

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FROEBEL YOUNG VOICES ON COVID PROJECT

March 2021

FINAL REPORT TO THE FROEBEL TRUST



REPORT PREPARED BY
THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants in this project, including our partner organisations, their dedicated practitioners and amazing children and families who have contributed to this study during one of the most difficult times imaginable. Their professionalism, generosity, compassion, dedication and good humour has been both inspiring and humbling. In particular we would like to acknowledge the contribution of the communities of practice at:

- Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre, England.
- Auckland Kindergarten Association, New Zealand;
- Birdwood Kindergarten, New Zealand;
- Cowgate Nursery and Family Centre, Scotland;
- Greengables Nursery School, Scotland;
- Centre for Research in Early Childhood, England.

We have each learnt a lot about ourselves and each other during this project, and got closer to the children and families who have been our collaborators. We have also developed our skills at listening more carefully and dialoguing about how we can work together in the spirit of collaborative and appreciative inquiry to better support young children and their families through this very difficult time. It has been an enormous privilege to share this journey together.

We should also thank the Froebel Trust who have generously funded this work and for the support of Dr Sacha Powell, Chief Executive Officer of the Trust who has guided and advised us throughout the project.

Finally we should pay tribute to Sally Cave, Anne Denham, Lynn McNair, Catriona Gill, Helen Lyndon and Sue Bennett who have not only been collaborators in the project work undertaken at the study sites but also critical friends throughout this journey. They have ensured we kept on track and that the voices of all those children, parents and practitioners who have given their time and wisdom were carefully and respectfully listened to and heard.

Professor Chris Pascal and Professor Tony Bertram
March 2021

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Background

What's it been like to be a young child living through the last 12 months of a global pandemic? What do they know and understand about the threat of the coronavirus? How have they experienced the restrictions on their daily life? What and who have they missed? What have they enjoyed about being largely home bound and spending a lot more time with their families? How do they feel about these changes to their life? What's been good and what's been difficult for them? Are they able to express their feelings and who has been listening?

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed multiple challenges across all areas of society and human life but there are particular and additional ones for young children growing up in the modern world. Listening to the experiences and perspectives of young children on the pandemic is important in sustaining a society, which aims to be inclusive and to value the right for all to be heard. Yet all too often the voices of young children are excluded from consideration. Children have powerful narratives about how they have been affected by lockdowns and the subsequent opening up of public spaces and places, and we believe that this deserves serious consideration by practitioners and policy makers. Giving these young children the opportunity to express and document their lived experiences can enable them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life.

This report presents the evidence from a study of how early years practitioners in England, Scotland and New Zealand have used a Froebelian approach to storytelling in their pedagogy to encourage young children to explore their COVID experiences through their play. This study reveals a great deal about the children's resilience, creativity and wisdom as they have navigated the last twelve months. The study also shows how early years practitioners and families have supported the children through these experiences, building deeper and more connected relationships and adapting daily routines to enable the children to manage the radical changes to daily life. There is much in these reported COVID-19 narratives to stimulate further thinking and action by parents and carers, practitioners and policymakers as societies round the world develop their responses to this shared global crisis. Children have become our teachers in this shared story.

Project Aims

Our aims in this project were:

- to support children (aged 3-4 years) to express their narratives about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- to document Froebel pedagogic storytelling strategies and their capacity to promote children's reflection on their lived experiences over the course of the pandemic crisis;
- to explore the power of storytelling within a Froebelian pedagogy to promote children's social and emotional health and contain COVID-19 fears and anxieties;
- to promote children as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives, ensuring that children are valued, listened to and nurtured.

We believe this project has provided a unique opportunity for the Froebelian and wider early childhood community in three countries to explore the contemporary power and purpose of storytelling as a key element of Froebelian practice; and to disseminate this learning to a world community which has been devastated by the pandemic.

Methodology

This project was carried out in four different Froebelian early years settings; one in England, two in Scotland and one in New Zealand. Each setting is working within less advantaged communities which have experienced COVID-19 at very different levels of intensity and with different national and local responses to the virus. This context allowed us to explore how wider societal responses have shaped children's lived experiences. Practitioners in each setting were also operating at a different stage in their experience and adoption of the Froebelian pedagogy but all were trained in a Froebelian approach to storytelling and in action research methodologies at the onset of the project. The children's play narratives were curated by the practitioner and link researcher working collaboratively to select those where COVID-19 experiences were central to the child's attention. These narratives were then subject to analysis that revealed common themes and issues, which can be addressed, and highlighted the shared concerns and responses of children to COVID-19 from different cultural contexts. We also documented how the Froebelian approach to storytelling in play was implemented in the four different contexts to support young children's social and emotional health and the impact of this on children's wellbeing. In total we gathered detailed play sequences from 43 children from three to four years of age. In this way 295 play narratives were generated through this project. Alongside the play narratives, a series of parent/carer and practitioner reflective dialogues were conducted in which the adults close to the children were encouraged to think about the children's play. These adult dialogues explored how the play reflected the daily experiences at home and what they might do to better support children's social and emotional wellbeing at this time.

Key Findings

This programme of work has generated a wealth of new knowledge about the COVID-19 experiences of young children and their families and the power of storytelling as a key element in Froebelian pedagogic practice. This learning is now being disseminated at both policy and practice level locally, nationally and internationally, ensuring the project has legacy and impact. Major findings from each of the project participants are set out below.

Children's COVID-19 Narratives

Children are very capable of reflecting deeply on their experiences and analysis suggests six dominant narrative themes in their reflections: transitions and settling; children's friendships; children's silences and expressions of resilience; the need to play; the importance of outdoors; and children's COVID wisdom. The project reveals that children in all three countries are expressing a desire to:

- Regain their daily life and routines
- Be with their friends
- Have extended time to play

- Be outdoors
- Have authentic information

Parents' COVID-19 Narratives

The experience of parents and families in the project was clearly nuanced and individual, affected by each country's COVID-19 policies in relation to the stage of the pandemic spread or retreat, but also according to a family's particular circumstances. All families in the study had faced challenges in adjusting to the crisis and were happy to share these with us, but many also saw positives in the experiences they were sharing.

The challenges include: worries about infection and vaccine; lack of extended family contact, especially with grandparents; social isolation of selves and child; worries about the impact on children's progress; pressures of home schooling; home routine disruption; stress on home relationships; and worries about jobs, finance and housing.

However, most parents also acknowledged a range of benefits from the pandemic which included: more time together as a family; slower pace of life; appreciation of nature and seasons; strengthened relationships between parents and siblings; open dialogues about virus risk and crisis; and an optimistic view of the future.

Practitioners' COVID-19 Narratives

The study practitioners had all been trained in Froebelian storytelling approaches and in action research methodologies, including pedagogic documentation and analysis. They were encouraged to document the pedagogic strategies they used to support children's storytelling about COVID-19. Many of these storytelling strategies were not new but were employed specifically or more frequently to encourage the children to explore their COVID-19 experiences, thoughts and feelings through the introduction of materials and resources. Other strategies were new to the practitioners and the children, as they created and innovated within their practice to extend and deepen their existing pedagogy. Each of these strategies could be employed indoors or outdoors. Some techniques were deemed to be more successful than others but practitioners revealed an openness to experiment and try out new ideas being determined to offer children a rich range of options and opportunities to express and share their own COVID-19 stories. Some of these storytelling strategies include: sustained shared conversations; TV screen and news; role play; picture/photo prompts; puppets/Persona Dolls; singing and music making; craft work and modelling; drawing and painting; mind mapping; book sharing; and story squares.

The practitioners also reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on children and suggested that attendance at nursery had, interestingly, largely improved since the pandemic hit. They also indicated a growing awareness that the behaviour of children had also changed once they returned to nursery, with social interaction, sharing, and operating in larger groups harder for some children.

The impact of being part of the Froebel COVID-19 project on the practitioners at this challenging time was also documented and revealed that many practitioners do have anxieties about the risk to their own health and that they could potentially transmit the virus to their own families. However, their

professionalism and dedication has meant that they have continued to come to work, unless they have tested positive, and have put the wellbeing of the children and families first: a huge tribute to their strength and deep commitment to their work and the leadership within each of the study sites. They also report significant shifts in their professional expertise and confidence, particularly in relation to having a deeper understanding of a Froebelian approach; a reinforced understanding of the importance of outdoors and the natural world; being able to lead deepening and more equitable relationships with the children and their families, and an excitement about being a practitioner researcher and part of a community of practice.

Legacy Learning and Next Steps

The project has had a significant impact on all participants, as evidenced above, and we believe has secured a strong legacy in all four study sites, which will feed future development and collaborations.

In summary, the project has flagged:

- The need to slow down, listen more to children, parents and each other.
- The benefits of action research for the triad of parent, child, practitioner learning together with no preconceived agenda.
- The shift to more email and phone contact with parents that has strengthened relationships and made them more equitable as all parents get the same offer.
- The value of posting information and news about the nursery activity on social media. Parents have been very appreciative of staff reading stories that they can then share at home and all the practical activities shared with parents.
- The real value of home visiting.
- The value of starting sessions outside and then opening up inside rather than the other way around has had a positive impact on children. Settling children outside has been extremely positive.
- Having virtual meetings with professionals, such as child protection teams, which has meant far less time out of nursery for staff as there is no travel time.
- The slower pace of life and re-prioritising of what is important which has benefited many.

We feel this project offers a challenge to all of us to respond actively and authentically to what the children are saying (and to their silences) – and echoing Froebel, this will be a test of our judgement and feelings too. We believe that the knowledge generated has real value for many stakeholders in the sector. We have already made good progress to realise our mission to better support young children to express their narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and through this to promote their social and emotional health and contain their COVID-19 fears and anxieties. We have also learned a lot about how to use storytelling strategies within a Froebel pedagogic approach to ensure children feel themselves as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives. In short, collectively we are taking great care to value, listen to and nurture these young children well during this devastating time. We hope our experiences can reach out to others to do the same for their children.