Froebelian Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care: Project Report

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Table of Contents

01 Table of Contents

02 Acknowledgments

03 Executive Summary

06 Introduction

07 Our Research

09 Findings

23 Conclusion

25 References

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We are also, of course, hugely grateful to all the wonderful Froebel-inspired leaders from around the world who participated in this research. It has been such a fantastic experience because of the passionate and inspiring conversations we have had through interviews and workshops. We hope that the participation in these conversations will be ongoing – that this report represents a chance to pause and reflect together, rather than the ending of our shared reflections.

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the project 'Froebelian Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)', which has sought to understand ECEC leadership through a Froebelian lens. Through the research, we have asked what it might mean to be a Froebelian leader in ECEC, how this has emerged and developed over the history of the Froebelian approach, and what it looks like in today's world across cultural contexts.

Conceptualisations of leadership in ECEC are under-developed and often over-informed by school-based and business models of leadership. In order to invest in effective leadership development in the sector, it is necessary to develop richer understandings of leadership with young children and their families at the centre. Froebel's legacy is a potentially helpful tool in enriching these conceptualisations because Froebelian principles and practices have been and continue to be a rich resource for those working in ECEC.

To understand more about what it means to be a Froebelian leader in today's world, we carried out three strands of research. First, we completed a literature review that brought together analysis of Froebel's own writings, archival sources and relevant academic literature. Second, we gathered reflections from 40 contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders around the world through 39 interviews and one written reflection. Finally, we brought together 28 participants in three global online workshops designed to reflect deeply on some of the strands emerging from analysis of the interviews.

This report presents four findings about the nature of Froebelian leadership that emerges across the three strands of research. These findings are held together by a Froebelian commitment to centring children and families in daily practice. In previous interim reports, we have offered more details on the findings from each strand, but in this report, we spotlight the findings that resonate the most across the different strands as described below:

Froebelian leaders focus on building and sustaining communities.

Froebelian leaders tend to emphasise community in and around the settings they lead. They generate a sense of community by committing time and energy to nurturing warm and strong relationships among children, colleagues, families and the community at large.

Froebelian leaders courageously navigate the ECEC landscape with the support of one another.

Froebelian leaders fight to keep young children and families at the centre of ECEC. They are adept at challenging and pushing back against dominant forces that have a negative impact on young children, such as the school-readiness agenda and assessment-driven practice, in a mainstream educational context. Working together and learning from each other, they navigate these pressures through creative adaptation and negotiation.

Froebelian leaders are constantly learning, adapting and responding to context.

Froebelian leaders remain true to their core principles such as keeping the child at the centre, valuing children as they are in the present, and seeing everything as connected. However, rather than being dogmatic or niche in practising these principles, leadership is constantly enriched and developed through an open mindset and a willingness to learn. When we look at leaders today and in the past they share an eagerness to adapt practice in response to the specific cultural context of their work.

Froebelian leaders are propelled by the principle of connectedness.

Connectedness is a powerful Froebelian principle that continues to inspire leaders, who take seriously the need for education to stimulate a deep connectedness with ourselves, with others and with nature. In day-to-day practice, this manifests as leaders emphasising slowing down, prioritising learning in and through nature, and cultivating awe and wonder.

We offer these findings as a starting point for ongoing discussion and debate. They are not intended as a comprehensive or exhaustive list of characteristics for Froebelian leadership. We hope that these pointers are a way for those who identify as Froebelian leaders to start reflective conversations with themselves and each other, so that they can continue to develop dialogical, relevant and useful understandings of their own leadership. Rather than seeing this as a rigid model of leadership to be followed, the threads we present here are a prompt for leaders to explore and potentially improve their leadership practices in context-specific ways. We hope leaders reflect on the ideas shared, incorporate the threads that resonate, and put aside those that do not.

Given this intention, these findings are relevant to individual Froebelian-inspired leaders around the world, other leaders in ECEC who may be interested in a Froebelian approach to leadership, and Froebelian learning communities and organisations who may wish to develop programmes of support specifically aimed at leadership.

Introduction

The project 'Froebelian Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care' has sought to enhance our understanding of leadership in early childhood education and contribute towards an inspiring vision of sector-specific leadership, inspired by a lively and critical engagement with Froebelian principles and practice.

Increasingly, international research in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has focused on the significance of leadership for supporting high-quality provision and strong outcomes for young children and their families (e.g. Douglass, 2019; Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019). Intensive leadership development programmes have been shown to impact positively on learning interactions in ECEC settings and children's learning and development over time (e.g. Arbour et al., 2016; Douglass, 2019; Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019).

However, while the attention on leadership in ECEC has grown, there are still only emergent understandings of how leadership in ECEC is different to leadership in other sectors, including later stages of education. Models of leadership in ECEC continue to be overly dominated by conceptualisations of school-based leadership, as well as entrepreneurialism as a result of large proportions of ECEC delivered through private business (Nicholson et al., 2020). In order to invest wisely in leadership development, we need ECEC-specific conceptualisations of leadership that resonate for those working in the sector and put young children and their families at the centre of what it means to lead (O'Sullivan & Sakr, 2022).

Drawing inspiration from previous research that has sparked reflective dialogues around Froebelian principles with contemporary communities (e.g. Carlsen & Clark, 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021), this project has sought to establish and sustain collaborative reflections on the nature of leadership in ECEC and the intersections with Froebelian principles and practice. Following a brief summary of the three strands of research included in the project, the report presents findings that emerge from across the strands.

Previous interim reports (all available on **www.froebelianleadership.co.uk**) have presented findings in detail from individual strands. Rather than repeat this detail here, we have attempted to bring our findings together and offer a holistic conceptualisation of Froebelian leadership. We explore all three strands of the project in this report to generate conversation and prompt further exploration. The findings offered in this report are therefore not intended to be conclusive or exhaustive, but are instead intended as an invitation for ongoing discussion.

Our Research

Methodological approach

Across the three strands of research, we have adopted a pragmatist approach with the aim of developing findings that are useful and relevant to the contemporary ECEC sector. Therefore, we have prioritized reflective dialogues among professionals as the main way to gather insights. Even when the research has not involved dialogues with participants (e.g. the literature review), we have sought to use it as a way to spark dialogues. With the emphasis on dialogues, we present our findings as collaborative conceptualisations of Froebelian leadership that emerge from across the sector.

Strand 1: Literature Review

The first strand of research involved a review of three bodies of literature: 1) Froebel's own writing; 2) archival materials featuring accounts of Froebelian leadership in action over the last 150 years and 3) relevant academic literature published in the last 30 years, including 45 peer reviewed journal articles that were found by searching the word 'Froebel' in our institution's library as well as 5 recommendations from the advisory panel. With the supportive engagement of a review advisory panel, we developed insights into what it might mean to be a Froebelian leader in ECEC according to these sources.

Strand 2: Interviews

39 individuals participated in the interviews strand of our project, and one participant supplied a written response to our interview questions; a total of 40 leaders participated in the study. We aimed to recruit participants from around the world and our final sample included 18 participants in the **UK**, 8 participants in **New Zealand**, 3 participants in the **USA**, 2 participants in **India**, 2 participants in **China**, 1 participant in **Taiwan**, 1 participant in **Ireland**, 1 participant in **Germany**, 1 participant in **Ghana**, 1 participant in **Nigeria**, 1 participant in **Australia** and 1 participant in **Chile**. Participants carried

out a range of leadership roles including head teachers, nursery managers, head of operations for a nursery group, pedagogical advisors, community leaders and academics. A more detailed breakdown can be found on the interviews strand report. All interviews were conducted online and lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. We asked the following questions:

- Tell me a bit about your work as an early years leader. It would be great to know more about the context in which you lead.
- How would you describe your leadership?
- Can you tell me about the place of Froebel in your practice?
- Is Froebel important in how you lead?
- What do you see as the future of Froebelian leadership?
- Is there anything you'd like to share that I haven't asked about?

Following transcription, we carried out an inductive thematic analysis, which was collaborative and iterative.

Strand 3: Workshops

In April 2024, we hosted three global, online workshops to discuss Froebelian leadership and some of the emerging threads from the analysis of the interviews. 28 individuals took part in the workshops, which were held at three different times to encourage as many people from around the world to participate as possible. We had leaders joining us from **South Africa, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England**. Each discussion was unique, though we used three prompts to provoke dialogue which were:

- Does Froebel's legacy give us the courage to lead in accordance with our values?
- What are the resonances between Froebel-inspired visions of leadership and other cultures, movements, and traditions?
- Are Froebel-inspired visions of leadership a colonial imposition on other parts of the world?

To build confidence and authenticity in the dialogue, we chose not to record the workshops. One of the facilitators was a dedicated note-taker. The two other facilitators chaired the discussion, with an emphasis on 'holding the silence' and thereby giving others an opportunity to share what was most important to them.

Findings

In this report, we bring together our findings from across the strands. We attempt to elucidate the recurrent themes presented through stories and accounts from the literature review, quotes from the interviews, and points taken from the workshops. More detailed findings from each of the strands can be found in our interim reports (all available on **www.froebelianleadership.co.uk**). At the heart of the threads we present below is a commitment to crafting an ECEC experience that centres young children and their families.

The four threads we present are:

- Froebelian leaders focus on building and sustaining communities
- Froebelian leaders courageously navigate the ECEC landscape with the support of one another
- Froebelian leaders are constantly learning, adapting and responding to context
- Froebelian leaders are propelled by the principle of connectedness

Froebelian leaders focus on building and sustaining communities

Across the strands of our research, it was apparent that Froebelian leaders are community leaders. That is, they focus on building community that uplifts young children by drawing people together, supporting them to work together and appreciating everyone. Froebelian leaders radiate light and warmth, strengthening relationships with professionals, families and children.

In the literature review, the archival sources emphasised warmth and human connection as fundamental elements of leadership. The women leaders in the archival research were warm, present and connected, championing a child-centred approach in everything they did. They positioned themselves at the heart of a community, or multiple intersecting communities, involving children, families, student-professionals and professionals.

Pictured above: An image of Caroline Garrison Bishop surrounded by children at her kindergarten.

This picture was discovered on the website Connecting Histories, which hosted a project ran by Birmingham City Archives between 2005 and 2007. It aimed to increase access to archival collections. The image was shared with Connecting Histories courtesy of Birmingham Archives and Heritage.

Caroline Garrison Bishop (1846-1929) was the principal of Edgbaston Froebel College in Birmingham. Her memoirs, gathered by Emily Last, remember her as a warm presence deeply connected to others: a 'presence round about, a person seen every morning, and a personality felt every minute.' (p. xi, foreword of the memoir from Mr Maurice Jacks, Headmaster of Mill Hill School).

Garrison Bishop was said to demonstrate the concept of Wohnstubenkraft, which is roughly translated as 'the power of the home' (p. xiii). Froebelian-inspired leaders have traditionally created a strong sense of home and community in the settings they lead. Emily Last, who collates the memoir for Garrison Bishop describes how:

'Miss Bishop's touch was felt in every department; besides being in direct contact with the children, students and household workers she ordered the meals and studied the separate needs of the members of her large household' (p. 66).

A student training under Garrison Bishop describes how the institution felt like a home and a family:

'In our year we were wont, laughingly, to call ourselves "the family", to talk of "coming home" to College, and surely we were not far wrong - for many of the elements of home life were there. We were bound together by a common tie, each had her sphere, her work to be done for the common good, and, above all, we were united in affection, in veneration for the "mother-spirit" of the place. How many

of us have been to her [Garrison Bishop] with pleasures that grew brighter for her sympathy, with difficulties which her insight went far to solve, with joys that came back to our hearts more precious for her reverend handling, with troubles which she helped us to find strength to bear. She took us all, younger and older, a jumble lot, many of us much cumbered with cares of self, and showed us the deeper things of life' (p. 71-72).

Impressions of Dorothea Spinney, a student at Edgbaston, evoke similar feelings of warmth:

'When "Harborne Road*" is mentioned in my mind's eye there is a sun with big rays, it is just appearing above the horizon – such a sun as a child draws with chalks – then comes warmth, light, growing things, a gentle buzz and stir in my ears and within a contentment' (p. 75).

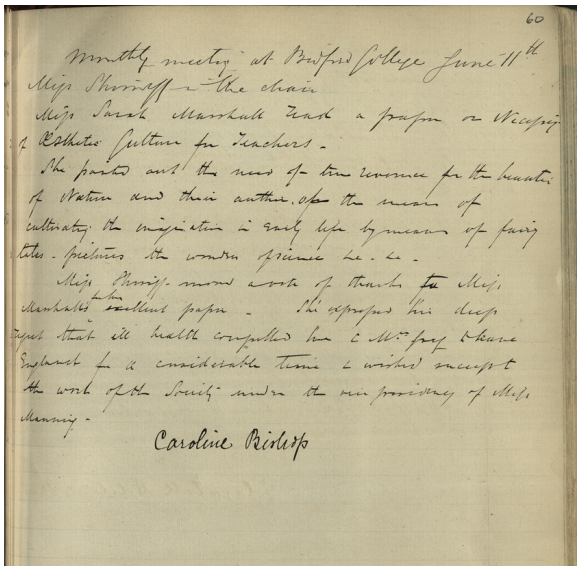
In these quotes, Caroline Garrison Bishop is presented as the centre of a many-layered sphere of education and development. Concentric layers of children, students and colleagues surround her: 'The children formed the central rings around Miss Bishop and the students the outside ones' (p.71).

Children's education and the development of the workforce are portrayed as parts of a whole. These interwoven communities are nurtured by the leader and given opportunities for progress and self-development.

*Harborne Road refers to the institute of which Caroline Garrison Bishop was principal in Edgbaston, Birmingham.

Pictured below: Caroline Bishop signed the minutes of a Froebel Society meeting in June 1878.

National Froebel Foundation Archive, Foyle Special Collections and Archives, University of Roehampton.


60

Monthly meeting at Bedford College June 11th
Miss Shirreff in the chair
Miss Sarah Marshall read a paper on Necessity of Rhythmic Culture for Teachers.
She pointed out the need of true reverence for the beauties of Nature and their author, of the means of cultivating the imagination in early life by means of fairy tales - pictures the wonders of science &c. &c.
Miss Shirreff moved a vote of thanks to Miss Marshall for her excellent paper. She expressed his deep regret that ill health compelled him & Mrs Frey to leave England for a considerable time & wished success to the work of the Society under the vice presidency of Miss Manning.
Caroline Bishop

The emphasis on community that emerges through the archival sources was echoed in our interviews with contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders. They described creating and sustaining communities through warm and sensitive relationships as a vital facet of their leadership.

'It's not really about managing people. It's about leading them and bringing them on that journey of distributed leadership. Even children as leaders...When you're thinking about leadership of change, it's not just us, it's the whole system. So it's the senior leaders, it's the early years practitioners, it's the assistants, it's the children, everybody has a leadership role.'
Community leader/pedagogue in Scotland

'In my heritage and many other cultures, we have this idea that it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to lead a village. So I'm very relational and really see value in maintaining those relationships in order to move into different directions together. I actually enjoy sharing leadership responsibilities with others. There's something to be said about power over others as opposed to empowering others, and I like to see myself as the latter.'
Academic in New Zealand

Building a community means prioritising relationships. It takes time and a conscious approach to generate strong connections with children, families and colleagues and to look for opportunities to work things out together, rather than doing it alone. Froebelian leadership, therefore, involves a commitment to collaborating with the community when implementing change, rather than imposing changes on others.

Pause and Reflect

How can you empower children, families, and practitioners to influence meaningful change in settings?

> ‘For me, it's all about relationships, which really speaks to that Froebelian approach, that unity and connectedness. If you haven't got a relationship with people, you are not going to affect change. So that was my whole big thing, is always start with a relationship. Build the trust, build the rapport, find your connections and then start from where they are, just as you do with children.’
> **Early childhood setting leader in England**

The importance of relationships and community was mentioned frequently in our workshops. The leaders shared that, for them, taking a Froebelian approach meant prioritising excellent communication with families. They described good communication as sharing knowledge with families and processing it together, rather than imposing knowledge. Froebelian leaders strengthen and inspire the communities they work with, rather than trying to change or mould that community to fit a particular vision in their mind.

Froebelian leaders courageously navigate the ECEC landscape with the support of one another

The academic literature demonstrates the tendency of Froebelian-inspired leaders throughout history to challenge the status quo and dominant agendas that they perceive to be harmful for children. The literature highlights the difficult political and historical contexts in which Froebelian-inspired leaders have carried out their work. Read (2013), for example, examines the leadership of Elizabeth Shaw and Frances Roe and shows how their engagement with the Froebelian principles challenged pedagogical conventions at the turn of the 20th century in England.

This continues to be an important aspect of Froebelian leaders’ work today. McNair and Powell (2020) suggest that the Froebelian leader enacts ‘principled conviction as modus operandi’ (p. 5). Agendas that are seen as harmful to the child are challenged through a Froebelian lens. For example, Hoskins and Smedley (2019) examine how Froebelian principles are employed as a counter-discourse to the school-readiness agenda, which fails to see the child as they are here and now and treats them instead as a ‘becoming-adult’ who needs to be prepared for the next stage of life. Froebelian leadership pushes back against this discourse by valuing the child as they are in the present and childhood as a curious and awe-inspiring stage of life.

While the literature review demonstrates the readiness of Froebelian-inspired leaders to challenge the status quo, it simultaneously suggests that these same leaders were politically savvy and knew how to navigate mainstream systems. We can see this if we return to Read’s (2013) example of Elizabeth Shaw and

Frances Roe, who championed Froebelian practice in England from the 1890s to 1930s. Read argues that Shaw and Roe did not allow their commitment to upholding Froebelian principles (such as valuing the child's free play, and seeing the child in the context of the family) to stand in the way of working to improve mainstream systems. Quite the opposite: they sought pragmatic influence in government, which involved having to adapt Froebelian principles and practices to meet the requirements of infant education at the time. It was more important to them that Froebelian pedagogy could benefit all children in England than to hold on tightly to all elements of Froebelian practice.

This connects with Jackson's (1999) distinction between Froebel's earlier experiments at Keilhau, which were more idealistic, and the later institute of Blankenburg, which was a larger-scale and more community-based approach. Operating on a larger scale, Blankenburg had to be more pragmatic in its outlook, and its leadership involved adapting and responding to the needs of the community.

We found in our interviews with contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders, that Froebel's legacy did indeed give leaders courage to help them push back against dominant agendas that they felt to be harmful for children. They used Froebel's work and tradition as a way to boost their determination to subvert, challenge and respond to external pressures.

'In that environment, to be so contrarian, to come forward with absolutely radical thinking based on observations, and to have the guts to say, "This is what should happen," and then do it. There's something really inspiring about this. Just because other people don't agree doesn't mean that it's wrong. If someone at a time where the repercussions for any kind of divergent thinking could have been life-threatening managed to speak up, then what excuse do we have?'
Community leader in Scotland

‘I have learned there is a need to face up to things that are challenging. I see resonance with Froebel's quite progressive approach in his day, the idea that he was a risk-taker. I think that a good leader will embrace that aspect of their role. Hopefully those risks are calculated, but there is an element of taking risks in order to see change, to move and generate new energy. I can see that in Froebel's ideas and his approach to education, and his philosophy.’

Academic in New Zealand

‘[Froebel] was able to shut out that external clutter of voices, or gossip, or criticisms and really focus on the work being done. I think that is one of the most important leadership aspects one must pick up from Froebel, because sometimes leaders tend to listen to everybody… and they deviate from what they have been appointed as a leader for. I'm very clear that I am appointed as a leader for the children. So every decision I or my team make is going to impact a child.’

Academic in India

The courage that leaders found in themselves consistently came back to a commitment to doing the right thing for young children and families. They felt strongly that this commitment should guide their practice in order to ensure the best experiences and outcomes.

To do the right thing by the child, participants needed to push back against external pressures, which they saw as emphasizing data, assessments and labelling children at the expense of day to day connectedness and love of learning.

‘My hope is that the cycle will come back from this neo-liberal, results-driven agenda that's permeated right down to the youngest children in our culture, to recognizing that it's actually not serving anybody, and that those fundamental truths of how children learn have never changed... A lot of teachers have left the profession because things are so dire. I really hope that, when things all start to fall apart and people realise this neo-liberal system isn't working, that they might turn to Froebelian leaders and say, “How can we fix this?”’
Early childhood setting leader in Australia

Pushing back against these pressures requires a creative approach. Our interviewees talked about re-framing pressures as opportunities to do things differently and navigate a clever way forward. Echoing what we had found in the historical accounts, contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders saw their leadership in terms of navigating the mainstream system with Froebelian values, rather than absenting themselves altogether from mainstream education.

Pause and Reflect

Which elements of ECEC practice are in tension with your beliefs? How can you align them?

‘We've been given an assessment tracker for children that feels like a tick list, but there is a part of it that looks at holistic observation. That's the part we are spending all our time with. We're focusing on the holistic observation of the child that's informed by all of the practitioners, the child's family at home, the child themselves. So, we're building up a really rich picture of what the child is capable of and we are using that to inform our tick list. We’ve tweaked that in a way that sits comfortably with us, but still meets those demands from above.’
Early childhood setting leader in Scotland

Being part of a community of like-minded individuals was the most important source of courage for Froebelian-inspired leaders. Pushing back against dominant pressures relied on educators and leaders coming together to consistently and collaboratively reflect on the Froebelian principles and what they mean for children in today's world.

'I felt when I met the Froebel crew that I had finally found my people. In mainstream systems of education in Australia, I was swimming down the wrong way in the stream and everybody else was going that way. I started to doubt whether I was just being an old-fashioned, out-of-date bore. I met all these passionate, amazing people who were doing incredible work, and I thought, "Phew, I've got my team."'
Early childhood setting leader in Australia

'There are obviously pressures from government and local authority for data, and there are things that don't sit comfortably with your values. Being with others, you can look at things in an imaginative way to make things fit comfortably with your [values] while meeting the expectations that government and your local authority puts on you. So, I think these opportunities to be with other people strengthens your resolve and allows you to have those conversations that can lead to creative ways of doing things.'
Early childhood setting leader in Scotland

In our workshops, participants similarly shared many examples of challenging the status quo and navigating mainstream systems that were not aligned with Froebelian principles. South African leaders talked about dealing with a push-down of more formal education into ECEC and needing to be courageous in continuing to prioritise a creative approach with a focus on outdoor play. Another example in a UK context was the need to teach phonics to very young children. Froebelian-inspired leaders explained how they had seen the requirement through a Froebelian lens and decided that they would carry out the requirements for teaching phonics through the mother-songs.

McNair and Powell (2020) use the term 'bilingualism' to describe Froebelian

leaders' capacity to articulate themselves in both the mainstream political arena of ECEC and in Froebelian communities. Leaders are able to move back and forth between these ways of seeing and being, and in doing so, they can maximise their impact. Bilingualism was discussed in our workshops as the key to subversion, when our world view doesn't sit comfortably with what we are being asked to do.

Froebelian leaders are constantly learning, adapting and responding to context

Across the research strands, Froebelian-inspired leaders were seen as responsive and adaptive rather than dogmatic. While they remained committed to putting the child at the centre and to the essential principles of connectedness and unity, they were depicted as always learning, transforming and responding to the contexts they found themselves in. This follows on from the thread above on courageous navigation of the political system: to courageously navigate the system, it was essential to be able to adapt and be flexible.

The academic literature we reviewed emphasises continual learning and self-development among Froebelian-inspired leaders. Returning again to the figures of Elizabeth Shaw and Frances Roe, we see how they imagined and re-imagined Froebelian pedagogy, taking inspiration from many other contemporaneous texts and thinkers (Read, 2013). Nawrotzki (2006) argues that Froebelian communities have always been revisionist, to the point that revisionism is itself part of the Froebelian legacy. Applying this to thinking about leadership, it suggests that Froebelian leaders have open minds and refuse to be dogmatic.

Turning to the archival sources, we saw this clearly in the memoirs of Caroline Garrison Bishop. Emily Last describes how 'the work for which she is remembered in Birmingham was dynamic, not static: it grew' (p. 1). Garrison Bishop was always interested in other thinkers and was voraciously reading and reflecting on other pedagogical texts of the time.

Applying this in the context of a contemporary ECEC setting, Felicity Thomas suggests that Froebelian leaders need to build an organisational culture resonant with learning. Continual learning is not just about continuous improvement, but is an instinct that we all have as humans: 'This is how Froebel saw learning as a continual reflection on what we know and what we still need to know… we wanted everyone to feel the emotional response to learning…' (Harding & Thomas, 2020, p. 16).

In our interviews, Froebelian-inspired leaders frequently referred to inspiring a love of learning that applied as much to adults as to children. They made time and space for their own learning, as a foundation for supporting learning among others:

'It's really important to have continuous training. It's not always easy to find the time to do it, but there is always a way to keep renewing your knowledge. I went to an international conference, and it was so interesting to see my leadership because I was the only person from my country to share the experiences of what we're doing.'
Early childhood setting leader in Chile

'We have to connect with other Froebelians. I think as leaders and practitioners we need to stay together and continue to support one another because it's really easy to fall back into what was easy. We need to be there to support each other and to grow our leadership practice because it doesn't come naturally. The more you learn, the better leader you can be.'
Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand

Pause and Reflect

How can you nurture a deep-rooted love of learning within yourself and in your setting?

Learning occurs through constant reflection and dialogue. Rather than getting stuck in the same ways of doing things, the leaders we spoke with carefully considered their practice and the practice of those around them and embraced change where it was helpful.

'You don't just say, "This is how we did it 10 years ago, so we're going to continue to do that." You know… evolving and checking in to see if your practice is having an impact on children or the experiences that you provide for children and families. So, I think for me, it was mainly focused around reflection being key to getting those principles embedded in your practice.'
Early childhood setting leader in Scotland

Along with the emphasis on continual learning, our interviews highlighted the importance of being culturally responsive in how to apply the Froebelian principles. The Froebelian-inspired leaders we interviewed were passionate about the need to be deeply aware of and sensitive to the cultural context in which they were working.

'I try to include all the stakeholders in decision-making, especially decisions about the way the programme looks. In this context, there's another layer of consultation that happens with the Aboriginal community so that we ensure what we are doing in this school is culturally responsive, respects the cultural protocols, and meets the expectations of the local community. That's something I've had to learn by doing, but now my first response, is, "What does the community think?"'
Early childhood setting leader in Australia

Our workshops reiterated these points, with participants highlighting that Froebel's philosophy centres on respect and strong relationships. This in turn, means that it is incongruent to impose views and ways of doing things on others. Froebelian practice is therefore a conversation between Froebel's original ideas and the legacy that has been emerged around these ideas, and the views and experiences of the community of children and families who are served by the setting. To initiate and sustain this conversation, Froebelian leaders need to be eager to grow, develop and transform practice, while staying true to the aspects of a Froebelian approach they see as non-negotiable. For most of the leaders we spoke to, the non-negotiable Froebelian principle is putting the child at the centre of everything you do and seeing everything as connected.

Froebelian leaders are propelled by the principle of connectedness

Connectedness was the fundamental Froebelian principle that repeatedly came to the fore through this research, particularly the interview and workshop strands. Connectedness involves taking a holistic approach to education, emphasising the need to connect to oneself, to others, to nature and to spirituality.

Froebel's writing evokes, throughout, the importance of connectedness in education. In Pedagogics of the

Kindergarten (1861/1896), Froebel explains that an individual 'does not and is not to stand alone; he is, as a human being, a member not only of his family, his community, his country, the whole race of mankind now existing, but of all humanity' (p. 7). Connectedness within yourself is also important, in that intellect and feeling are intertwined, so that education is a process involving both 'the all-embracing heart' and 'the penetrating intellect' (p. 4).

Connectedness with nature is a significant part of the Froebelian vision: 'For the child desires to go into the open air, he knows already the door which leads thither – he wishes to make a journey of discovery into the world, into the free Nature which offers to him so much that is new' (p. 112). Through the connection with nature, we come closer to our selves, and this in turn refuels our connection with others and the world around us: 'Self-discovery, self-observation and self-development to help unite man in and with himself and with nature and life' (p. 6).

Contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders involved in our research echoed the emphasis on connectedness. It was a thread that ran through from our direct engagement with Froebel's writing to the way that Froebelian-inspired leaders spoke about their approach today.

'[We have] very specific pedagogies of nurturing the whole child. [We] focus on connecting the child to themselves, to nature, to their community, to God and helping the child to understand that all of these things are fundamentally connected. [That] is where the Froebelian element comes in for me.'
Academic in Ghana

On a daily basis, leading with connectedness involves slowing down and cultivating dispositions of patience and awe.

'When I think, "Froebel," I think, "slow down," and, "wonder." We tend to jump in and want to take control and get things done quickly, but you actually should slow down and wonder. I think people are starting to realize the importance of wonder and curiosity because they're wanting to slow children down. I think that people are starting to recognise that children are being affected by the speed at which we operate.'
Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand

The leaders we interviewed also emphasized prioritizing children's engagement with nature as a way to promote connectedness. Thus, Froebelian-inspired leaders held onto the importance of learning in and through nature and actively prioritized this as part of the day to day practice in whichever setting they were based.

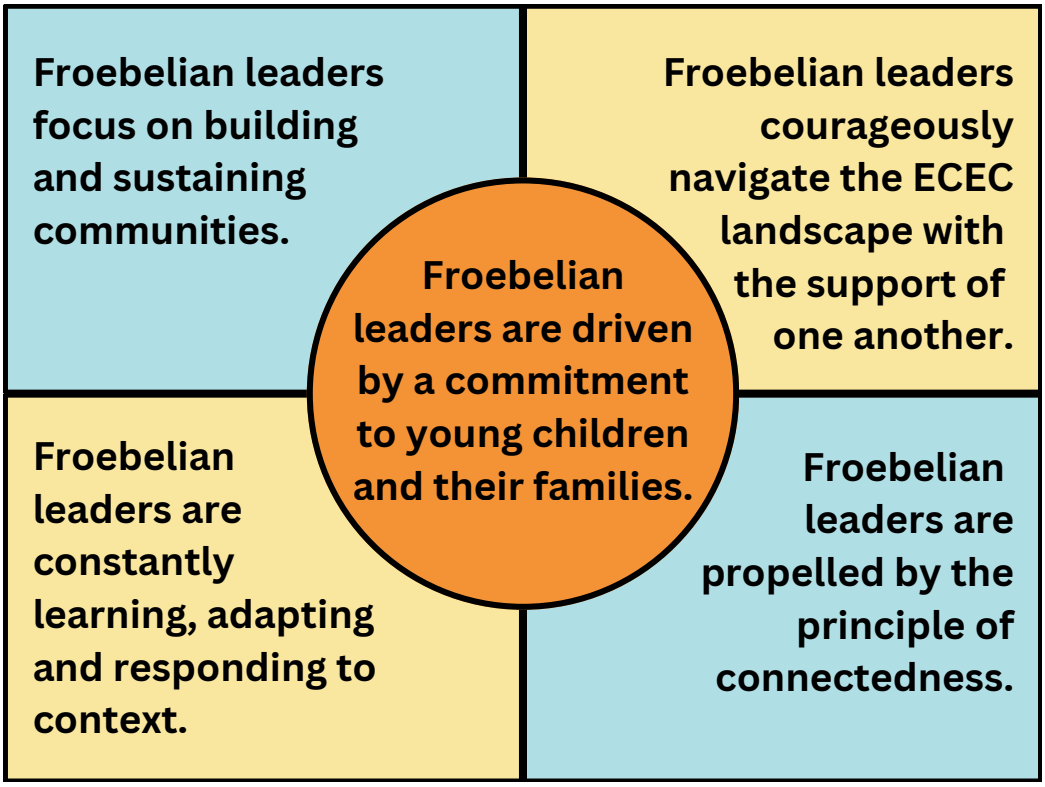
‘We want everybody to experience the value of nature and [to think] about sustainability and respect for the environment, and how we're connected to that wider world. So, I think we're not an insular community, but an outward-facing community, and that's an important part of how I lead.’
Early childhood setting leader in England

‘The indigenous Maori way of learning is to use nature. So, for example, if you wanted to do some counting, rather than go inside and find a chalkboard, you could lie under a tree and wait for leaves to fall down and count them. Or you could go and find some sticks and make letters... Really looking at the learning that can happen as you are immersed in the outdoors... learning within nature and learning about nature. So, the awe and wonderment of finding worms, feeling snail slime, watching caterpillars grow, try[ing] not to let them be squashed before they hatch.’
Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand

In our workshops, leaders explained how the principle of connectedness had deep resonance with their own diverse cultural contexts. For example, one participant talked about how the principle of connectedness was helpful in an Indian context because it offered a starting point for celebrating the rich cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of an Indian early childhood setting. Those leading in a New Zealand context saw a helpful alignment between the principle of connectedness and Maori values of positioning the child in the context of the family and the importance of learning through nature.

Conclusion

To understand more about what it means to be a Froebelian leader in today's world, we carried out three strands of research. First, we completed a literature review that brought together analysis of Froebel's own writings, archival sources and relevant academic literature. Second, we gathered reflections from 40 contemporary Froebelian-inspired leaders around the world through 39 interviews and one written reflection. Finally, we brought together 28 participants in three global online workshops designed to reflect more deeply on some of the strands emerging from analysis of the interviews. This report presents four findings about the nature of Froebelian leadership that emerge from across the three strands of research. In previous interim reports, we have offered more details on the analysis and findings from each strand, but in this report, we highlight the the findings that resonate most across the different strands, held together by a Froebelian commitment to centring children and families in daily practice:



We offer these threads as a starting point for ongoing discussion and debate. They are not intended as a comprehensive or exhaustive list of characteristics for Froebelian leadership, and we doubt such a list could ever exist. We hope that these pointers are a way for those who identify as Froebelian leaders to start reflective conversations with themselves and each other, so that they can continue to develop dialogical, relevant and useful understandings of their own leadership. Rather than seeing this as a model of leadership to be enacted, the threads we present here are a prompt for leaders to explore and potentially improve their leadership practices. Given this intention, these findings are relevant to individual Froebelian-inspired leaders around the world, other leaders in ECEC who may be interested in a Froebelian approach to leadership, and Froebelian learning communities and organisations who may wish to develop programmes of support specifically aimed at leadership.

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