



Froebelian Principles in the 21st Century:

How is and can play be supported in ECEC settings, at home and in the community for children living in disadvantaged urban areas?

Dublin City University & Maynooth
University

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Project Summary

Research Grants Final Report Form

Project Details

Names:

Principal Investigator: Professor Mathias Urban (PI), Dublin City University

Co- Applicant: Professor Marie Mc Loughlin: Maynooth University

Research Team Maynooth University: Annette Kearns; Leah O' Toole; Patsy Stafford, Triona Stokes

Research Team Dublin City University: Aishling Silke and Marlene Mc Cormack

Project title:

Froebelian Principles in the 21st Century: How is and can play be supported in ECEC settings, at home and in the community for children living in disadvantaged urban areas?

Project start date: **Project approved:** 01-03-2020; **Commencement of research in the settings delayed due to COVID in 2020-; Meeting with the services started in Autumn 2021**

Project end date: Original end date 28-02-2023; Extension from Froebel Trust – approved until 29 February 2024 due to COVID-19 pandemic

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1) Overview

Inspired by Froebelian principles, our study aimed to provide a platform to empower children and their families in Dublin City and suburbs to highlight their experiences, challenges and vision for play within their communities. The aims of the project were firstly, to explore the relevance of play and Froebelian play principles in the 21st century and secondly, to promote action under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The latter aimed to provide a platform for children and families, living in urban environments, to influence or shape play provision in their localities. The project adopted a right-based position and speaks to Article 31 of the UNCRC which states the child has the right to rest and to engage in leisure, play and recreational activities. Additionally, Article 12 notes that children have the right to express an opinion and for that opinion to be taken into account, (UNCRC, 1989). Consultation with young children and their families about play and play preferences was central to the design of this research.

The study aimed to influence policy at both a local and a national level. It promoted the implementation of the UNCRC (1989), and provided the participants – parents, children, educators - with an evidenced-based resource, empowering them to engage with key stakeholders and policy makers towards a re-envisioning of play spaces in their communities. Such play visions, developed by children for children, have the potential to directly impact their lives and the lives of future generations.

The project adopted a participatory, collaborative approach to investigating the central research question: How is and can play be supported in ECEC settings, at home and in the community for children living in disadvantaged urban areas?

The main objectives were to:

- Conduct a critical, participatory investigation into the conditions of and opportunities for play as experienced by young children growing up in urban areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Open a space for early childhood educators and families to engage in meaningful dialogue about the value, and reality of play in the lives of their young children.
- Support children and families to envision new understandings and enact concrete actions to improve the play opportunities within their urban environments.
- Systematically document these processes to:
 - provide *examples of good collaborative practices* that ‘work’ in response to the concrete conditions of children and adults
 - engage in “Future” thinking/methodology to afford opportunities for marginalised voices to be heard
 - inform the wider early childhood community, locally and internationally
 - provide *practice-based evidence* (Urban, 2010) to influence the play-focussed work of Dublin City Council and the implementation of the Government of Ireland’s 10-year early childhood strategy
 - co-create new knowledge of enabling Froebelian principles to be introduced to the Irish early childhood policy context.

In short, we sought to collaborate with children, their families, and educators to gather perspectives on play preferences and provision; create a vision for play in two locations with experience of social challenges, one in suburban Dublin and one in Dublin city centre; and identify and implement a model of participation that supports empowerment.

2) The Grant

Outline of achievements:

- a. The research team engaged successfully with educators, children and their families in a participative, collaborative manner.
- b. The research created a space for a diverse range of participants from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to have a voice.
- c. The project effectively implemented a model of consultation (Future Workshop) which captures a range of voices but, in particular, it engaged children as key participants, recording their voices, dreams and visions for play and play spaces in their lived areas and communities.
- d. There has been a strong dissemination of the research through presentations at conferences (Child in the City; Froebel 2023; EECERA; Children's Research Network), which have been received with great enthusiasm and interest highlighting the relevance of Froebel's philosophy in today's world.
- e. An accessible publication has been developed for both settings outlining the research process and findings.
- f. Situated in a Froebelian framework, a comprehensive literature review on Play has been conducted as part of the research output.
- g. An invited book chapter was authored by the research team and has been included in an edited book (McCormack, M., Silke, A., Kearns, A., O'Toole, L., Stafford, P., Stokes, T., & Urban, M. (2023). *Pedagogies of hope. Exploring play opportunities for young children in an urban environment*. In T. Bruce, Y. Nishida, S. Powell, H. Wasmuth, & J. Whinnett (Eds.), *Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel*. London: Bloomsbury).

Research Progress

The project was agreed by the Froebel Trust in 2019. However, the COVID pandemic delayed the commencement of the project due to travel restrictions, work-related changes, working-from-home dictates, and the closure of early years' settings. Below depicts the stages in the progression of the research project. Currently, we are at the dissemination stage, delivering papers at conferences and engaging with policymakers to discuss the findings.

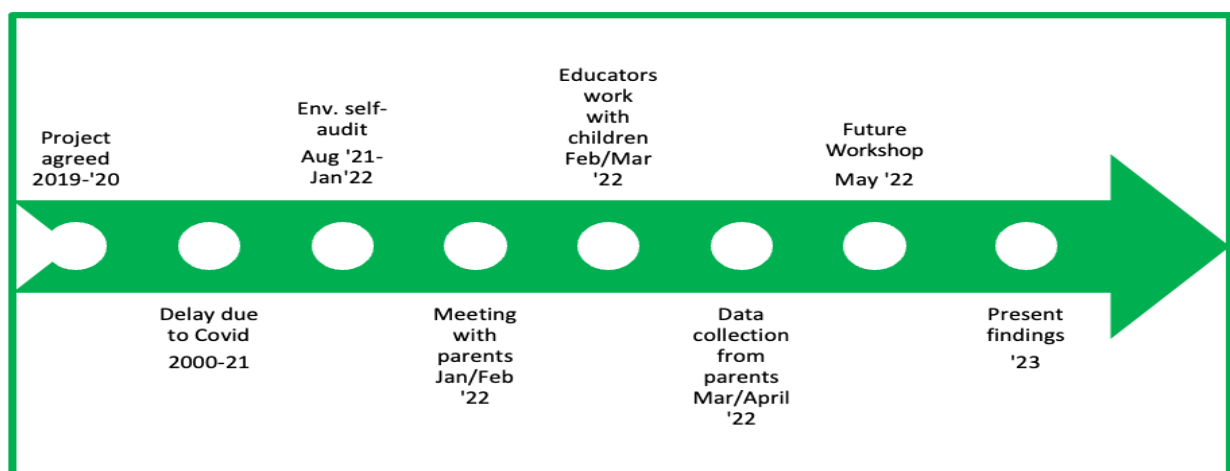


Diagram 1 Timeline of Project

3) Research activity.

The focus of this research project was to hear and understand the place and nature of play for children and families in urban areas of disadvantage. Too frequently perspectives of those with tacit knowledge and lived experiences of play are seldom heard, with policy makers and researchers taking centre stage.

The active participation of children, families and educators was a guiding principle of the project which naturally led us to adopt a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.

Furthermore, we were deeply conscious of the power dynamics between researchers and participants, many of whom were recent immigrants living in challenging urban environments. As a research group, we wanted to draw on a method that would create a space to enable co-construction of the research between researchers, children, families, and educators, where power was distributed, and everyone could contribute.

In the first instance, we needed to secure agreement from two local early childhood education settings to partner with us on the project. After meeting with them and discussing the project, they were willing to participate.

The two early childhood education settings involved in the project were located in Dublin. A description of the two settings is below:

Our Nursery is situated at Sillogue Gardens, Ballymun, Dublin 11. The nursery is a purpose-built childcare facility and caters for children from 4 months to school age. The Nursery achieved an overall Siolta quality rating of Level 4 (highest award) in all 16 quality Siolta standards. All staff are trained in High Scope and the HighScope curriculum is implemented in the nursery.

Our Nursery won the "Healthy Ireland Preschool Award" for promoting healthy eating, oral health, nutrition, physical activity and health and safety in the nursery. It was also awarded the "Investing in Childcare" award.



Hill St. FRC is located in North-East Inner City (NEIC) of Dublin which comprises all of Dublin 1 and parts of Dublin 3. It is an area that is bounded by the river Liffey to the south, the Tolka River to the west and East Wall to the East. The residing broad, diverse and growing community experiences disadvantage and marginalisation. The total population of the NEIC is 45,812 which represents a 78% increase over 20 years (ICON). Drawing on Census 2016 data, an ESRI report on Diverse Neighbourhoods (2019), indicated that the largest share of foreign-born population nationally, amounting to almost 60%, is in the area of Mountjoy Sq. adjacent to Hill St.



Sampling Approach

Non-probability sampling was chosen to select the participants. Hill St. and Our Nursery were identified as early childhood settings that had an established relationship with both DCU and MU. Participants from both Hill St. and Our Nursery were considered to be marginalised in terms of living in a disadvantaged socio-economic area. In addition, families attending Hill St. comprised of new communities (immigrants), all living in apartments in the North Inner City. Families in Our Nursery comprised of families (including immigrant families) and lone parents (all mothers) living in one of the highest deprivation areas nationally.

A total of 40 children and 40 parents/guardians from the 2 settings, twenty from the Junior Pre-School (age 2-4 years) room in Hill St. and twenty families from the Pre-School (age 3-5 years) room in Our Nursery were invited to engage in the project.

In meeting with parents in person, in giving time to consider engagement (prior to signing Consent Forms), working with and through the gatekeepers (Managers) and in selecting a participative action research approach, we aimed to minimise power differentials. Permission was granted for 21 children and 21 parents/guardians to participate in the research (Twelve from Our Nursery and nine from Hill Street). Ten educators/managers were also involved in the project, four educators and a manager from each setting.

The main challenge of recruitment was that English was not a first language for many of the families. This necessitated the information and permission slips to be translated into 17 different languages to facilitate the families understanding of the project. Full retention of all 21 children and their 21 parents/guardians in the project was realised with the support of the manager and educators in the settings.

A **Participative Action Research** (PAR) approach that focused on listening to those who had direct experience of play in the community was adopted. Aligned with this approach, the research team decided to use the **Future Workshop (FW) Method** developed by Müllert and Jungk (1987). This method was developed in the 1960's with the intention of including people constructively and creatively to develop their own ideas and projects for a better society. Jungk's motivation behind the creation of FW arose from his own experience and feelings of powerlessness from living through the holocaust (Jungk & Müllert, 1987). He wanted to create a democratic space where everyone's voice and perspectives could emerge in a collaborative effort to solve social problems and re-image an alternative future. Levitas (2013) describes Jungk's FW as an early attempt to utilise "utopia" as a method (McCormack et al. 2023). As a team of researchers, we felt challenged as we searched for a method that would support an authentic form of research until the Future Workshop method was proposed. The researchers believed that the original design of the FW was still very applicable in relation to the topic of play, as it was experienced by children and families in socio-economic disadvantaged urban environments.

The Future Workshop method provided a framework for the project, which supported the empowerment of participants and enabled a re-imagining of their futures. In summary, the Future Workshop method, as enacted by the team of researchers within this project, is predicated upon four phases: **The Preparation Phase** – where relationships between educators, families, children and researchers were forged; **The Critique Phase** – where the perspectives of children and parents on current play experiences and provision in their community were identified and discussed; **The Fantasy Phase or Future's Workshop** – where children and parents shared ideas and constructed a vision of what ideal or better play

provision might look like in their communities; ***The Implementation Phase*** – where the findings and vision from the research culminate in a report and an action plan. More detailed information on the activities performed under each phase is provided below:

Phase 1: Forging relationships between educators, families, children and researchers

Activities in Phase 1 focussed on taking time to construct trusting relationships.

- Built relationships were underpinned by respect, trust and time.
- Developed shared understandings of play.
- Negotiated informed consent.
- Translated documents for greater inclusion.
- Evaluated current provision in the settings using the Aistear/Síolta Self-Evaluation Learning through play tools.
- Explored perspectives on play with educators and children.
- Parents discussed play preferences with their children.
- Children expressed their perspectives through art (mark making).

Phase 2: Gathering perspectives on current provision and children's play preferences.

A variety of data sources and approaches were used to explore play provision and practice:

- Educators captured children's words and ideas over weeks, through discussion and art (mark making).
- Parents gathered and shared stories, photographs and their children's art.
- Focus group discussions were held with the 21 parents/guardians (Nine in Hill Street and eleven in Our Nursery) on play in the community and the barriers encountered.

Findings from the self-evaluation tool and the perspectives of children and parents were analysed and themed to inform Phase 3 of the research project.

Phase 3: Creating a vision for children's play - Future Thinking Workshop

In Phase 3 conditions were created that enabled children and parents/carers to re-imagine play in the future.

- Researchers designed a Future Workshop, which took the form of an outdoors play event in an expansive green space on the DCU university campus.
- Play stations were set up with open-ended materials, construction equipment and animals (petting farm).
- Children and families were invited to spend time engaging with the space and the materials
- Researchers captured children's preferences through photographs and informal conversations with them and their parents.
- Participants engaged in a discussion indoors afterwards to envision ideals of play (refreshments provided).
- Local representatives joined the gathering, engaging in informal conversation around play experiences with families and children.
- Views and visions were collated, analysed and themed.

It is these perspectives that inform the reports to the families and settings.

Phase 4: Presenting Findings: Creating a utopian future play space

Phase 4 focussed on the development of a tool (the Report) which could be used by the research participants to advocate for changes in play provision within the urban areas.

- Two draft reports 'Playing on the Edge' were prepared for the two respective early childhood education and care settings from the vision created by children and families in Phase 3. The draft reports were shared with and reviewed by the settings.
- Feedback was incorporated and the layout and content were agreed
- The final reports were shared with the settings to consider what practical steps could be taken to realise the plan.
- Communities may now utilise the final published report to highlight and advocate for the implementation of their needs to local councillors and politicians.

4) Conclusions and achievements.

The project highlighted the ongoing value of and need for play opportunities and spaces within a densely populated urban area. The principles of Froebel are alive and as relevant today as ever. Despite societal and economic changes, the centrality of play as a joy, as a means of learning and of engaging with the world holds fast. This was not an unexpected finding emerging from the children, but parents and families also had very strong beliefs about play. The ethnic diversity within the parent groups enriched discussions as memories of play in Egypt, Poland and China contributed to the discussions.

Despite the efforts to improve play provision in Dublin city, this project highlighted a dearth of focus on play for the under 2's and for children with additional needs. Furthermore, families who lived in challenging circumstances, travelled far distances to access good quality play spaces. This study clearly signposts the need to make accommodations for play in future buildings within the city and in particular apartment developments.

Significantly, this project trialled the Future Workshop method in an innovative way, adapting it for a younger audience. The project team recognised that younger children express their opinions through what Malaguzzi (Rinaldi, 2006) describes as the 100 languages and consequently we overlaid the established FW framework with a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011). The Mosaic approach entails using a variety of ways of gathering information (drawings, words, observations, photographs, etc..) from children about their experiences and preferences which are then put together by adults to create a fuller picture (like a mosaic) (Clark & Moss, 2011).

The continued importance and value of play in the lives of children and families; the adapted use of the FW to engage what previously has been considered a 'hard-to-reach' group; and the empowerment of marginalised communities to self-advocate through the use of specific research processes were understood as significant achievements arising from the project. Outlined in the section below are some further details in respect of the objectives and how they were met.

OBJECTIVE 1: Conduct a critical, participatory investigation into the conditions and opportunities of play experienced by young children growing up in adverse conditions, especially homelessness and forced migration, in Ireland	Objective 1 was re-framed early in the project to focus on the conditions and opportunities of play experienced by those children and families living in the socio-economic disadvantaged areas of North Dublin Inner City and suburban Ballymun. This objective was re-focused from children growing up in adverse conditions to children living in a marginalised community. The shift was from categorising children (as immigrants/homeless) within the project to emphasising the nature of play provision within their marginalised community. The communities involved in this study were considered marginalised as they were economically and socially disadvantaged and included many immigrant families. Objective 1 of the project was met as follows: • The conditions and opportunities for play in the two areas were highlighted by parents within the study. Within the Reports to the settings, current play provision was problematised by parents/families. • Parents highlighted the lack of play provision in the context of apartment dwelling with no communal play space indoor or outdoor, a lack of access to natural and open-ended play materials, and no opportunities for children to engage with animals/pets, all of which contribute to children's well-being and at a broader level, a sense of community. Parents also outlined the challenges in finding park areas that were appropriate to a younger age group, that had clean and safe public amenities (toilets, coffee shop). In meeting this objective, the explicit lived experiences of play in the urban setting were identified by parents/families. In researching in this way and presenting the voices of the parents, their tacit knowledge is legitimised as practice-based-evidence (Urban, 2010).
OBJECTIVE 2 Open a space for early childhood educators and families to engage in meaningful dialogue about the value, meaning and importance, and reality of play in the lives of their young children	Objective 2 of the project was met as follows: • While much rhetoric surrounds the practice of researching with young children and families on the margins, the reality is often found wanting. Vandenbroeck and Bie (2006, p.127) highlight that "the new pedagogy of participation may well be silencing specific groups of children and their parents". • The Future Workshop Method was successful in creating an open space for educators and parents/families to share their opinions and have them valued. Time was invested in building trusting relationships and the method was non-judgemental.

OBJECTIVE 3 Co-create new shared understandings and concrete action to improve the play opportunities experienced by young children in the participating early childhood settings	Objective 3 was met as follows: The aim of this objective was met through the collaborative vision for play provision, which was conceptualised by children and parents/families. Their ideas and desires were crystalised in the final reports to the ECEC settings. The Future Workshop method guides participants to utilise the outputs and new knowledge generated through the research process to effect change. In short, the reports emanating from this project can be understood as tools for advocacy. The settings, children, and families, as owners of the findings have the evidence, power and hopefully confidence to argue for the desired play provision in their area and to influence policy development of Dublin City Council and beyond. Through this research project, an original contribution has been made in respect of both practical and methodological knowledge, which will be of significance policy makers and researchers in the field. The practical knowledge emerging from this study indicates that incorporating play provision in residential and public amenity planning in the cities is critical to the sustainability of communities and the well-being of young children and families. Apartment living for families should be cognisant of play space requirements as a child's right. Outdoor play provision must be local (pocket play areas) to enable ease of access to safe spaces, where children can develop friendships and where a sense of belonging and community can be nourished. The study has also valued and legitimised the opinion and voices of very young children and their families who are living in marginalised areas within the city. Many of the participants in this study were relatively new to Ireland, did not have English as a first language, and were living in areas of socio-economic deprivation. These parents and children had lived insider knowledge of, and perspectives on, play provision in their community and in the broader Dublin area. The lack of value placed on tacit knowledge in research is not confined to children and parents in marginalised communities. In focusing on tacit knowledge in higher education, Mitchell et al. (2022, p.1665) suggest that "in many research projects, tacit knowledge remains undisclosed, under-represented and undervalued when thinking about how to use explicit research findings for impact". The methodological knowledge emerging from this study is powerful in that it advances the use of a Future Workshop approach with a younger cohort which is currently absent within the literature. The Future Workshop model is flexible, but to date, most applications have not been reported in accessible journals or publications. The methodology and

	learning from its implementation have been disseminated at conferences and will become more accessible to a wider academic audience through publication.
OBJECTIVE 4 Systematically document these processes in order to • provide <i>examples of good collaborative practices</i> that ‘work’ in response to the concrete conditions of children and adults • inform the wider early childhood community, locally and internationally • provide <i>practice-based evidence</i> (Urban, 2010) to influence the implementation of the government of Ireland’s 10-year early childhood strategy • co-create new knowledge enabling Froebelian principles to be introduced to the Irish early childhood policy context	Objective 4 was met as follows: This project was grounded in the principles of collaboration and evidenced in the following research activities at each stage of the project. The translation of relevant documentation (Information leaflets, Plain Language Statement, Consent Forms) into 17 different languages to enable parents make informed decisions. Children’s perspectives were elicited by the parents and by the educators who knew them. This approach ensured voluntary assent and authentic engagement by the children. Art packs as a resource to prompt children’s reflections were shared with all families, irrespective of their involvement in the research. The use of the Future Workshop as method, equalised the power balance between the researchers and the research participants and allowed the voices/perspectives of children and families emerge strongly. The final reports to the settings drew heavily on the words of children and parents; on the images captured and shared by the parents and on the drawings and artefacts of children. Presenting back the report in this format, meant that parents and children could easily identify their own contributions, and in-line with the Future Workshop model lent an authenticity to the research process. Each phase of the project was systematically documented, and this has enabled the research to be shared with a range of national and international audiences (the participant families, Dublin City Council, OMEP, Froebel, Child in the City, EECERA, Children’s Research Network, Citizens Science). Key to this project was the engagement of Dublin City Council from the start, an influential policy agency which has responsibility for planning and play (amongst other things) in the Dublin area. Practice-based evidence (Urban, 2010) has long been recognised as a challenge for policy makers. The divide between research and practice in respect of policy development and implementation is wide (Krizek, et al., 2010), with little time

	for policy makers to read and integrate findings in meaningful ways. Krizek et al. (2010) suggest that continual engagement between policy makers and researchers, the synthesis of research findings and the framing of research outcomes into workable actions serve to bridge the research/policy implementation divide. This Froebel funded project offers robust practice-based evidence emerging from the perspectives of children and families, which has been shared with Dublin City Council for consideration in planning for play within the city. The project highlights the continued relevance of Froebelian principles of play for children living in disadvantaged urban areas in the 21st century. Play is on the national (ref) and more local policy agendas. What this project has uniquely achieved through participatory research (Future Workshop) is the translation of Froebel's thinking on play and practice-based evidence into play possibilities for policy.
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5) Learning

Three overarching areas of learning emerged from this project, namely, (a) the value of play in the lives of children, families and communities, which reaffirm Froebel's principles in the 21st century; (b) the power of tacit knowledge relating to play provision amongst children and families; and (c) the use or implementation of the Future Workshop method of listening, empowerment, and democratic engagement within marginalised communities.

(a) The value of play in the lives of children, families and communities

Froebel (1782-1852) extolled the possibilities of play, as a mode of learning (Werth, 2018a), as a means of connecting with the world (Bruce, 2021), as a way of building relationships (Bruce 2013) and as a joyful experience. Over 200 years later, learning from this project highlights the continued value of play in the lives of children but also in the lives of their parents. Within the city and urban areas where space is at a premium, there is frequently little opportunity for children's free play close to home and for parents to connect as part of a new community. One of the questions which arose at the commencement of this research study related to the relevance of Froebelian play principles in the 21st century. The study highlighted that play remains a joyous and learning experience for children and a priority for their parents. Principles of connectedness with others and the surrounding world, autonomy in learners, creativity of children and engagement with nature are as relevant for children and families in this study as they were for Froebel in the 18th and 19th centuries.

(b) The power of tacit knowledge relating to play provision amongst children and families.

Evidence-based research tends to rely on explicit knowledge (Mitchell et al., 2022). This study aimed to explore, value and harness the tacit knowledge of children and parents in relation to their lived experiences of play opportunities and provision within their localities. Learning from the study clearly signalled and evidenced that children and parents had specific, valuable insights into what was needed in their communities to enable the formation of friendships and the creation of informal networks for both young and old.

Tacit knowledge that emerged from the lived experiences of children, parents and families within the study informed six key recommendations which were:

Establish Park Ranger roles - to keep the play areas safe, clean and resourced.

Provide hygiene facilities in public parks – to encourage and enable all community members to engage in outdoor activities and to come together socially. Basic facilities such as clean toilets, nappy changes areas and handwashing facilities along with access to refreshments and covered/sheltered areas would support children and families to spend extended periods of time in the park. This is highly relevant in light of apartments without communal outdoor spaces.

Re-wild traditional playgrounds – to contribute to sustainability and place an emphasis on nature. For many children living in apartments, there is a disconnect with nature which has negative impact on wellbeing.

Re-claim and develop pocket play spaces – there appears to be little evidence of design consideration for children and families in apartment developments within the city. The participants in this research called for small, accessible natural play areas close to their homes.

Provide accessible loose parts for play – the value of open-ended natural and found materials are critical to children's play (Daly et al., 2015). Children and parents in this study highlighted the natural and found objects that enriched play.

Enable contact with animals – The benefits of child-animal connections (Melson & Fine, 2015) are well recognised, and this study highlighted the need for and benefit of have access to animals (even occasionally).

(c) The use or implementation of Future Workshop as a method of listening, empowerment, and democratic engagement within marginalised communities.

The need for the democratic participation of children and families in research is well recognised (Palaiologou, 2014), but so too are the challenges in engaging with our youngest citizens and particularly with families who may be marginalised, colonised or silenced (Alminde & Hanne, 2020). This project recognised that children and families have valuable and untapped tacit knowledge in relation to play in their communities.

Building on the above point in respect of tacit knowledge, democratising knowledge generation and rethinking research approaches have been identified as key methodological challenges of the current era (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017). Consequently, this critical strand of learning emerging from the project relates to the use and adaptation of the Jungk's Future Workshop as a method.

The Future Workshop model has been used successfully and extensively with diverse and marginalised communities, but the use of this method with children and particularly young children is rarely discussed in the international literature on qualitative research (Alminde & Warming, 2019, p.435). This study has implemented and will publish findings on the Future Workshop approach, sharing insights on researching with very young children. However, findings from this study confirms that Future Workshop as a method of participatory research is appropriate for young children. Further work is required to utilise methodological learning from this project to refine the implementation of the Futures Workshop.

Learning about the method which arose from the project related primarily to group size and time. The study engaged with two separate settings, educators, children, and parents. All were invited to the Future Workshop and approx. 40 (adults and children) participated in the event. Despite having generous outdoor/indoor space and richly equipped play provision, this number proved to be too many for authentic engagement. A smaller group size or an increased ratio of researchers to children at the FW event would have enabled greater engagement.

The additional time requirements at each stage of the Future Workshop approach. While this study, aided by Covid, afforded greater opportunities to engage in slow research in Phase 1 and 2 (Preparatory), too much was expected of too many, within a limited time frame in Phase 3. In working with young children (3-6 years) greater consideration of the relationship between expectations, time, participant numbers and data gathering methods is required.

6) Ethical issues.

Guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (EECERA, 2015), this research project received institutional ethical approval both from Dublin City University and from Maynooth University, Ireland. The research design and process were grounded in the principles of respect, justice and equity and integrity, and rooted in a commitment to academic scholarship and making a social contribution.

Ethics were understood as an encounter which demanded individual and collective responsibility for us and others within the research process (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Skånfors, 2009). Subscribing to this belief, the project team took time, care, and attention to attune to the children, parents (families) and educators engaged as participants in the research. This meant that time and resources were focused on informed consent/assent, providing families with the opportunity to meet with members of the research team and to hear about the research aims and methods, prior to deciding about getting involved.

a. *Negotiating Consent*

Consent was negotiated using family-friendly information sheets translated into 17 different languages, opt-in consent forms and opportunities to meet the researchers and to ask questions about the research. The research was explained to children in age-appropriate terms by their educators, with whom they have an established relationship. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage of the project. Following an introduction to children and their families, all children in the settings were given art packs to explore play practice with their families at home, irrespective of their intention to participate in the project.

b. *Impact of Pandemic on Ethical Considerations*

The arrival of the pandemic (Covid-19) in 2020 impacted significantly on the project timeline and raised ethical questions in relation to communication with the settings and families. Guided by the settings, engagement with the educators in undertaking a self-evaluation of play provision was delayed until August 2021 (almost 1 year later than planned). Meeting with families was delayed until Spring 2022 to ensure compliance with Public Health guidelines and setting policies. All planned research methods and processes were completed and fulfilled. However, the timing of the initial lockdown resulted in the research settings deviating somewhat from one another in their timelines.

c. *Research Title Change*

As the research unfolded, the research team queried whether they were positioning the children engaged in the study in a deficit position through the research question, 'how is and can play be supported in ECEC settings, at home and in the community for children experiencing disadvantage and stress in their life situations?' With this initial question, they queried whether they may have been positioning all children in specific communities or early childhood settings as experiencing disadvantage and stress. Thereby, was there a presumption that disadvantaged geographic contexts and stress in children were inextricably linked raising concerns about what this might say to parents. The title of the project was subsequently adapted to read 'Froebelian Principles in the 21st century: Play environments and play opportunities for young children living in urban areas of disadvantage' and the research question was then framed as 'How is and can play be supported in ECEC settings, at home and in the community for children living in disadvantaged urban areas?'

d. Progressing the Research

The iterative approach of Participant Action Research demanded responsiveness to the needs of the different settings throughout the project. The research team supporting each setting progressed through the planned research stages, collating, and combining emergent data to determine shared and individual emphases within the data set as a whole. This phase was critical to informing the planning of the Jungk workshop day in June 2021. The expressed interests and wishes of families for play access were considered by the full research team and a plan to cater for these aspects took shape. An example of this was the sourcing of a mobile farm as part of the Jungk workshop, as well as a variety of loose parts and large construction materials requested for play.

7) Implications.

From the outset, there was a strong desire among the research team for participants (parents and families) to use this research to inform policy-level discussion about play in Dublin. To this end, contact was made with the play section of Dublin City Council as the research got underway. The Play Development Officer expressed interest in the research project and asked to be kept abreast of its development. Furthermore, on behalf of the Play Development Office, an offer of practical support was made to the research team. At the culmination of the research at the Jungk workshop day in June 2021, officials from Dublin City Council attended the event.

The timing of this research project coincided with the preparation of the release of the Dublin City Play Strategy 2022-2027. Informed by the right of the child to play (UNCRC, 1989), the strategy has an emphasis on public play provision particular to the Irish context. It presents survey data based on play experiences of urban Dublin communities during the pandemic and offers six policy statements outlining the main focus of the strategy. Through strategic networking with Dublin City Council, the research is well positioned to inform future plans for urban play spaces, specifically in respect of very young children

The research design and use of the Future approach have shown the capacity for active community engagement with matters affecting children and families. The Jungk model has highlighted another means by which consultation can be undertaken in an authentic manner, thereby, upholding the voices of the children and families. This can safeguard opportunities for the rights of children and families from marginalised communities to be heard and to make a difference by informing policy implementation.

A further implication arising from the study or collaboration relates to the empowerment of parents, families and communities. In working through the FW approach, parents became more confident in sharing opinions. Those with poor levels of English, brought friends along to the sessions to ensure their stories could be heard. At the end of the project and armed with the Report which drew extensively on the words of the participants, parents were keen to meet with local councillors and representatives to put forward their requests and ideas in respect of local play spaces. The full extent of outcomes from this project for parents and children in the urban settings is not known. What is recognised is the openness and willingness of parents to engage with research in a bid to improve play opportunities for their children.

8) Other funding.

No other funding bodies have been involved in supporting this research project.

9) Publications and other outputs.

Dissemination has been a core element of the Froebel-funded project and to date this has been achieved through several initiatives, conference presentations/seminars, a published book chapter, two project reports for the research participants and a contribution to a successful ERASMUS project.

Findings and learnings from the project and from the methodology have been shared with international and national conferences.

International Conferences

In June 2023 (15-17) the International Froebel Society Conference took place in Maynooth University. This offered an authentic and effective forum for the team to share our learning on the continued relevance of Froebelian principles for the 21st Century, as showcased in this research. Our presentation which focused on the central importance of play, child and family agency within marginalised communities and methodologies that enable voices to be heard, constituted cross-cutting themes of the conference.

The European Early Childhood Education Research (EECERA) conference took place in Portugal in August 2023 and attracted in excess of 1,000 research participants. At this conference, the project team disseminated learning within a self-organised symposium. International colleagues/researchers from countries including Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and Canada explored findings from the study and considered play in the lives of children in urban areas, the role of play in fostering community and the ways in which tacit knowledge is materialised and heard in policy.

National Conferences

The Child in the City conference attracts an international cohort of those interested in strengthening the position of children in cities. The organisation/group is strong in promoting and protecting children's rights and giving a platform for the exchange of research results and good practices directed at the creation of child-friendly cities. In October (5-7) 2022, members of the Froebel-funded project team presented and discussed the topic 'Engaging with communities through a Jungk's Future Workshop Methodology: A Froebelian way of listening.'

At a national level, the project team presented findings from the project at the Children's Research Network (27th October 2023), which focuses on 'Children's voices in research'.

We also presented at the OMEP Conference in Limerick (11th November 2023), which explored the theme of sustainability.

At the Children's Research Network Annual conference in University College Dublin on 6th December 2023, the research team presented on, 'The Impact of policies, processes and practice on children and young people on the island of Ireland.'

The value of presenting at these national conferences is that they both attract a very broad audience of academics, researchers and practitioners/educators and offer significant opportunities for networking and discussion. We believe that learning from the project

highlights that children and families can share perspectives on play when the context and conditions are favourable and respectful.

Finally, and as a result of the participative and inclusive nature of the method used in our Froebel-funded project, we were invited to present to members of universities attached to the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) (<https://www.eciu.eu/>). The presentation resulted in a member of our research team who is engaged in ECIU to make a successful bid for Erasmus + project that aims to provide training on FW for researchers to support more participative and inclusive research.

Book chapter

McCormack, M., Silke, A., Kearns, A., O'Toole, L., Stafford, P., Stokes, T., & Urban, M. (2023). Pedagogies of hope. Exploring play opportunities for young children in an urban environment. In T. Bruce, Y. Nishida, S. Powell, H. Wasmuth, & J. Whinnett (Eds.), *Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel*. London: Bloomsbury.

Drawing on the Froebel-funded project, this invited book chapter makes a case for the continued relevance of play in the lives of children, their families and communities in the 21st century.

Project Reports: 'Playing on the Edge'

Children, parents/families and educators in two early childhood settings in North Dublin participated as partners in this research project. A commitment was made at the outset of the project to share findings with the group in a way that was meaningful and reflective of their contribution to the process. Consequently, two reports were developed 'Playing on the Edge' which were presented through the voices, images and drawings of children and their families. The reports became the property of the settings and a tool for activism in advocating for improved public play provision and possibilities in the North Dublin area.

10) Future plans.

Plans are currently in progress/discussion for three Journal articles:

- a. Following on from the presentation in EECERA, the team is planning an article on the theme of children's voice and participation, which will be aimed at the EECERA Journal. This article will focus on play requirements in urban neighbourhoods from the perspectives of children and families.
- b. Key learning from the project relates to the Future Workshop method which was used to work with young children and their families. Through our project, this method has been adapted to suit research engagement with very young children and families who are marginalised. A second journal article, focussing on the development of the Future Workshop method will be of particular interest to those who wish to pursue ethical and truly participative research. This article will be aimed at the International Journal of Qualitative Methods or similar.

- c. A Literature Review on Play, which will draw links between Froebel principles and current context of play in the 21st century. The article will re-confirm the relevance of Froebelian play and this will be aimed at the International Journal of Play.

Project summary

The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity to children and families living in urban Dublin to influence and shape play provision in their localities. Adopting a right-based position, informed by the UNCRC (1989), the research team produced an evidence-based report which captured re-envisioned play spaces for their communities. This report was intended as a resource which participants could use to express views to key stakeholders and policy makers.

The project adopted a participatory, collaborative approach using the Future Workshop Model (Müllert & Jungk, 1987). Principally, the project sought to conduct a critical, participatory investigation into the conditions and opportunities of play experienced by young children growing up in urban areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Towards this end, we provided a space for early childhood educators and families to engage in meaningful dialogue about the value, importance, and reality of play in the lives of young children. Out of this grew a compelling vision for future play provision within their urban environments. Finally, the team aspired towards documenting an exemplar collaboration that works with children and adults, can inform the wider early childhood community, influences policy whilst simultaneously highlights the relevance of Froebelian principles within the Irish early childhood context.

Key Findings

Participation and the active involvement of families is critical to the process of designing and re-designing play spaces, which are regularly used and with which they are familiar. By creating authentic opportunities for active participation in matters that have a direct impact, parents and young children can advocate effectively for play spaces that are fit-for-purpose.

The transformation of park life, the reclamation of natural spaces in the city centre and the creation of new park rangers/play officers' posts could provide the prospect of safer and cleaner play opportunities.

Other unintended benefits emerged from the project. For example, participants identified that communal play spaces develop a stronger sense of community. From a curriculum perspective, play provision brings potential for global citizenship education and compliments themes such as care for self, animals and the local environment.

Finally, listening to the voices of very young children, on the matter of play and recreation has the potential to turn hopes into a reality.

Next Steps

- Further disseminate the findings from the research
- Develop the literature review into an accessible document for the early childhood sector

- Develop an article on exploring and advancing the application of the Future Workshop with young children
- Develop an article which specifically examines the findings through the lens of the Froebelian principles.
- Further engagement with the settings
- Contact relevant policy makers and mediate the key findings with an offer to collaborate, advise and inform future play provision within the city.

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