I recently had the privilege of working as a Froebel Trust endorsed Travelling Tutor with a group working in a community allotment. Some of the staff are volunteers who work with children coming to the allotment. None of them has had any experience of working within a traditional educational setting. The volunteers' knowledge of and passion for being outside in nature is abundantly clear. They take the importance of working with nature as their starting point. They had asked for support in developing a Froebelian ethos in their work with children and families and this was how I came to work with them. To Friedrich Froebel, the importance of engaging with and learning from nature could not be overstated.

We spent some time exploring key Froebelian principles and ideas, in particular:

- the importance of starting where the child is (not where you want them to be or think they ought to be)
- the importance of rich first hand experiences
- freedom with guidance (not being too free and easy and not taking tight control)
- unity or inter connectedness
- and the law of opposites (where Froebel recognised that to understand something fully, you also have to experience its opposite).

Over time, as we worked together in the allotment in a practical way, the group of volunteers came to understand these ideas using the resources that they found readily in the allotment.

We asked them to find **examples of opposites.** All of us were stunned to see the range of opposites in the natural environment on a cold March morning:

- daffodils open and closed
- long and short branches on a willow fence
- hard and soft areas underfoot
- ice and water in the water butt
- thin and thick tree trunks
- bendy branches and rigid trunks

The list was endless.

**Building a mud kitchen**

One of the projects the volunteers wanted to get under way was the building of a mud kitchen. They had located a site, and armed with their list of opposites they began to see how they could use the idea of opposites to enrich their provision. They talked enthusiastically about:

- incorporating cupboards with different heights of shelves so that very young children could experience up/down, high/low, and in/out.

- They designed a special step so that young children could physically experience different perspectives ( a reminder of Froebel's description of a child climbing a tree; *to climb a new tree is to discover a new world* , (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:126).
- They wanted to develop a work surface which included two sinks ( wet/dry)
- Ovens for symbolic play and plain work tops where they envisaged children filling/emptying, flattening and pounding material from the garden or "making perfumes" as one of them nostalgically put it.

They had begun to see how the natural resources around them could enrich their provision, and how they themselves could enrich the language and thinking of the children, using Froebel's law of opposites as a framework to help them. In addition, they took the idea of meaningful first hand experiences very much to heart and were planning how to incorporate guttering into the kitchen so that children could see for themselves "what happens to rain". They were also planning storage for mud kitchen implements that was accessible to children, demonstrating their understanding of Froebel's ideas about Freedom with Guidance. They had realised that another of their roles was not only to encourage children to explore and experiment freely, but also to care for and respect the resources offered.

**Really looking at plants-and finding mathematics**

We asked the volunteers to look closely at the stems and stalks of plants growing in the allotment. We urged them to be like Froebel in the forest as a child, closely observing, comparing and wondering about the plants around him. We took as our starting point a chart from Stearn, 1985:321. The diversity of shape and form, even in late winter, was astonishing. We found:

- Oval shaped stems
- many-sided stems with both incurving and out curving faces
- round and triangular shaped stems
- solid and hollow stems.

We discovered why brambles are impossible to escape- their thorns on many sided stems are hard to avoid. The group engaged in mathematical language to describe what they had found, using their phones to enlarge photographs of their finds. This was a session rich in talk and debate, with everyone engaged, showing curiosity and delight and asking questions, pretty much as real scientists would. They were able to make connections with shapes they had previously encountered in Froebel's Gifts. They felt that this session was particularly helpful in getting them to think about the natural resources they had readily available.

The group of allotment volunteers found personal and meaningful ways to make sense of Froebel's idea of Unity. One member of the group created a sculpture of a planed plank of wood with another piece of bark lying on top which he said was to show how "a table comes from a tree". Another said that a piece of trunk left to rot on the ground and pierced with holes from beetles was "the tree going back to the earth". They were making real and thoughtful connections.

Because the group has not previously worked in educational settings, we introduced child development through Froebel's Mother (Family) Songs. Froebel regarded these as his most important work , encapsulating his thoughts and understanding of children's development. Jane Dyke has written a Froebel Trust Pamphlet on this subject. As a group we thought about which gardening skills would match which kind of song and which developmental skills they chimed with.

| Song ( not necessarily a direct Mother (Family) Song) | Developmental skills | Gardening skills |
|---|---|---|
| lullabies | Whole body held, rocked, soothed | The group of volunteers talked a lot about the sense of peace, completeness and purpose they felt in the allotment |
| Row, row your boat | Upper body, core strength | Using a watering can |
| 2 little dickie birds<br><br>Open, shut them | Movement from shoulder, elbow and wrist | Harvesting large fruit, eg apples<br>Picking peapods |
| Tommy Thumb<br>5 fat peas<br>Here is the beehive | Using fingers, isolating fingers | Sowing smaller seeds, harvesting small fruits, opening peapods |
| Heads, shoulders | Whole body moving on the spot | digging |
| Here's a little sandy girl | Whole body moving | Using a wheelbarrow |

Compiling this chart surprised all of us; it helps to make sense of why young children enjoy watering so much more than planting seeds and why mastering a wheelbarrow is so difficult. This document will now be used as a focus and reference point for their ongoing Froebelian journey.

The passion and commitment of the group of allotment volunteers was a joy to work with. My fellow tutor and I left feeling that Froebel speaks to all those who work with children and families, whatever their setting. We hope that we have been able to provide the group with a structure and understanding on which they can base their future work.

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