



Curriculum making with young children

A Froebel Trust early childhood research highlight by Dr Liz Chesworth



Froebelian principles

This research highlight considers ways of building a curriculum with young children. It makes links between research & practice in Froebelian education today.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood. **The principles** of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern early childhood education.

A Froebelian approach to education reflects the wholeness of Froebel's ideas and brings together all the principles of his work. This research highlight makes particular connection to four of the principles:

- **Unity and connectedness**
 - Autonomous learners
 - The value of childhood in its own right
- **Relationships matter**
 - Creativity and the power of symbols
- **The central importance of play**
 - Engaging with nature
- **Knowledgeable and nurturing educators**

This is an interactive document

Click on the **highlighted** links to access references and further information.



Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

What is curriculum?

What comes to mind when you think about 'curriculum'? The content and characteristics of the curriculum are influenced by different views about what is right for children's learning and development. So, who should decide what, and how, children learn?

Research that explores social and cultural contexts for learning highlights the importance of relationships in the curriculum. When educators build the curriculum with children and families, national learning goals can be embedded into experiences that are meaningful for children. This means that many people play a role in building a curriculum.

A relationships approach to curriculum making has much in common with Froebel's ideas:

Curriculum is 'built around a relational pedagogy formed from in-depth knowledge of children and families' ¹

← Insights from contemporary research

Froebel's emphasis →

Froebel believed that educational experiences should be 'in close and living relationship with people's lives' ²

How can a relationships approach inform curriculum making?

Respectful and responsive relationships are at the heart of curriculum making. Educators recognise and respond to children's experiences and interests. They use their professional knowledge to create a curriculum that has meaning and relevance for children in their settings. This dynamic process involves:

- Being attuned
- Being responsive
- Building connections
- Being inclusive



Being attuned

Contemporary research supports the value that Froebel placed upon careful observation of play.³ Observation is the starting point for building a curriculum in response to children's ideas and interests.

- Observing children's play involves far more than looking for evidence of a particular skill or knowledge.⁴
- Children use the languages of play, creativity, movement and gesture to make sense of their worlds, explore their interests and represent their thinking. Sensitive observation enables educators to recognise and value children's many forms of expression.⁵
- Listening to and watching these diverse forms of expression helps educators to tune in to the ideas and interests⁶ that children are exploring in their play and interactions.

Being responsive

A responsive curriculum is built on holistic observation, careful reflection and dialogue.⁷ Taking children's interests seriously helps educators to recognise and respond to children as capable learners and curriculum makers. This involves working out what might motivate children to play with particular objects, activities or materials.

- Evidence shows that valuing the 'Funds of Knowledge'⁸ that all children bring from their homes can enable educators to gain a deeper understanding of their interests.⁹
- Funds of knowledge encapsulate the knowledge, skills and values that children develop through their life experiences with their families and friends.¹⁰
- A funds of knowledge approach enables educators, children and families to co-create a curriculum that connects with diverse family contexts and has personal meaning for children.¹¹

There are clear links between this approach and Froebelian practice. Froebel believed that 'The early years setting should be closely connected with the life of the home, family, culture and local community'.¹²



Making connections

- Curriculum making happens through moment by moment interactions as well as through planned opportunities for children to make **connections between new and familiar experiences.** ¹⁴
- Children need time and space to revisit and extend their interests and investigations. Exploring, reviewing and consolidating ideas leads to **deeper knowledge and understanding.** ¹⁵
- Knowledgeable, nurturing adults sustain children's interests by supporting their thinking, introducing new information and guiding them in **making connections.** ¹⁶



‘Making connections between what is new and what is known is a powerful aspect of learning’ ¹³

(Helen Tovey, 2017)

Being inclusive

Working together and valuing everyone's contribution helps to build an inclusive curriculum.

- Close partnership with families helps educators to recognise and build upon the connections¹⁷ that children are making in their play.
- Sharing and reflecting upon observations with children, parents and caregivers helps educators to understand children's interests in relation to children's diverse experiences of family life.¹⁸
- Looking for specific signs of developmental progress risks missing so much else that a child knows, can do, or is eager to explore. A holistic approach¹⁹ to observation makes it more likely that every child's capabilities and interests will be recognised and valued.²⁰



Bringing the curriculum to life

Educational research focusing on social and cultural contexts demonstrates how Froebel's ideas about connectedness can inform meaningful curriculum making. The research discussed in this highlight provides insights into how curriculum can be an ongoing, dynamic process. Children and adults build the curriculum together through play, interactions and shared enquiry.





Reflecting on curriculum

Think back to your initial response to the question 'what is curriculum?' In what ways has your response been confirmed, changed or modified as a result of reading this?

In what ways has reading this informed your ideas about relationships in curriculum making?

What insights from this research highlight could you use to develop curriculum making in your setting?

References and further reading

- 1** Hedges, H. & Cooper, M. (2018) Relational play-based pedagogy: theorising a core practice in early childhood education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4): 369–383, DOI: [10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564](https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564)
- 2** Lilley, I.M. (1967) Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.168
- 3** Louis, S. (2022) Observing Young Children, The Froebel Trust. Available online: https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT_Observing-young-children_Pamphlet_INTERACTIVE_REV-2.pdf
- 4** Flewitt, R. and Cowan, K. (2019) Valuing Young Children's Signs of Learning: Observation and Digital Documentation of Play in Early Years Classrooms. Final report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Froebel-Trust-Final-Report-Cowan-and-Flewitt-Valuing-Young-Childrens-Signs-of-Learning.pdf>
- 5** Cowan, K. & Flewitt, R. (2021) Moving from paper-based to digital documentation in Early Childhood Education: Democratic potentials and challenges. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2021.2013171](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.2013171)
- 6** Chesworth, E., Wood, E. and Folorunsho, A. (2022) Understanding practitioners' curriculum decision-making to support complexity in children's play in a multi-diverse pre-school setting. Final report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Final-Report-Froebel-Trust-Chesworth-et-al-2022-Practitioners-Curriculum-Decision-Making-Final-Report.pdf>
- 7** Chesworth, E., Wood, E. and Folorunsho, A. (2022) Understanding practitioners' curriculum decision-making to support complexity in children's play in a multi-diverse pre-school setting. Final report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Final-Report-Froebel-Trust-Chesworth-et-al-2022-Practitioners-Curriculum-Decision-Making-Final-Report.pdf>
- 8** González, N. Moll, L. C. & Amanti, C. (2005) Funds of Knowledge. Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms, London: Routledge.
- 9** Hedges, H. & Cooper, M. (2018) Relational play-based pedagogy: theorising a core practice in early childhood education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4): 369–383, DOI: [10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564](https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564)
- 10** Chesworth, L. (2016) A funds of knowledge approach to examining play interests: listening to children's and parents' perspectives. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(3): 294–308, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2016.1188370](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2016.1188370).
- 11** Hedges, H. (2021) The place of interests, agency and imagination in funds of identity theory. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 28(2): 111–124, DOI: [10.1080/10749039.2020.1833931](https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2020.1833931)
- 12** Tovey, H. (2017) Bringing the Froebel Approach to your early years practice (2nd edition). Abingdon: Routledge. p.126
- 13** Tovey, H. (2017) Bringing the Froebel Approach to your early years practice (2nd edition). Abingdon: Routledge. p.126
- 14** Wood, E. & Hedges, H. (2016). Curriculum in early childhood education: Critical questions about content, coherence, and control. *The Curriculum Journal*, 27(3): 387–405. DOI: [10.1080/09585176.2015.1129981](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2015.1129981)
- 15** Davis, K. & Peters, S. (2011). Moments of wonder, everyday events: Children's working theories in action. Teaching Learning Research Initiative Final Report. Available online: http://www.tlri.org.nz/sites/default/files/projects/9266_%20davis-summaryreport.pdf
- 16** Hedges, H. & Cooper, M. (2018) Relational play-based pedagogy: theorising a core practice in early childhood education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4): 369–383, DOI: [10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564](https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564)
- 17** Chesworth, L. (2016) A funds of knowledge approach to examining play interests: listening to children's and parents' perspectives. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(3): 294–308, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2016.1188370](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2016.1188370).
- 18** Chesworth, E., Wood, E. and Folorunsho, A. (2022) Understanding practitioners' curriculum decision-making to support complexity in children's play in a multi-diverse pre-school setting. Final report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Final-Report-Froebel-Trust-Chesworth-et-al-2022-Practitioners-Curriculum-Decision-Making-Final-Report.pdf>
- 19** McNair, L. (2019) Telling Life Stories: developing a Froebelian approach to documenting children's experiences in the early years. Summary report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Froebel-Trust-Grant-Summary-Report-Lynn-McNair-2019.pdf>
- 20** Hoskins, K. and Smedley, S. (2018) Enacting Froebelian principles in practice. Final report: The Froebel Trust. Available online: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Froebel-Trust-Final-Research-Report-Hoskins-2018.pdf>

Further reading

Chesworth, L. (2019) Theorising young children's interests: Making connections and in-the-moment happenings. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*. DOI: [10.1016/j.lcsi.2018.11.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2018.11.010).

Hedges, H. (2022) Children's Interests, Inquiries and Identities: Curriculum, pedagogy, learning and outcomes in the early years, Abingdon: Routledge

Hoskins, K & Smedley, S. (2019) Protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice: Exploring the importance of learning through play. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(2): 73–87. DOI: [10.1177/1476718X18809114](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X18809114)

The author

Dr Liz Chesworth is Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at University of Sheffield.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Sue Robson
– Series Editor

Other titles available in the research highlight series

Froebel Trust resources are designed to support educators and all those who work with and care for babies and young children. All our publications are free to download from our website at froebel.org.uk



The Froebel Trust funds research into children's learning from birth to eight years and champions early childhood education.

Find out more about our work at froebel.org.uk

Froebel Trust

Clarence Lodge
Clarence Lane
Roehampton
London SW15 5JW

w: froebel.org.uk

t: 020 8878 7546

e: office@froebeltrust.org.uk

Twitter @FroebelTrust

Facebook TheFroebelTrust

Instagram @FroebelTrustUK

LinkedIn linkedin.com/company/the-froebel-trust

This research highlight was first published by the Froebel Trust in September 2022.

ISBN: 978-1-9162822-4-7

