



# Froebelian Futures

In partnership with



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[Adults] should be initiated into the real nature of a child's growth, inspired with respect and love for it, and made thoroughly familiar with the forms of learning which will really satisfy them"

**Froebel, 1830s** (in Lilley, 1967:118)



A Beginners' Guide to

## Practitioner Inquiry in the Early Years

### What is practitioner inquiry?

Practitioner inquiry is a process of individual or collective research led by practitioners within their own work settings. It enables practitioners to better understand what is happening in their setting and ultimately make small or large changes to improve shared practice and the experiences of the children and families they work with. It also empowers practitioners by generating credible evidence to advocate for wider change: locally, regionally and nationally.

### Why does it matter?

Too much of what happens in nurseries and schools is decided *for* children, families and staff – not with them. A truly responsive and enabling environment which puts children's rights and relationships at the heart of practice means "listening" closely to what is happening in each unique community. Practitioners are uniquely placed to do just that – by noticing and building on children's strengths, by gently but continuously questioning themselves, and by co-creating the environments, resources and practices which meet the hearts, minds and needs of every child in the current moment.



"I place huge value on practitioner research. Collaborating and sharing to bring about positive change cannot be underestimated as we all learn from each other in an ever-changing world. The use of the project approach to bring about change is something that I think we need to do more of. It gives practitioners confidence to make evidence-based change and reflect on that change. It is an approach that would sit really well within improvement planning."

**Katie Smith**, Senior Early Years Officer, Edinburgh



## 5 key steps

### 1 - A reflexive attitude, one great overarching question

It's tempting to run straight towards change, but the best research begins by looking closely at **what is** – before it considers **what could be**. Questioning *ourselves* is fundamental. Reflective practitioners consider how their own actions, values and assumptions shape their relationships and interactions with children, families and colleagues. This means being curious (not afraid) to look beyond accepted practices (not “this is just how we do it”) to evaluate and evolve **what** you are doing (or not doing), **how** you are doing it, and **why** – without being judgemental of your own or others' skills and motivations.

Start by wondering, individually or collectively:

- *What might our community's choices be asking us to consider about our current environment or practice?*
- *What am I personally interested in looking closer at, or developing?*

Now try and come up with a great “overarching” question, one that **focuses** your inquiry down to a concrete situation but is **open-ended** enough to invite answers you'd never have thought of. For example:

- ✗ Why does our lunchtime routine interrupt children's play and disturb their equilibrium?  
✓ How does our lunchtime routine effect children's play?

### 2 - How to gather the evidence: choosing a methodology

Once you've decided on your overarching question, you'll want to break it down into a few smaller questions that will give you the data you need. For example:

*Does anyone struggle with our lunchtime routine? In what ways? What helps?  
What more could we do? Who have we forgotten?*

Small-scale inquiries are typically more powerful if they are qualitative (“how, why, what, what if”) – i.e. when they dig deep to analyse a handful of *experiences*. Statistical surveys (“how many”) need larger amounts of data to tell a meaningful story – but one or two basic stats (e.g. *2 out of 10 families read our newsletter*) can lead you to a powerful question (e.g. *What would help families engage more with children's experiences at nursery?*).

Qualitative methodologies include close observation, participatory methods (e.g. child-led photography, mapping, drawing etc.), self-reflexive journaling (“what did I/we feel and do”), interviews (personal), focus groups (dynamic), questionnaires (private) and documentary analysis (e.g. the content and effect of policies).

Your methodology also includes how you are going to *analyse* your data: are you interested in trends, absences, strengths, doubts? Being able to refer to one or two **case studies** in some depth will bring your findings to life. If you are looking to assess a **change** in practice, you will need both *before* and *after* evidence that is comparable.

## 3 – Ethical considerations

Participation in research should always be voluntary, it should not cause any risks to participants' (and researchers') safety and wellbeing, and it should be justified – i.e. leading to an immediate or longer term/wider benefit for the participant group.

Download a research planner, ethics checklist and consent templates to share with your line manager at <https://bit.ly/3aOQqyb>

It is always best practice to get written consent from your participants – since you should (ethically) have a plan for sharing your findings. For research directly involving children, parental consent will also be required.

You should also ask yourself:

- How does my position / role influence things? *For example, may colleagues, children or parents feel 'coerced' to take part in my research or only tell me what they think I want to hear?*
  - How do I ensure my own emotional wellbeing? (Think about workload or vulnerabilities)
  - Could my research create unrealistic expectations among my participants?
  - How will I explore future thinking without rubbishing what people have done in the past?
  - How will I balance analysis which recognises everyone's strengths *and* offers critical reflection?
  - Can I promise my participants 100% anonymity and confidentiality, including in any distributed photos?

## 4 – Sharing and next steps

- Analyse with others** – Once you've done some initial analysis of your findings, consider checking it out with others (children, colleagues, families) and be prepared to evolve your final conclusions if you learn more in the process.

- Consider your (shared) next steps** – What prototype activities (or more fundamental changes to personal or shared practices or environments) might you want to make in response to your findings? How (and when) will you review them to know whether they have had the effect you intended? Could this lead to part two of the research cycle (see right)? Is any specific change likely to be appropriate for ever? Or will you revisit it with your next intake of children?

-  **Share!** – You are part of a valuable movement of practitioner-researchers in Scotland, so don't be shy! Who else might benefit from your learning? What kind of media or event will draw them in?



### The “action research” cycle

**Is your practice Froebelian?** Get inspiration and share your own project with our national at [www.froebel.ed.ac.uk/resources/the-inspiration-directory](http://www.froebel.ed.ac.uk/resources/the-inspiration-directory)

# A Froebelian lens

## A community of learning with the child at the centre



Above, from top: Friedrich Froebel; the garden at Bad Blankenburg, Froebel's original kindergarten. Below: Cowgate Under 5s, Edinburgh, Scotland's Froebelian hub.

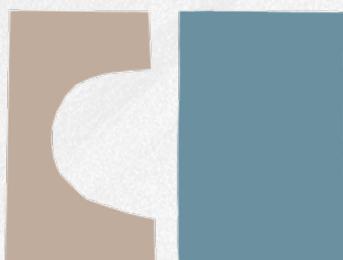
**Friedrich Froebel** (1782–1852) was the founder of the kindergarten. His principles are now widely reflected and named in *Realising the Ambition* – the national guidance for early years practice in Scotland.

Froebel's practice centred on his belief that "Every child should be accepted as an indispensable... member of the human race" (Lilley, 1967:57) and that play – far from being inconsequential – continually reveals the inner lives, knowledge, needs, gifts and struggles of children, as they respond to (and create) the communities they are part of.

Froebel was therefore convinced that the primary role of the adult educator was to stand back and closely observe children's play and interactions, looking for clues about both the community and the child simultaneously. Only then (and with restraint) should we step in to support children to fulfil their *own* purposes, before stepping back again. This likewise underpins a Froebelian approach to practitioner inquiry.

'During childhood, when children attend Kindergarten and school, it matters that they spend time with adults who are trained to tune into their emerging thoughts. Education for Froebel was hugely about helping children to develop their thinking and ideas, but always as an integrated whole, so that ideas, feelings, the physical self and relationships are part of each other. Children therefore need a nurturing environment, with people who understand how they feel and think, and need to be active physically in order to learn. He realised, spending time in Pestalozzi's school in Yverdun, that observation was a powerful way of getting to know children in order to help them learn'

**Tina Bruce**, 2021:111



Education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting only; it should neither direct nor determine nor interfere .

**Froebel**, 1830s (in Lilley, 1967:1)



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Funded by  
**Froebel  
Trust**

**Froebelian Futures** is a groundbreaking multi-year programme (2021-2024) funded by [The Froebel Trust](#) which aims to strengthen and deepen child and community-centred early years practice across Scotland, based on the foundational principles of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852).

Our vision is of a world where **children's integrity, interdependence and creativity** are recognised and cultivated as an indispensable life force in all human societies. Specifically, we want to see children – supported by skilful childhood practitioners – widely and confidently sharing their **co-created knowledge, ideas and practices** – to inspire and enhance **social justice**, in harmony with **the natural world**.

Interested in training with **Froebelian Futures** at The University of Edinburgh – including our certificated *Froebel in Childhood Practice* and *Practitioner Inquiry* programmes? Visit [www.froebel.ed.ac.uk/training](http://www.froebel.ed.ac.uk/training) for more details.

**Froebelian principles**

**Unity and connectedness**  
Everything in the universe is connected. The more we let it do, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children are natural explorers and inquisitive. They never become compartmentalised for everything links.

**Creativity and the power of symbols**  
Creativity is about children representing their own being in their own way. It is about the development of self and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, these ideas become more complex and the community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

**The central importance of play**  
Play is a part of being human and helps children to revise their inner worlds of feeling, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, testing, imagining and creating and is central to the Froebelian approach. Play is a natural part of life. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

**Engaging with nature**  
Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it is one of the most important ways in which children learn. Through these experiences, children learn about the interconnectedness of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

**Knowledgeable, nurturing educators**  
Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and development are role models for children. Educators are key aspects of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children, carefully supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

**Autonomous learners**  
Each child is unique and what children can do, rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things, for themselves and from becoming more involved in their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their interests. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of all Froebelian education.

**The value of childhood in its own right**  
Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

**Relationships matter**  
The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

[froebel.org.uk](http://froebel.org.uk)



The Froebel Trust is the lead funder for Froebelian Futures. It is the primary grant making charity in the UK specialising in funding early childhood research, promoting early education and developing Froebelian practice. Our aim is to ensure that the Froebelian framework of principled education and care is recognised, understood, valued and practised across the early childhood sector for the benefit of young children in the UK and internationally. We produce a popular series of pamphlets on Froebelian principles in action, host the Froebel archive, and run courses, webinars and conferences throughout the year.

Download our free Froebelian Principles poster at [www.froebel.org.uk/news/new-froebel-trust-poster](http://www.froebel.org.uk/news/new-froebel-trust-poster)