose and intentions reflect the three key features of a community of practice. Namely:

The Domain – broadly speaking, a commitment to the practice of nurturing young children's early learning that is underpinned by Froebelian principles and pedagogy

The Community – a group of like-minded people who actively learn with and from one another in pursuit of the domain that has brought them together.

The Practice – involves practitioners with recognised knowledge and expertise who work together in a sustained way to “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems”. ([Wenger 2012](#)).

With this collective commitment the Wales Froebel Network becomes more than a group of people who are loosely or coincidentally connected. It is all of you developing and working towards a shared goal, actively engaged in learning together to create a collective repertoire of resources that will transform young children's educational experiences for the better.

### **Transformative CoPs**

In the years since Etienne Wenger and his co-researcher Jean Lave first wrote about communities of practice, many learning groups and organisations have used and benefited from their theoretical model and practice examples. And the theory has continued to advance.

Although communities of practice have always had change and transformation at their core, recent theorising and societies' concern for social justice have led to a sharper focus on the ways that communities of practice extend their learning and its benefits by broadening the worldview and aspirations of members.



The groups that form with this intention have become known as Transformative Communities of Practice (TCoPs) whose domain of practice involves an outward spiral of influence or ripple effect involving the “individual and team...community, organisation, and larger social systems”. We might think of this as an ecological perspective with an ever-expanding series of circles or ripples.

It also connects to a Froebelian perspective. When he describes the process of nurturing in people an awareness and ability to care for others and for the environment, Froebel refers to raising to a level of consciousness the sensations that had been hidden previously; assimilating and acting on this transformed realisation. This was more easily done with the others who could support, challenge or guide.

On a similar note, when George Por describes the actions of the transformative agents who are members of TCoPs, he states that they are engaged in the “evolution of consciousness” – their own and other people’s. ([Por 2018](#)).

In Froebelian practice, it follows that first aspect of a TCoP - the domain that spirals outwards to raise consciousness - will include children, educators, families, communities, the wider social spheres of early childhood education practice, policy and research, and the world that we inhabit. For Froebel this would have incorporated a spiritual dimension.

In TCoPs, the second key element of such a learning community, i.e. **practice**:

“includes the pursuit of a shared learning agenda and the development and spreading of new knowledge and capabilities.” ([Por 2017](#))

In the Edinburgh Froebel Network, the transformative agents of this powerful community of practice extended their knowledge and capabilities far beyond their circle by developing courses in partnership with Edinburgh University, teaching courses to others, reading and talking together, challenging and supporting each other, hosting conferences that attracted hundreds of educators annually, researching their own and one another’s practice and publishing together – including winning the Nursery World Award for Professional Book of the Year for “*Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice.*” (Bruce et al 2020).

Through these practices, opportunities were created for complexity to exist and to facilitate new thinking, feelings, sometimes uncertainty or disorientation that is a part of the evolution of consciousness and the creation of new knowledge and understanding (Southern et al 2012).

This TCoP of Froebelians refer to the way that their Network grew as being like “strawberry runners”, a term devised by Jane Whinnett, because:

“The way that strawberry plants grow is not linear or predictable in its pattern of growth but the result when it has room to grow is a delicious fruit”. (Baker et al 2019, p.244).

## **A Praxeological Approach to Professional Development**

If you are familiar with the work of the Froebel Partnership, you may already know that this is another Froebelian TCoP, which started with a collaborative project between Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre (led by Sally Cave), the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (led by Professor Chris Pascal) and Seven Stars Kindergarten in New Zealand (led by Anne Denham).



After working together for three years, the team reflected on what brought about success in their TCoP's research and practice development. In an article that will be published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, the team outline seven key features of the praxeological approach to professional development that they created together (Pascal et al forthcoming 2024):

1. The first feature was working with **extended timeframes**:  
 “much of our work grew organically from what we learnt from the children, families and colleagues over an extended period of time.”
2. The next was **a shared practice focus**:  
 “we agreed an annual cycle of...research and action with an agreed practice focus each year.”
3. The third element was **working as a Froebelian Community of Practice** in which there was:  
 “a diverse range of participants, including educators, leaders, researchers, children and families and those who straddled multiple and other identities. We celebrated this plurality every time we met believing it enriched and extended our thinking and learning.”
4. The next was a commitment to **deepening and extending professional knowledge and skills** through a wide range of learning opportunities because:  
 “The generation and critical consumption of professional knowledge was highly valued in our CoP and provided a vital source of professional challenge and stimulation for professional transformation.”
5. The fifth feature was **regular and reflective professional dialogues** involving virtual as well as face to face discussions with:  
 “time...made available for the Nursery team to engage in regular professional dialogues and these opportunities were embedded in the Nursery routines.”
6. The penultimate feature was **documentation of practice**:  
 “The CoP members were committed to sharing their professional practices and reflections through a process of documentation throughout the whole period of shared working.”



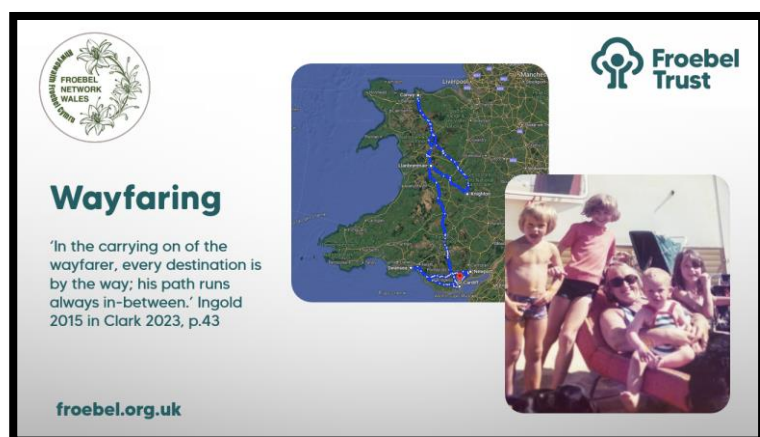
7. The seventh element of the PADP was **Analysing, Identifying and Creating Practice Transformations** through a:

“rigorous and systematic analytical process...to transform professional practice and the development of both children and educators.”

The entire analytical process was translated into a professional development reflective tool for others to use. It is called [Reflection with Guidance](#) and it will be published later this year.

## Wayfaring

As I looked into the history of Froebelian education in this country, I started to think about my own my own history of connections to Wales.



Generations of my Mum’s family on her Dad’s side farmed at Llanbrynmair, which by coincidence is just an hour’s drive north of where my husband’s family on his Dad’s side were living in Knighton.

For years, I had wonderful childhood holidays with my Mum and sister at my grandparents’ caravan in Conwy. We ate fried liver sausage for breakfast, buried each other in the dunes, swam in the choppy sea, ran for miles with our dog, heaved the heavy drinking water barrel back from the communal tap, laughed and danced in the rain in our swimming costumes while neighbours stared out of their caravans in disbelief, climbed through the prickly, yellow gorse up a steep mountain opposite the caravan site, full of excited anticipation about sliding back down on our bottoms on the sandy path that snaked between the bushes, and visited A&E when my sister broke her collar bone! Those holidays were about play, firsthand real experiences, family and freedom with just a dash of guidance.

When I was at university in Durham, I would come with one of my best friends to visit their family in Penarth. They were keen singers and instrumentalists, and their house was filled with music.

A few years later, in 2005, I attended the British Educational Research Association conference - at what was, in those days, the University of Glamorgan - where Professor Trisha Maynard gave a memorable lecture about outdoor play. Trisha was working at Swansea University at the time, and she was the first person to introduce me to a man called “Froebel”.

I couldn’t have known that this meeting with Trisha would be the start of a long association with the Froebel Trust. An association that has brought me back to Wales: – to Newport to

teach a Froebel Trust Short Course; to the Temple of Peace in Cardiff for the Trust's annual lecture in 2023; and here at Ely & Caerau Children's Centre for today's launch of the Froebel Network Wales.

Google Maps helpfully tells me that if I walked the route shown in the picture, it would take me 188 hours. It's actually taken more than 50 years and reminds me of Jane Whinnett's "strawberry runners" metaphor, or her Edinburgh Froebel Network colleague, Dr Lynn McNair's description of children at Cowgate Under-5s Centre being "wayfarers". The paths to lovely fruits are rarely linear. Lynn borrows her description of the children's unique development as "wayfaring" from an anthropologist called Tim Ingold (2015).

Ingold refers to a way of becoming in the world, which he calls "commoning". This recognises everyone's difference and means that seeking continuity - such as tracing Froebelian history in Wales - is not about "homogeneity, uniformity or conformity, but a commitment and aspiration to...infinite multiplicity" (Ingold 2018, p.67 cited in [Harding 2021](#), p.355). It is authentic to its kindred soil and chimes with Froebel's idea of unity in or through diversity, or what he himself described as "the triad" of individuality, manifoldness (or diversity) and unity (Wasmuth 2021, p.58).

Froebel Network Wales will be unique because each of you walks a different path in your own time and your own way and no two interconnections will be the same. On behalf of the Froebel Trust, I wish you all the very best as you wayfare - backwards, sideways and / or forwards - into the future of the Froebel Network Wales.

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