Resistance Stories

Telling and sharing stories about children's right to play.

Froebel Trust Final Report Form

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To our participants, thank you for sharing your stories – they have been the key in helping us develop our understanding. Because of the limited wordcount for a report, the stories included here are only a tiny selection of those shared but know that we are inspired to write more with all their rich provocations.

Project Details

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Executive Summary

The fundamental question we ask in our research responds to a heartfelt worry about the marginalisation of children's play and what such restrictions on play can have for crucial early experiences of being physically active, social and independent. Our enquiries centred around how educators enabled children's right to play and resisted the perceptions that more formal instruction should be prioritised through education policies, assessment demands, and inspection procedures.

We position our enquiry within studies of resistance practices, where actions which prioritise play as acts of resistance have been under-researched. The fundamental questions we asked was how resistances against formalised approaches took place to enable children's right to play. This aligns strongly with Froebelian principles related to play as autonomous learning and how crucial it is for knowledgeable and nurturing adults to honour the right to play.

Our methodology draws on posthuman and new materialist theories to make understanding about the agency of resistance as being relational and distributed in-between humans and more-than-humans. We created data from focus group research conversations and multi-modal resistance stories from twenty-five educator participants. We then analysed resistance and its relation to agency by understanding play as an embodied material relationship. This meant we noticed what happened in play between the child, and the time and the spaces it happened in. Alongside this focus on materiality, our knowledge of play took account of the discourses that shape it.

A key finding for us is the significance of agency in resistances. From here we posit a contribution to knowledge with a new conceptual understanding of the processes between agency and acts of resistance in early childhood education. We explain this as an active process and flow between **resistance ↔ agency** that pushes back on formalisation to make space and time for play. What this means is that agency is related to both the conditions for resistance and the outcomes of acts of resistance. We found that moments and movements in the process of **resistance ↔ agency** inform and shape the capacity to act. In addition, creating platforms that share resistance stories positively demonstrate impacts of attitudinal change and increased confidence that exemplify Froebelian principles of how knowledgeable and nurturing educators enable children's autonomy to play. Such principles become all the more important in contexts where children's opportunities for play may be limited.

The implications of our research are that educators who collectively share their resistance stories do not just protect young children's right to play. Story sharing can inspire both themselves and others whilst acknowledging the embodied complexities of working in challenging policy climates. Mapping the processes of **resistance ↔ agency** can deepen understandings of how agency and resistance emerge in relationship and that contexts

include not just pedagogical values.

We recommend that creating conditions for collective telling and sharing stories of how play can resist the dominance of formalisation agendas is an accessible and hopeful practice. In turn, this holds the possibility to educate, affirm and generate **resistance ↔ agency** as an important characteristic of educator and potentially children's lives.

Introduction

As our research studied how resistance to formalisation agendas in ECE were storied, we introduce our project (as we mean to go on) by telling and sharing stories (Figure 1, 4, 5, 6). With these stories, we see educators creating the circumstances for playful experiences to unfold with some pushing back on more formalised expectations in England's early childhood education (ECE) system.

The backdrop to our stories is the context of the lived reality of navigating daily practises, where increasing emphasis on formal teaching activities means limitations placed on play because of, "an increased focus on Literacy and Mathematics, and pedagogical practices associated with older age groups such as ability grouping" (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021) (cited in Kay, 2026, p.14). Our primary consideration in this study has been to notice what vulnerabilities there are to play being the bread and butter of everyday life and our worry that it is being side-lined by accountability demands (Wood, 2019).

It seems the prominence of play in ECE and childhood itself is not just eroding in some contexts, but becoming more narrowly viewed (Lewis, 2017). There are wider implications with play being marginalised, as it is seen less as a right for children and more of a privilege (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023; Souto-Manning, 2017). The erosion of play in children's educational lives has wider and more longer-term consequences.

Threading our study together are Froebelian principles of children's autonomous learning and its connection with the role of knowledgeable and nurturing adults who value the facilitation and guidance of play, rather than instruction (Froebel Trust, 2026).

Research from Hoskins and Smedley (2019) found that interpreting the statutory curriculum of England, (DfE, 2025) to foreground the significance of Froebel's concept of learning through play can operate as a counter discourse to agendas associated with 'school readiness' where the primary function of ECE is preparation for compulsory education. What this suggests is that ECE occupies a deficit model in England, with an emphasis is on what children cannot yet 'do' and preparing them for the next education stage. This deficit model of ECE in England, can be perceived in wider global discourses as

> ...the onus is placed on what the child can or should be able to do; and if they can't, this manifests in a deficit view of the child as not fitting an expected norm. It also then places an expectation on the preschool educator; that they need to prepare children developmentally to meet external expectations in order to be assessed as ready to take on the next phase of their formal learning journey.
>
> (Rouse, Nicholas and Garner, 2023, p. 194-195).

Let us return to storytelling play. The first story (Figure 1) tells of how an educator said yes to a child who wanted to walk on the sunnier side of the road on the way back from posting a

letter on a route that did not feature in her original plan. In the second story (Figure 1), the educators from a small nursery chain halted their normal timetable to create a 'joy retreat' that gave permission for connection and play. We name these stories 'yessing' and 'retreating' to appreciate the dynamism of **resistance ↔ agency** that are entangled with pushbacks on formalisation agendas.

I took a small group of children up to post a letter at the nearby post box - a job that would have taken me about 2 minutes on my walk home from work. I filled in a double-sided A4 form ...and off we went. The post box itself was a source of fascination and inspired such rich questioning. Suddenly those scribbles on an envelope became important - what were they there for? How did the postman know my letter was in the box? How did he take it to where it was meant to go? Why wasn't I using a phone or emailing? I'd said on the form that we were walking straight back but when one child asked if we could go a different way because it looked sunnier that way, I agreed. The children wanted to stop at a tree stump to look at the mushrooms and while we were investigating them, one child gently cupped a leaf in his hands, tapped my side and showed me this caterpillar. He wanted to feed it salami and a lollipop and all the Eric Carle foods! When his mum collected him at the end of the day, this normally quiet little boy was chatting away all about his caterpillar and his mini adventure to the post box.

Sometimes resistance is as simple as saying 'yes' to a child's question. Yes, we can do that...

(Participant S1)

Yessing



Retreating



For a whole week we decided to go completely off schedule and to focus on what brings us joy by slowing down, tuning into each other and the environment, and following our own rhythms and wanderings. We created spaces of permission and possibility which we called the 'joy retreat', where children, educators and families could come together, be present, connect and play!

So, we thought, you know, what we need here is true joy. So, we got all the teachers together and we got them to brainstorm "How can we bring everyone together? "And so, we were thinking about sort of words that will make us think about "well-being, wellness and connection". Some of the teachers say, well, what about "retreats", right? Because when, when you feel like you want to have me-time and really pause and slow down, you usually go to a retreat. So, we thought, "Oh, that's it. Let's call it your retreat".

(Participant Ad3)

Figure 1: *Yessing Story and Retreating Story*

Research aims

Our research engaged with twenty-five educators in differing roles (Appendix 1) to make sense of how they resisted formalisation agendas to enable children's right to play. Our aim (Figure 2) was to understand how resistance happened in formalisation agendas where the messaging was tied to outcomes driven curricula policy, assessment demands and inspection processes that might prioritise the normalisation of adult led teaching and marginalise children's right to play (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023). Our research questions illustrate the wider context of understanding why resistance was needed and how pedagogies can flourish and provide hopeful conditions. Our research questions also help us to understanding how storying plays a role.

Research questions

1.	Why is resistance needed?
2.	What can hopeful flourishing pedagogies do?
3.	How are resistances enacted and storied?
4.	What impact can sharing and connecting resistance stories have for generating hopefulness?

Figure 2: *Research questions*

Research context and literature

Play through a Froebelian lens

Play is of central importance in the principles associated with Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) where it is closely associated with humanity itself. Not only does play support children in making sense of the world they encounter now, and in the future, it also activates their emotional, imaginative and creative selves. When the child is enabled to take control in play, the role of the adult is to offer 'freedom with guidance' (Froebel Trust, 2026). In enabling freedom to play, children are framed as powerful learners (Tovey, 2017). An important scholar of Froebel, Tina Bruce, posits that play and creativity are closely linked and is of high value when it both "child-initiated and child-directed" (Bruce, 2011a, p.24 cited in Smedley and Hoskins, 2020, p. 1202).

Recent scholarship exploring ideas about Froebelian play, notice that free play is an important site for children to express their identity. For example, Tembo and Bateson (2025) found that observing play offers space for educators to notice how race and exclusion manifest through the replication and resistance of colonial behaviours. What this suggests is that children's entitlement to play can be associated with the time and space for children to make sense of their own identities but also how they exert power in relationships with others. Here we see the clear connections between the right to play and themes of democracy, equity, and social justice (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023). In short, the right to play does crucial work in supporting children as learning to be responsible citizens in the present and in the future.

Another important point is how Froebel emphasises the interconnectedness and unity between people and the world that brings attention to the nurturing of children's responsibility and stewardship (Bruce, 2021). Froebel placed great importance on play as activity that enabled

> ... the interconnectivity of the inner and the outer, the law of opposites, the awareness of the self in relationship with community and nature... Bruce, 2021 p.5.

Howe (2022) comments that there are parallels with Common World approaches that notice the consequences of action and inaction for the multi-species flourishing of both the human and more-than-human world (p. 48). Additionally, Froebel's ideas resonate with some more recent theories such as posthumanism (Haraway, 2016; Braidotti, 2013) and New Materialisms (Barad, 2007) that have been taken up in ECE research where "Mind and matter are seen as inextricably entangled...They see humans as developing in dynamic and unfolding relation with their environments." (MacLure and McRae, 2022. p.15). Such readings remind us that Froebel is more than a 'pioneer' of ECE, and his influence continues to be reimagined "as a dynamic and ever-changing web of encounter" (Sakr and Kaur, 2024, p.923).

Why is play marginalised?

There is a growing body of research and social commentary which reflects and critiques neoliberalism as a dominant paradigm of our times. Neoliberalism has been defined as a political economic theory which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by promoting individual entrepreneurial freedoms alongside enhanced private property rights and free markets (Harvey, 2007). In education, this political project manifests as the implementation of economic solutions to 'problems' of quality and effectiveness, curriculum, and children's outcomes. Children and educators are subject to policies in preparation for the future, where success is measured as children's academic achievement and their financial productivity as future citizens (Archer 2022; Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021).

The context of our study is a concern about how the status and value of play is shifting from the centre of pedagogical practices. As pushes for formalisation in the form of adult-led learning takes the centre stage, this is often at the expense of time for child-led play. Such ideas sit within much larger narratives, such as how 'schoolification' and 'school readiness' have shaped ECE cultures, where adult-led formal teaching to provide measurable and comparable outcomes are privileged that in turn squeeze out time for child-led play (Grieshaber and Ryan, 2018; Kay 2026; Wood, 2019).

In the policy context of England, where this study is based, play is at risk of being marginalised as accountability narratives drive the formalisation agenda (Cameron and Moss, 2020). The grander narrative here is about how the primary purpose of ECE is *not just* the readying children for school, instead framing ECE beyond "a subservient sector of the education system whose main role is delivering young children 'ready' for the next sector." (Moss, 2025, p.429).

Resistance practices

Resisting dominant discourses and practices that formalise ECE is a growing field of study (Archer, 2021; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2021, 2023; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Resistance is also explored in research in respect to love as an act of resistance (Morris, 2021) and joy and emotional capital resisting neoliberal pressures in ECE (Sloan, 2025).

In understanding stories of play as 'acts of resistance', we add to a previously under-researched aspect which is how resistance is enacted (Archer, 2021). Whilst there have been limited studies in relation to resistance and Froebelian practice, one paper (McNair et al., 2021) details the dominant discourse of standardisation and narrowing of ECE. This action research study explores how Froebelian inspired educators strongly opposed the 'reductionist' formal 'tick-box' assessments produced by their local authority instead advocating for a 'Lived Story' approach of narrative assessment designed to track children's

progress whilst respecting the complexity of their learning, “in radical, creative and innovative ways” (p. 478).

Resistance and Agency

Whilst not from a solely ECE perspective, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson’s writing (2015) considers there is a clear relationship between agency and resistance, “Agency, in other words, is not only exercised when teachers go along with policy and change; it can be equally exercised in resistance to policy and change” (p.134). We work with the idea that resistance marks the boundaries of what is currently possible, (Rosińska and Czemiel, 2022) while agency is the practice of navigating, circumventing and sometimes transforming those boundaries. We further explore this thinking with posthuman and new materialist theories to evolve an understanding of the **resistance ↔ agency** dynamic in relation to the more-than-human context of ECE.

There are a limited number of ECE studies that explore relationships between resistance and agency. Guerrero and Camargo-Abello (2023) consider when teacher’s negotiate policy implementation in Colombia, they draw on resistance and adaptation as a complimentary form of agency. For example, Bradbury (2019) examines how teachers in England resisted a national assessment policy by foregrounding their specific pedagogical knowledge and exercising some choices about how policy was interpreted by emphasising holistic understandings of children through an ethics of care. What Bradbury (2019) found was that subversions took place by complying with policy but naming it as ‘nonsense’ was an act that still retained a teacher’s sense of agency. Similarly, Fenech and Sumsion’s (2007) Australian research positions agency as a manifestation of resistance. When threats appeared to teachers imposed through regulatory policies or powers, they take Foucauldian lenses on resistance that take account for how power circulates in relation to the freedoms of agency. In their writing, Fenech and Sumsion’s (2007) present this relationship as agency/resistance to show the close correlations between them.

How agency figures in resistance practices can be understood through scholars like Lenz Taguchi (2010) who position pedagogy as a relational and performative encounter that happens in-between educators, children but also materials and spaces. This suggests agency is created between humans *and* things (Barad, 2007), and operates beyond an individual person (Burkitt, 2016). If agency involves more than an individual acting, then resisting is more than only what can be observed (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023; Alldred and Fox, 2017; Archer, 2022). For example, Albin-Clark, Archer and Chesworth (2024) understand resisting the dominance of reporting data because of the pressure of assessment agendas as generating an agency that forges a creative space where different ways of acting and doing become possible.

This suggests that agency and resistance in ECE life have a more-than-human perspective, and like the work of Fairchild, (2019) agency is understood as dispersed beyond the human.

Both Albin-Clark, Archer and Chesworth (2024) and Fairchild (2019) use feminist posthuman materialist theories to take the position that agency is relational and distributed in-between humans and more-than-humans (Malone et al., 2020).

Our position from the literature

As children's play becomes more marginalised, we aim to understand how educators navigate restrictions that might limit play opportunities and the implications for crucial early play experiences of being physically active, social and independent. Many of our stories bring attention to the Froebelian principle of the significance of how nurturing and knowledgeable adults can support children's autonomy and play.

With our emphasis on asking educators to tell and share stories, we make sense of how educators practice resistance (Archer, 2022; Archer and Albin-Clark 2022; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021) and the role of emotions and ethical decision making (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Morris, 2021; Sloan, 2025).

As influential scholars such as Moss (2025) state, ECE needs new stories. In particular, we aimed to illuminate how those strong beliefs where stories about children's right to play and how it can flourish in schools and settings.

Along with storytelling, we aimed to notice how time and space is made for children to play in these stories, and resistance to formalisation can foreground a hopeful storying of the sector. How acts of resistance are enacted is particularly relevant to our enquiry, and to do this we are particularly in interested in the processes of resistance and how agency is related (Bradbury, 2019; Fenech and Sumsion, 2007; Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023). In particular, we build from studies that notice the more-than-human enactments of agency and resistance in ECE (Albin-Clark, Archer and Chesworth 2024).

Methodology

For our methodology we built our knowledge of play as every day and embodied with spaces, places and materials in relation to the discourses that shape it. Froebel wrote that everything is connected (Froebel Trust 2026). Because of this interest in connectedness, we found posthuman and new materialist theorising helpful. Thinking with Karen Barad (2007), we noticed the relationalities of play in-between the material and social world (Alldred and Fox, 2017). This means we softened our gaze to understand resistance as situated, embodied, multiple, and always on the move and in relation with the more-than-human (Strom et al., 2020) amongst people, places, events and materials.

Analysis with feminist posthuman and materialist approaches was inspired by research creation, that Truman (2022) explains makes what it wants to enquire about. Our analysis noticed how resistance was in relation to things, places and spaces along with the discourses as a material-discursive phenomena (Barad, 2007). For example, in the story about saying yes to the sunny walk the language used (Figure 1), the policy, the light filled walk of children and educator's discovery of a caterpillar of the underside of the leaf are all part of the analysis.

Institutional, national and international ethical codes and guidelines shaped our study in relation to important subjects such as the respect, responsibility and integrity to the participants, stakeholders and ourselves (BERA, 2024; Edge Hill Ethical Policy, EECERA, 2025, Froebel Trust, 2024 (see Bertram et al. 2025). This meant that ethics shaped our study not just in the planning stage but rather threaded throughout the whole process that included the more-than-human (Taylor, 2022). In addition to securing participant consents and assuring anonymity, confidentiality, data protection, we strove to undertake the research process with an ethic of care and responsibility.

Also, we brought playfulness to how we generated and understood data. This means we invited stories of resistance where images, sound, and movement became as important to what was said. Through multiple research tools that included arts-based multi-modal storytelling, our intention was to develop a knowledge-making that took seriously the spaces, materialities and more-than-human others entangled with sharing stories.

Our approach to analysis was to notice how resistance and agency were not only related to actions and language. This meant we paid attention to how agency and resistance happened in specific times, spaces and places in relation to the material world. Because analysis was ongoing, we revisited the data often and considered agency and resistance as happening in-between the human and more-than-human (Truman, 2022).

To reach a range of educators we invited stories through research stages that included online platforms (MSTeams) through a mixture of individual and group focus groups. Then we

used a private invited platform weblink (Padlet) as the vehicle for gathering multi modal responses to the research questions. Further details of the recruitment and data collections stages are detailed below (Figure 3).

Stages of Research

The research took the form of three phases to consider why resistance is needed, what is being resisted and how:

Recruitment	We recruited 25 professionals from our existing professional networks and wider recruitment promotion with the rationale of understanding resistance from those working first hand with children as educators and those with roles who educate or support educators. Participants who came forward ranged from third sector professionals, childminders, students, researchers, college or university tutors and teachers or educators in practice in both the non-maintained or maintained sectors. Educators recruited to the study were from across England and had a range of work experience in ECE from current student teachers to consultant with 30+ years experience. (Appendix 1).
Event 1	Online research dialogue with individuals or small group focus groups about *why* resistance to formalisation is needed.
Event 2	Online event sharing examples of stories of *what* is being resisted and *how*. After the event, participants invited to upload stories of resistances that enable children to play. We invited an open interpretation of what constituted a story that could include narrative, or any artistic response that can include multi-modal approaches (including images/songs/photo/audio/sound files).
Event 3	Online event in which participants shared their stories of resistances that enable children to play across the participant group.

Figure 3: *Stages of research*

Findings and Discussion

Our findings and discussion are organised around two positions that explore how the **resistance ↔ agency** dynamic enables acting otherwise. When participants explained why resistance was needed, they foreground that this relates to the exercising of agency. By agency we do not just mean the individual capacity, choice and power to act independently but also appreciating that agency is relation, created in contexts and conditions where collegial support and leadership has a role to play. Participants who were part of a Nursery School that had leadership and practice informed by Froebelian practices expressed how much it mattered for educators to act with autonomy:

> *"It's ensuring that everybody, children and adults have that, that autonomy that you know, guidance where they need it, but freedom to make the right decisions."*
> *(Nursery School speaking as a team)*

Enabling agency often involves action, so the stories of **resistance ↔ agency** we tell are titled to draw attention to agency as an active verb. Naming the stories we share as 'Yessing' 'Retreating' 'Tapping' 'Splashing' 'Nesting' (Figures 1, 4, 5, 6) encapsulates how resistance actively happens in everyday moments.

Resistance ↔ Agency Position 1: Resistance relates to agency.

Our first position illustrates how resistance to formalisation agendas relates to the agency involved in enabling both educators and children the capacity to play. Such agency is part of both educators' interior and exterior worlds. Agency is part of the interior world that expresses itself through firmly held principles, values and pedagogical ethical decision-making about play. Agency too is part of the exterior world that drives the capacity to act and manifests as acts of resistance to overly formalised environments to increase children's right to play.

For example, in the 'yessing' story about the walk to the post box (Figure 1), the educator storied how resistance can be as simple as saying yes or giving permission to a child's request to walk on the sunnier side of the road that resulted in the excited discovery of a caterpillar. Often more open-ended child led pedagogical choices might feel restrained in the assumption that time spent with adult led teaching is more valuable. When plans are fixed, it often feels safer not deter from them, yet that simple 'yes' and willingness to move outside of what was planned involved valuing the agency and autonomy of a child's ideas and led to a rich, motivating and communicative child-led learning experience.

Just as participant S1 (Figure 1) noticed the potential of a child's idea to walk on the sunny side, participant Ad5 (Figure 5) draws attention to observing everyday actions and going along with children's enquiries. In this story the participant noticed what interested children with water, puddles and splashing. In analysing this story, we took account of the human-more-than-human relationalities of wetness, splashing, wellies and the year-long dialogues of feedback opportunities. What the long and repeated time spent for reflection on play possibilities meant was that educators were able to resist staying dry and instead embraced their agency to foreground resources such as a clothing to champion the wetness and splashing embodiment of child-led water play.

I was coach mentoring educators at an ECEC setting. I noticed that children were dropping things into this puddle, and splashing in it too, with their shoes on. The puddle was like a world of other possibilities - like an infinite play possibility.

I took a child inside who loved splashing and we found some wellies. She continued to splash for a long time, with joy!

During my feedback session with the adults, we thought about how we can promote and enable play and creativity through positively embracing this puddle and not avoiding its wetness!

I walked a coaching and re-thinking journey with this team for a year. Now the nursery has plenty of absorbing water play, puddles are embraced, play is spontaneously encouraged, interests of children are followed, and they have a welly boot stand with waterproof outfits.

Resistance against staying dry champions childhood and changes thinking!

Participant Ad5

Splashing

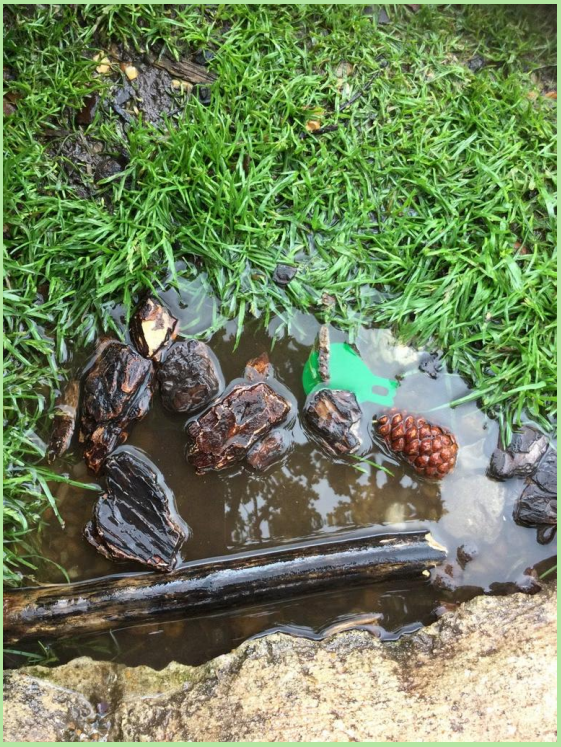

Figure 4: *Splashing story*

What this leads us to appreciate is that in the moment, affirmative responses matter. When educators are open to children's ideas and value children's expressions, they are connecting into an openness to their own ideas and creativity. This contributes towards the conditions for agency to thrive.

These stories help us to understand the conditions of our first research question (Figure 2), about why resistance is needed. Resisting against something is a complicating factor in the creation of agency as we acknowledge how challenging the policy contexts are for

participants when dominant narratives can be seen to decentre a focus on playful responses to children. It takes energy for knowledgeable and nurturing educators to pushback on policies to re-centre children's play and encourages their own (and children's) voice and agency. What our findings contribute are lively and accessible exemplars of how acts of resistance are enacted (Archer, 2021; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

Resistance ↔ Agency Position 2: Agency thrives in space, place and materialities

In our positioning of agency, we notice that the spaces, use of time, materials and the environment itself play a role in how it is furthered. This suggests that agency is a generative process entangled with materials, time and space. Agency as shared with ecologies of spaces and materials are related to moments in time (Albin-Clark, Archer, and Chesworth, 2024). In the yessing story (Figure 1), the embodied walking in the sunlight, the thrill of the turning over the dry leaf to discover the caterpillar all contributed to the creation and furthering of agency. In the splashing story (Figure 5), the water and dropping objects opened endless play in the everydayness of the puddle. We acknowledge these material-discursive moments as related to curricula policy discourses but also drenched in larger democratic discourses that values dialogue, respect of children's right and entitlement to play.

Another two stories (Figure 5, 6) crystallise how agency is related to giving space and time for children's enquiries to unfold on their own timelines that supports our third research question of how resistances are enacted and storied. This points to how powerful stories can be and how building a collective space can connect narratives to re-imagine a future that embraces knowledgeable and autonomous educators. Stories are a mechanism that are useful for understanding the **resistance ↔ agency,** and by welcoming multi-modally story telling we were able to make sense of how time, space and materials mattered.

What our findings illustrate is how sharing stories can be a generative and hopeful endeavour that reassert the ways resistance is inextricable from ethical approaches to pedagogical decision making (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). We are reminded of Froebel's principle of childhood being valued in its own right and more than a preparation for the next stage of learning. The stories we share join studies such as McNair et al. (2021) in demonstrating how resistance practices can align with Froebelian principles that draw attention to the rich complexities of play.

In particular, the stories extend understandings of the role of agency in resistance practices, and how such agency needs conditions to thrive. Such conditions and contexts of agency have distinct features that are often everyday lively enactments in relation to more-than-human things, time, spaces and places such as enjoying the sunshine or dropping objects into a puddle (Figure 1, 4). As such, we offer exemplifications of the agency of resistance practices that respect the richness and complexity of young children's play worlds and the

hopeful practices of knowledgeable and nurturing educators who enable the time and space for such play to flourish.

The following 'Tapping' story (Figure 5) outlines a further example of a story where time and space were allowed after advice was sought and put into practice from a specialist advisor on special educational needs and disability. In analysing this story, we noticed the relationalities in-between the changing attitudes to the repeated rhythms of the tapping spoon and how educator resistance shifted to enable time for educator and child agency for play.

Tapping



The first question the reception class teacher asked me about B, was, "how do we get him to stop tapping?" My answer was simple, "you don't"....B's play is repetitive in nature and is difficult to understand. It doesn't meet those all-important early learning goals. But it is still play all the same...it was equally important to allow him the time and space to play in his own way.

... so my advice was this:

"Provide opportunities for tapping in the provision and ensure he has free access to this. Adults to join him side by side in play and tap with him."...They needed permission, justification and rationale to support play in this way...The resistance lies in my assessment, observations and report writing and the way in which this was shared with teachers and practitioners...When we copied B's tapping, we learned something else about him. He was tapping a repeating rhythm.... He would also move his body and smile as he played his spoons...I asked the class teacher at the end of my involvement with B if she still wanted to 'stop the tapping'. She told me, "oh no. We keep finding new things for him to tap with..

Participant Ad1

Figure 5: *Tapping story*

It is interesting to note that as the tapping story (Figure 5) unfolded, the educators shifted in their view through dialogue from seeing tapping sounds as having little value. What shifted this viewpoint was modelling curiosity about the potential of giving time and space to one child's repeated action. Sometimes with children who repeat the same action there is an urge to move them on or shift that action to an adult led agenda tied to curricula or developmental expectations.

What we appreciate here is the role that time and space are playing in exploring the tapping action (Figure 5) that has connections to Alison Clark's (2022) innovative research with slow knowledge. In her scholarship, Clark (2022) offers the provocation of what slow knowledge can do and adult responses that value and attune to children playing in their own time and "may involve resonance and listening, resistance and making room for the longer view" (p.155).

Another story 'Nesting' (Figure 6) captures what else might inform the creation of agency. The 'Nesting' story involved analysing the textural emotions the nest suggested and the weaving of powerful senses of care, nurturing and vulnerability. Resistance here to educational norms that might jeopardise care wove in professional values about how emotional and embodied experiences contribute to how ECE spaces are made.

As I was walking along one of my local footpaths, I looked over, and I saw this really incredibly interwoven, intricately constructed bird's nest.

And still to this day, I can't quite believe it's a bird's nest and not something that someone made and stuck into a hedge, because it just looks so incredibly perfect. And I'm so glad I captured it, because it's been a metaphor for me recurrently.

And it helps me to think about the interweaving of play and love and care and joy in learning, that weaving of that nurturing, beautiful space that cradles and holds a vulnerable egg and a vulnerable baby, vulnerable child, vulnerable creature.

I love the blue.
I love the weave.
I love the intricacy.

It speaks to me about cradling spaces to keep safe and protect, to resist from any education or societal norms or neurotypical approaches that perhaps may not be the best for the child. So that's a description of my metaphor, the nest.

Participant Ad5

Nesting



Figure 6: *Nesting story*

What strikes us in the nesting (Figure 6) story is how relational pedagogies become part of the resistance practice, and in particular the entanglement between *'play and love and care and joy'* (Participant Ad4). This aligns with the concepts of love as an act of resistance (Morris, 2021) and how joy and complex emotional responses are entangled into resisting pressure (Sloan, 2025). Our research contributes by offering storytelling and sharing as a fruitful way to illustrate how love and the emotional are related to resistance and the generation of agency.

For us, this speaks to our second research question (Figure 2) about what hopeful flourishing pedagogies can do and how what we do in ECE can offer sites of hope but also speaks to the complicating factor in how resistance involves an embodied labour. Here we note the connection between the exercising of agency and how pedagogies are felt, experienced and responded to.

In addition, how the nesting story has been shared helps us to answer our fourth research question (Figure 2), about what impacts sharing and connecting resistance stories have for generating hopefulness. Here we take the baton from Peter Moss (2019; 2025), who calls for an urgency in ECE needing and telling new stories. The stories seems to resonate beyond the teller, and when they are shared help to galvanise and recognise the agency educators already exercise. For example, the following participant reflection exemplifies how telling and sharing stories can illuminate the relationship between resistance and agency:

"...am hugely surprised at the influence I have in certain areas of work currently and am convinced that I wouldn't have been ready if hadn't participated in this research. Somehow it has empowered me and given me that nudge into embracing and acknowledging my work and words as micro resistances, and I seize the agency within myself that comes with this badge of honour - for the greater good of education, teachers, ECEC and schools" decisions." (Participant Ad5)

What a new conceptual process of **resistance ↔ agency**, offers as new knowledge

In our conceptual mapping of relationships between **resistance ↔ agency,** we start from the assumption that resistance marks the boundaries of what is currently possible, (Rosińska and Czemiel 2022) while agency is the practice of navigating, circumventing and sometimes transforming those boundaries. We further explore this thinking with posthuman and new materialist theories to evolve an understanding of the **resistance ↔ agency** dynamic in the context of ECE.

We argue that we contribute new knowledge to the scholarship of ECE resistance practices in terms of exemplifying how formalisation is navigated to enable children the right to play. We offer stories as mechanisms for appreciating how emotions and ethical decision making have a place in asserting resistance (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Morris, 2021; Sloan, 2025).

In addition, we contribute some nuance to the process of how **resistance ↔ agency** are related (Bradbury, 2019; Fenech and Sumsion, 2007; Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023) by extending the existing scholarship of more-than-human enactments of agency and resistance in ECE (Albin-Clark, Archer and Chesworth 2024). Thus, we present the new conceptual understanding of **resistance ↔ agency** as a creative and generative way of understanding the flow and reciprocity that happens in moments but also contributes to possible movements in ECE that resist formalisation agendas to enable the flourishing of play cultures. Inspired by Moss (2025) we focus on storytelling and story sharing as the mechanism for illuminating this **resistance ↔ agency** dynamic. Storytelling in practice with children is also resonant with Froebel's teachings (Bruce, McNair and Whinnett, 2020). We perceive this dynamic as a key trait of knowledgeable, nurturing educators that aligns with Froebelian principles.

Impact, Reach and Outputs

As a result of the project, we suggest there has been impact in the following two ways:

1. ***We have seen an attitude change and increased confidence in educator participants – linking to the Froebelian Principles of 'the value of play' and of 'knowledgeable and nurturing educators'.***

Evidence for this can be found in feedback from participants:

> *"I think one of the best things educators can do is resisting timetabling. And the need for timetabling. You know the idea that you do Reading at this time. Maths at this time. Story time at this time, if we can resist and open up and have more flexibility in the time that we have for children. I think that would be one strategy educators could use and prioritise play."* (Event 3 Participant T1*)*
>
> *"So, I think it's just finding those entry points, inspiring other people and celebrating that they know what they're doing. If they're doing it, maybe I can do it too. And I can be that that voice for children because I know in my heart this is what I need to do for children. And then, you know, when teachers teach other, so many teachers are there are doing the best that they can to hold that space where children can play and there is joy and you know, and they're all learning and exploring together, and there is a space, there is time, is unstructured and it's OK and it's celebrated and its value".* (Event 4 Participant Ad3)
>
> *"And recently I've been thinking a lot about teacher ego and how teachers are very powerful agents in the classroom. And like Superman says, "with great power comes great responsibility". That is what I feel like teaches need to tap into because it's, it's being able to take that power, to take that control that the teacher has and use it for good use, as a force for good, to advocate for children and to allow them that space and time."* (Event 6 Participant Ad2)

Figure 7*: Evidence for impact of attitude change and increased confidence.*

2. ***We have witnessed an awareness of the power of resistance and the power in story sharing about resistances.***

Evidence for this includes:

> *"Sharing and celebrating that's why it actually I love the title "Stories and Resistance", and it's just so powerful. And as human beings from the beginning of the days, that's what we've done as humans. Well, we share, we connect to each other and there's something really powerful. When you all of sudden see someone sharing their personal journey of resistance of things that they're doing for the children. That is always something that clicks on you and you think like "Oh, of course, why not?"* (Event 3 Participant Ad3)

"...and sometimes it just takes that right to sort of like have that domino effect and all of a sudden, you know, another teacher might start doing it and all of sudden you create that sort of like shared culture of permission and understanding". (Event 4 Participant Ad3)

"It helps to be part of a collaboration. It helps to have collective voice. It helps for us to fire up each other as everyone's sort of said so far. But I think there's a strength in numbers and I think there's something in empowering, empowering voice and teacher agency. And something in having the courage to encourage." (Event 4 Participant Ad5)

"What I'm thinking though is that I think resistance inevitably is partly going to be sharing stories of sort of frustration and sort of desperation and anger. And I think that's part of it. But I also think, and I think this is what appeals so much to the way that you you're framing this study. It's also it has also got to be hopeful, hasn't it?" (Event 4 Participant Ac3)

Figure 8: *Evidence for impact of awareness of the power of resistance and the power in story sharing about resistances*

Reach and Outputs

Outputs from the project (Figure 9) have been numerous and taken the form of online content and face to face dissemination. At the time of compiling this report, outputs include:

Type of Output	Output	Reach
Conference presentation	EECERA 2025 paper presentation: *Resistance Stories: Telling and sharing stories of children's right to play* Programme-of-symposia-v.4-Sept-2025.pdf	40 attendees
	BECERA 2026 paper presentation: *Storying resistances in Early Childhood Education* BECERA 2026 Programme — CREC	35 attendees
Blog via LinkedIN	Resistance stories: Telling and sharing stories about children's right to play. | LinkedIn 3 Dec 2024	344 Article views 88 Social engagements 12 comments
	What some early educators resist and why | LinkedIn 27 May 2025	193 Article views 84 Social engagements 20 comments

Vlog	Play Talk Radio - Froebel and Play Dr Nathan Archer and Dr Jo Albin Clark - Play Talk Radio | Podcast on Spotify 28 April 2026	Numbers not available
Educator facing article	Nursery World magazine (forthcoming Autumn 2026)	Readership 100k
Academic article	Global Education Review -Abstract accepted for Special Issue: *Mapping an Atlas of Hope and Possibility in Early Care and Education, Volume 13, No. 1 (March 2027)*	
Research webinars	Edge Hill University Conference: *Improving life chances and making hope possible through education* 16-17 July 2025. Presentation: Resistance Stories Tea Party. https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/publications/resistance-stories-tea-party-generating-dialogues-of-hope-on-chil/	55 attendees
	Froebel Trust Online Conference: Involving, Informing and Inspiring Froebel Trust | Online Conference: Involving, Informing and Inspiring 25 April 2026. Presentation: Connecting everyday, principles resistances in early childhood education	231 attendees
Legacy Website	https://round-barge-552.notion.site/Resistance-Stories-1251a6ead69d80ddb5f6c7cd8ba14df2	

Figure 9*: Reach and Outputs*

Conclusion, Implications and Final Thoughts

To circle back to our central concern about play becoming an even more marginalised activity in the ECE landscape, we now conclude our project report with its implications and recommendations. Here we consider the practice and policy implications of pushing back on restricting play and foregrounding crucial early physically active play that celebrates the social and independent child. It is also important that we acknowledge the lived experience of educators who navigate practice day in day out, and the very real pull of prioritising formal instruction that is so often highlighted in policies, assessment and inspection. It is crucial that we always question why children are not afforded the right to play as a norm.

The study has enabled a new conceptual understanding of **resistance ↔ agency**, and its dynamic and self-perpetuating cycle. When educators feel they have and exert their personal agency as resistances; they are further emboldened to utilise and express their agency in support of children's right to play. We would go further and argue that **resistance ↔ agency** is an important role model for children in being with adults who advocate, value and celebrate them as agents of their own learning.

As an overall conclusion we have taken two implication statements that understand resistance as a creation and furthering of agency for both educators and children, and that the conditions for agency to thrive are to be found in everyday interpretations of being attentive to the materiality for play that takes place within real time and spaces. Following on from those implications we offer some practical recommendations.

Stories have been the vehicle for investigating our research questions, and so the following implications acknowledge the potential of storytelling and sharing. The implications and recommendations are organised on different micro and macro scales for resistance practices and are organised around **resistance ↔ agency** as moments and movements.

Implication 1: Resistance happens in moments

Our first implication speaks to the moments that play happens in. What we mean here is that play is not something that necessarily needs special planning or organisation. We argue here that play happens in micro scales of being in and responding to the moment.

It is important to acknowledge how the stories of play happen because time and space have been valued for children to play and involves some rethinking of how timetables and plans are made. One story in the form of a poem written by an undergraduate student (Figure 10) crystallises the significance of valuing moments of and for play,

Welcome, adults, to our world of play. Imagination knows no bounds.

Magic lives here, it's everywhere, you just have to look around.

It may be hard for you to see at first, you're from the adult world,

But if you resist those adult words, you'll find our play has gone unheard.

Our play is our power, our minds are like magic, you must believe this true,

Take a step into our world of play and learn a thing or two.

A teacher trapped in the education machine; "it shouldn't be like this",

Irreflective [sic] of children's world of play; "is there something that's amiss?"

You see, children don't live by checking boxes and lists,

They're much more interested in knowing no limits.

Checklists, assessments, and keeping accounts, the adult world has clouded us of what is paramount.

Awaken yourself from the education machine to see what is truly there — children thinking differently than us with extraordinary ideas to share!

The magic of children is all around us; everywhere we let it be.

Children need our help to play, it's up to you and me!

I resist being blind to the magic of children; they have so much to teach,

not only themselves, but to others and teachers! A world of play is in reach!

Let's give children a platform, a voice, to play, to learn, to live,

For play is a catalyst for learning and growth, the result is transformative.

I resist by turning off from the adult-world, tuning in to children's voices, and dropping out of the education machine. (Participant S2)

Figure 10*: A poem of resistance*

Recommendations for educators of resisting in the moment

- ★ In everyday practice, assign space and materials for children to play by giving time for enquiries to happen.
- ★ Be attentive to what children are doing, and their actions and intentions by noticing what materials and actions are enchanting to them.
- ★ Be curious about what potential is offered and already happening. For example, the tapping of the spoon or the splash created by a puddle (Figure 4, 5).
- ★ Encourage children to tell and share their own stories of play that foreground their own agency.
- ★ Talk more to colleagues and families about play. Celebrate and recognise the learning already taking place through play. For example, the nursery school who took part in our study actively supported each other in leading, advocating for and celebrating play.
- ★ Froebelian principles are supportive for educators in articulating and foregrounding play.
- ★ Acknowledge what might limit play happening and open conversations about increasing opportunities for play.

Implication 2: Resistances shared supports the building of movements

This second implication acknowledges the importance of telling and sharing resistance stories. Participants reflected not only on their own resistances but on the power of sharing these episodes with other educators. It was evident that the reciprocity of this process built an understanding and solidarity across different ECE contexts.

This reflection has implications for the importance and power of communities of practice whether face to face or virtual. Such networks have been eroded over time and yet the demands of ECE in current contexts signal the need for educators to share experiences and offer peer support. We also perceive such networks of learning and mutual support as developing knowledgeable and nurturing educators who prioritise children's play.

Further, the solidarity shared in focus groups and throughout the whole research endeavour suggests that the sharing of these resistances can contribute to wider movements that trouble

the marginalisation of play in ECE life. Contributions from participants suggest that there is a galvanising effect to sharing stories, animating colleagues and building courage:

> *"Yes, it helps to be part of a collaboration. It helps to have collective voice. It helps for us to fire up each other as everyone's sort of said so far. But I think there's a strength in numbers and I think there's something in empowering, empowering voice and teacher agency. And something in having the courage to encourage." (Event 4 Participant 13)*

Recommendations for resistance as building movements

- ★ Make time and space to connect with children, families and other early educators to discuss personal and pedagogical values and principles and children's right to play. Educator educators in further and higher education have a role in supporting the development of critical awareness of resistance and movement building with and for students.

- ★ Build courage in each other by creating safe spaces to share resistances, whatever the scale.

- ★ Safe spaces include conversations with colleagues and students about how curricula policy is not uncritically followed but rather interpreted through foregrounding pedagogical values and principles about children's right to play. Pedagogical values matter because policies are ever shifting. Creating safe spaces for marginalized communities can help to build trust and foster a sense of solidarity.

- ★ Take advantage of (or form) a community of practice to share not only wise practices but resistances too. Online platforms/networks appear to offer potential for further exploration of educator experiences. In particular, the use of Padlet in this research offered opportunities for multi-modal and asynchronous contributions.

- ★ Supporting marginalized voices and amplifying their messages can help to challenge dominant narratives and promote social change.

- ★ Join or develop involvement in professional associations, such as Froebelian membership organisations or unions utilising these spaces for further advocacy and activism work. Building alliances between different communities and organizations can help to amplify the impact of resistance efforts.

Recommendations for policy makers

- ★ Engagement between policy makers and educators needs genuine listening to the lived experience and stories of policy impact that is beyond tokenistic.

- ★ Actively encourage local eco-systems and clusters of mutual support where stories are shared.

- ★ Policy should be designed to encourage professional contribution and interpretation. In policy writing, guidance should encourage educators to contextualise practice to their communities. Educators need to feel empowered to use their pedagogical decision making through their values and principles related to children's right to play.

Final thoughts

Our final message is about the power and potential for children in storytelling. This a question we did not directly ask but shone out through the dialogues and stories.

When educators tell and retell stories to themselves and others about how play happens it increases their empowerment for understanding how the process of **resistance ↔ agency** enables questioning and the capacity for action.

As a profession, we need to tell new stories.

As a last provocation, we offer the potential of further enquiries into how children themselves benefit from telling and retelling their own stories of play where they acknowledge their own agency. A child who foregrounds their own agency is a powerful citizen in the present and for the future.

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Appendix 1 - Participants

Participant Code	Role
Ac2	Lecturer
Ac3	Researcher
Ad1	Local Authority EY SEND advisor
Ad2	Consultant
Ad3	Head of Nursery
Ad4	Early Years Coach
Ad5	Consultant
Ad6	Consultant
Ad7	Lecturer
S1	MA student
S2	Undergraduate student
S3	Undergraduate student
S4	MA student
S5	Undergraduate student
ST1	Nursery School Headteacher
ST2	Nursery School Teacher
ST3	Nursery School Teacher
ST4	Nursery School Educator
ST5	Nursery School Educator
T1	Reception Teacher
T2	Reception Teacher
T3	Teacher/Advocate
T4	Teacher
T5	Reception Teacher
T6	Retired Headteacher