

Play cafes inspired by
Froebelian principles as
new models of Early Learning
and Childcare provisions.

The Play Cafe Project

What would Froebelian
play cafes look like?



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



Δίκτυο
για τα δικαιώματα
του παιδιού
Πέρα από λόγια και συμβόλαια



Funded by

**Froebel
Trust**

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Aslani, Beba, Konstantinos, Vasiliki and a team of young
advisors from the Network for Children's Rights**

'When are we going to have another play cafe?'

'Freedom means to play outside.'

'We want play cafes where we can go and play both inside and outside.'

This project is devoted to Alex, Ariana, Mohammad, Roujda, Ali, a team of young advisors at the Network for Children's Rights in Greece, Beba, Konstantino, Vasiliki, to all the children and families that participated in our project, and to all the children and families that need amazing 'play cafe' spaces!



'More please, more of this please, it was amazing, we want more please.'

Aida, Migrant Black Single mum of 2 children under 7

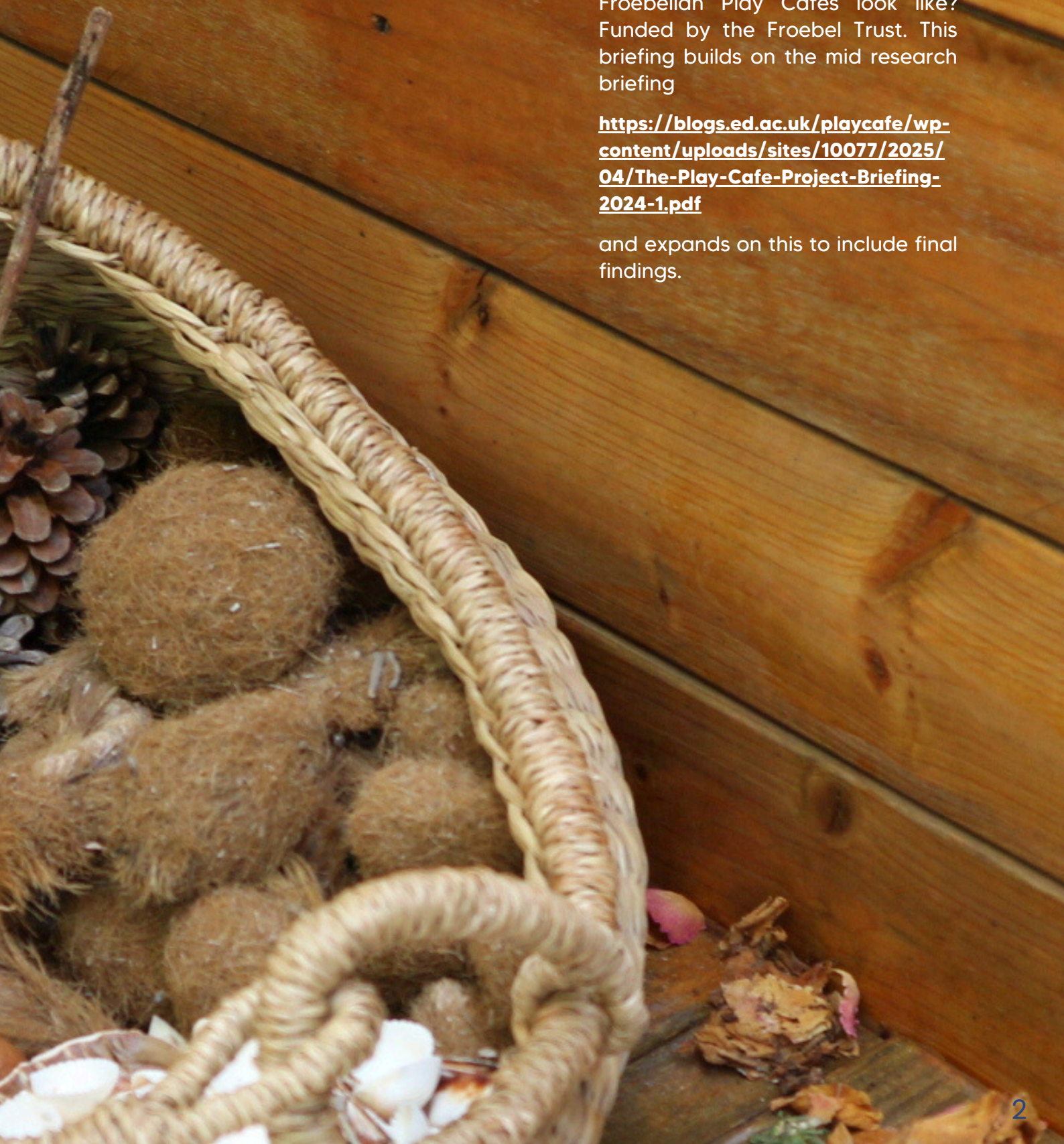
Overview

Final Briefing

This is a final report briefing about the Play Cafe Project: What would Froebelian Play Cafes look like? Funded by the Froebel Trust. This briefing builds on the mid research briefing

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/playcafe/wp-content/uploads/sites/10077/2025/04/The-Play-Cafe-Project-Briefing-2024-1.pdf>

and expands on this to include final findings.



A quick look: The Play Cafe's story summary

'Where do young children play in public life?'

'Are these social and play spaces designed with young children and their communities in mind?'

'What would an 'inclusive'/ equitable social and play space look and feel like?'

'What would an ideal social and play space look and feel like from young children's and their communities' perspectives?'

These are some of the questions our [Play Cafe Project](#) ('The Play Cafe Project: What would Froebelian play cafes look like?'), funded by the Froebel Trust, explored in two contexts: Greece and Scotland. Play and high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) is an urgent global priority evidenced by the substantial financial and political investment in the early years, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and UNICEF'S Child Friendly Cities. However, there is lack of high-quality sustainable community-based play provisions in public life, beyond ELC institutions. **We argue that high quality play cafes inspired by Froebelian principles need to be recognised as new innovative models of ELC provision.**



The play cafe project had two objectives:

- understand the current opportunities that children have to play in community and business play spaces and their underlying philosophies and principles and
- to explore children's, families', practitioners' and business owners/staff views of play cafes and co-design what Froebelian play cafes may look like.

The research questions were:

1. What are the current opportunities that young children have to play in community and business play cafes, and their underlying philosophies and principles?
2. What are young children's, families', practitioners' and business staff's views and experiences about current play cafes, and how would they envision play cafés differently?
3. How can we co-design with children, families and practitioners Froebelian play cafes which are inclusive for all?

19 young advisors

Our research process involved a group of 19 young children advisors. Seven young children advisors (1-8 years old) across Scotland and Greece, four of which were children of two of the researchers (in Scotland) and a group of 12 young children advisors from the Network for Children's Rights in Greece.



42 families

As part of The Play Cafe research project experiences, we worked closely with 42 families in different geographical locales in Scotland and Greece through ethnographic, participatory, creative, art-based and play-based approaches. Throughout the project our research, community-based and co-design work we engaged with **more than 400 participants.**



Key Findings

Children are agents, reclaiming play spaces creatively

Adults experience anxiety and stress

about young children playing in public life and public spaces (especially indoors) with some country-specific differences; 'being in the way', 'nowhere to go'; 'no space to play'.



Noticeable differences in children's play depending on the environment

The Froebelian play cafe

was considered an ideal social and play space, of high quality; a unique space and experience.

Families face barriers

to accessing current available spaces (due to intersections linked to affordability/ economic barriers; accessibility; location; racial, religious and cultural barriers; not feeling welcomed; language barriers; time/activity restrictions).

Play Cafes recognized as an important type of informal high-quality play and social provision in public life

both indoors and outdoors; spaces where both child and parent/carer interact but also spaces where the child can play and the parent/carer relax.

Not all children have access to the same spaces and experiences

Who they are and where they live matters; e.g. refugee families or recently arrived migrant families who do not speak English or families of colour from low social economic backgrounds feel isolated and do not always access public spaces.



Outdoor spaces are highly valued, especially natural spaces like the beach, parks and open green spaces

but they may not always be accessible by all families because of adverse weather conditions.

Power relationships between children and adults or between children / between adults have an impact on play experiences.



Feeling safe, having trust, feelings of belonging and community, diversity in resources and staffing, anti-racism anti-discrimination are important

High-quality social and play spaces (especially indoors) are scarce

'there is nowhere to play in this cafe'; 'we want to play'; 'play all day'.



Ingredients for an ideal social and play space for young children and their families include

high quality play and learning; design, space and resource matters; care, love and relationship matters; pedagogy and meraki matters; role of the adult matters; knowledge sharing, learning and research; a one-stop space for all provisions both for young children and adults/carers; community and social justice; role of the adult matters; Human and other-than-human Matters; children's rights; de/anti-colonial work.

A strong desire for the creation of high-quality Play Cafes;

playing locally is important; as such Play Cafes are needed across diverse communities and neighborhoods.



Technology, young children and play in public and family life

Technology e.g. screens, often used as processes for children's body regulation (e.g. in order to sit down in restaurants/cafes). Children were not really observed to ask for screen devices when engaged in spaces that were enriching e.g. nature, the Froebelian play cafes. Technology e.g. video calls or online gaming used as tool to stay connected with families and friends that lived in different countries. Technology like online games were also used as processes of learning through play e.g. learning numbers, the alphabet, colours or languages.

The importance of food

Food as memory, cultural identity, community, togetherness, belonging and love; food also as exclusion.

The importance of the weather

Key Findings

Some key findings include that young children and their families face many barriers and experience many intersecting inequalities when playing in public life, especially indoors. Not all children have access to the same spaces and experiences; for example, recent refugee families or migrant families that do not speak English or migrant autistic/neurodivergent children feel isolated and do not always access public spaces due to fear of discrimination and racism. High-quality play and social spaces are very rare and families that attended pop-up play cafes (in Scotland and Greece) inspired by Froebelian principles, considered them ideal social and play spaces. The role of the adult in facilitating high quality play and social experiences is integral. Therefore, questions around who has access to high-quality play, what kinds of play are valued, and how various cultural conceptions of children are reflected or excluded are persistent across Greece (particularly in Athens), and Scotland (Edinburgh), across both community and private venues.

Contemporary play cafes have the potential to perpetuate social exclusion. Community places may strive to be accessible and 'inclusive' but may not have consistent funding or support. Both types provide significant play experiences when they are at their finest. The difficulty lies in making sure that these chances are not only created for the convenience or financial gain of adults, but are also fairly distributed, culturally appropriate and genuinely child-community centered.

Play cafes are often appreciated by families and children as spaces for fun, play, socialization, food and relaxation but views across different groups reveal deeper complexities. Some children enjoy these environments but often feel constrained by adult rules or overly structured play, desiring more freedom and creativity. Families, especially from marginalised backgrounds, may experience play cafes as exclusive due to cost, cultural barriers, accessibility (in terms of distance particularly if they are in the center of Athens or across Edinburgh). Children, parents and practitioners critique the lack of educational depth, critical reflexivity and lack of free play opportunities, seeing potential for more child-centred approaches, equitable and meaningful engagement. Meanwhile, business staff juggle customer satisfaction with profit and business sustainability. Across all perspectives, there's a shared aspiration for play cafes to become more accessible, child-led, culturally responsive and community spaces where play is not only fun but also empowering and equitable.

What did we find?

Key Overall findings

- Play cafes **underpinned by child-community centred, social justice and sustainable principles**, like Play Cafes inspired by Froebelian principles, provide accessible high-quality play and care experiences for young children to live well, learn, play and thrive.
- Play cafes that are considered **'high-quality' are scarce**.
- **Play cafes** inspired by Froebelian principles need to be **recognised as new innovative models of ELC provisions**.
- **Families urgently need high-quality play cafes** in community centres and co-being, co-working spaces so that a) children and their families can access high quality play, early learning and childcare, and social experiences, b) parents/carers can participate in the workforce flexibly, have access to social networks, community support, skill development and recreational opportunities, and c) families (children and carers/parents) can get informal support and access to information linked to well-being and health.
- **Play cafes underpinned by child-community centred and social justice** pedagogical practices provide safe and equitable spaces for families of diverse/marginalised backgrounds.
- **Play cafes that are underpinned by Froebelian principles** are designed with social justice and sustainable intention which should be reflected in the design of the space, the play materials, the pedagogical practices, the food and the social and play experiences making the world a better and sustainable place, so that children and families live well in the now and in the future.





Co-designing Froebelian play cafes that are equitable for all requires a genuinely collaborative, participatory approach where children, families, and practitioners are seen as experts of their own experiences. This means creating space for open dialogue, listening deeply and actively to children's ideas, valuing their creativity, and embedding their suggestions into design decisions, from the layout and materials to the play provision. Families, especially those from marginalized and deprived backgrounds, need to be engaged in ways that acknowledge and seek to remove barriers such as language, time, cost, cultural, religious, race barriers and power disparities. Practitioners, alongside parents/carers and children bring vital insights about child-centred and social justice pedagogies, helping to ensure that play remains open-ended, relational, and connected to nature, community and the world, in line with Froebelian principles. By embracing co-design as an ongoing process rather than a one-time consultation, we can shape play cafes that reflect diverse lived experiences and foster community, justice, joy and belonging for all.

Existing play cafes might be costly, too structured or culturally inhospitable, or not based explicitly on a pedagogical practice/philosophy, even though they frequently include some recreational or educational activities.

Additionally, often play cafes will adjust to the needs of the families that visit them, especially if it becomes a matter of business sustainability. Some have incorporated more 'unhealthy' foods, soft play, or screens (Greece) to accommodate families and keep their business alive. However, our observational findings revealed that spaces such as soft plays are not spaces where children were observed to be engaged in deep play and are often spaces where children focus on one aspect of play which is more physical; for some children, such spaces are often overwhelming. Deep play was observed consistently in nature (beach, woodlands etc), the Froebelian play cafes, and spaces featuring arts and creating with open ended and everyday play materials. Engaging in real life and daily activities was valued by children and was also observed to be linked to learning. Playing with a purpose was a common theme that families and children mentioned as important. Technology like screens were often used as processes for children's body regulation (e.g. parent/children needed a moment to eat, wanted the child to sit on the chair until they complete their food at a restaurant etc). We observed that some children might ask for access to screens if the space and the people were not engaging, enriching and curious. Parents also tended to offer children devices when the space did not offer opportunities to engage with their children e.g. like at restaurants. Children were not really observed to ask for screen devices when they played in nature, the Froebelian play cafes or in outdoors spaces. Technology e.g. video calls or online gaming was also used as a tool to stay connected with families and friends that lived in different countries and at home. Technology (i.e. online games) was also used as a process of learning through play e.g. learning numbers, the alphabet, colours or languages.

THE Play CAFE PROJECT

Research, knowledge sharing, community-based and co-design project
 at early childhoods, play and public life in Scotland and Greece

*Where do young children play in public life?
 current social and play spaces designed with young children and their communities?
 and an ideal social and play space look like, feel like from young children's
 and their communities' perspectives?
 could an 'inclusive'/ equitable social and play space feel like, look like?*

....Well a play cafe is you get to a cafe at a coffee shop and there has to be a place to play. You know like at the outside like a cafe, or maybe like a coffee shop or like a play ground. It sort of a playground but not a really one...

Guided by a group of **young advisors** from **Scotland and the Network for Children's Rights 'Culture Lab'** in Greece.

Being ... with young children, their families and their communities

Learning ... with young children and their communities

Sharing ... experiences and knowledges

Doing / co-designing ... social and play spaces for young children and their communities

Presented in Partnership with

Eating and sharing food is also a very important practice and for some families healthy food options as well as dietary considerations like Vegan, Vegetarian, Halal are very important. Not having Halal food for example would be a reason of exclusion of Muslim families. Food was considered memory, cultural identity, a practice of connection, togetherness, belonging and love.

Moreover, children often felt overwhelmed in settings that are controlled by adults and exhibit a need for autonomy, creativity and ownership in their play. At the same time, parents/carers and professionals stressed the value of areas that foster community development and engagement. It has been demonstrated that co-creating play cafes with children, families and practitioners with intention creates 'high quality' play cafe provisions, while fostering social cohesion among various groups and enabling meaningful play and cultural relevance.



The weather was mentioned in both countries as a factor that plays a role and can restrict children's play (cold and rainy in Scotland or very hot in the summer in Greece). However, both indoor and outdoor spaces are very important for children and families. Having continuous access and more permanent play and social spaces for families is very important, which also enhances sense of ownership, belonging and trust.

Child/community-centred pedagogical approaches where children are free and creative with facilitation, guidance and collaboration with adults were also identified as important.

Despite the lack of high-quality play and social provisions for families, children were observed to be active agents in reclaiming play spaces creatively; however, **there is a strong desire for the creation of high-quality play cafes in diverse communities/neighbourhoods.**

What are Play Cafes?

Children conceptualised play cafes as inter/intra-generational social and play spaces that are free to access. Play cafes were viewed here as places for connection, for looking after each other (care/love), and for eating. Play cafes were also considered fun and as spaces that have play resources and books, paint, music and experiences linked to dance and food/cooking. Play cafes are considered spaces which offer 'hands-on' everyday and real experiences (e.g., 'making coffee'), spaces where you can go into imaginative worlds and spaces that you can be with friends. Play cafes have inside and outside spaces and are like playgrounds - but not exactly like the ones that we currently find in public life and outdoors. Play cafes were also viewed by some children as spaces for intersectional and intergenerational activism, for example spaces that should be accessible to 'poor people' too and/or people from marginalised backgrounds.

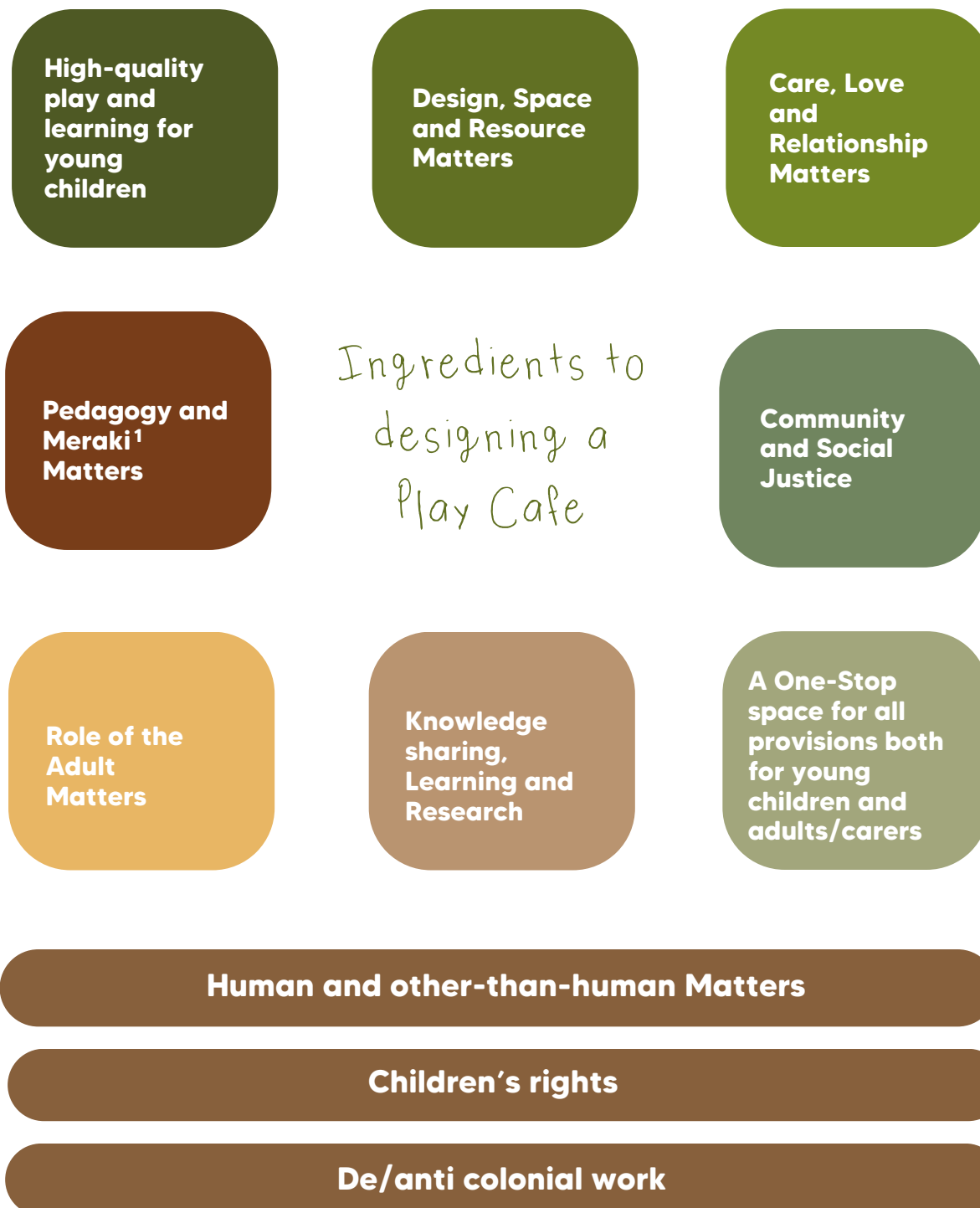


Ingredients to designing Play Cafes

Inspired by Froebelian principles

As part of our research, our community-based and co-design initiatives, children and parents/carers shared with us what matters when we create ideal social and play spaces for them. We have named these **the ingredients to designing a Play Cafe**.

For further details about this please see our Reflective resource which takes you through the Ingredients to designing a Play Cafe.



¹ Inspired by Konstantina Papaspyropoulou



As we are developing this work, we are coming to conceptualise play cafes as important types of informal high-quality play and social provisions in public life for young children and related adults, as life-affirming spaces and initiatives and as spaces for intergenerational and intersectional activism.

Play cafes are innovative models for integrated and whole family support.

Understanding the various nuances and intersectional conceptualisations around 'high-quality' play is a complex practice as it evolves over time (Nxumalo 2019; Viruru 2001) and it also needs to be decolonised (Nxumalo, 2019) by critically reflecting on and disrupting the dominance of universalist, white Western, and Eurocentric ideals (Nxumalo 2019; Viruru 2001; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2014).

What does this mean for us in this context?

- How do we decolonise Froebelian early childhood pedagogical practices? Can we?
- How can we offer high-quality play spaces and at the same time disrupt the use of a universal checklist (which is influenced by white Euro-centric Western practices) (Viruru 2001; Nxumalo 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2014) in creating existing play spaces for children?
- Through this project, how are we going to learn from those who have been engaging in this work of decolonisation (within and beyond early childhood), to decolonise our own minds, processes and practices? What does this mean practically?

Applying Froebelian principles in everyday public life is not a 'copy and paste' approach; it needs to be culturally and contextually specific and responsive, co-designed with communities of practice.

As part of our work in collaboration with Greek practitioners we co-created Play Cafe Principles inspired by Froebelian principles. In this project Kristina and Effie (Eftychia-Afroditi Panagopoulou) led on drafting play cafe principles based on our work (research-practice), engaging the whole team across Scotland and Greece. The principles were also based on the research findings and on children's and families lived experiences and perspectives.

Froebelian Principles

Our project was inspired by Froebelian Principles, please see here: <https://froebel.org.uk/about-us/froebelian-principles>)

As part of our project Kristina Konstantoni (Scotland) and Eftyxia-Afroditi Panagopoulou (Greece), alongside a group of international practitioners, and based on the research findings with children and families, co-created specific play cafe principles inspired by Froebelian principles

The importance of play

The importance of childhood and children's rights

Love, Care and Meraki

Attunement with nature and Sustainability



Joy and hope

Autonomy and Harmonious Collective Co-Existence



Participatory pedagogies

Pedagogies that are attuned to children's rhythms

Pedagogies of the commons

Free play, Creativity and Freedom of expression

Knowledges, Embodied Experiences and Critical Reflexivity



Social Justice, Anti-discrimination, Anti-racism and Anti-colonial

Froebelian Principles

The importance of play

Play is a right that needs to be safeguarded. Play is innate and is very important for both children and adults as it connects, discovers, experiments, learns, relaxes, creates commons. Play can be serious business and fun. We recognise that play can also be a hurtful/toxic experience for children and this needs to be acknowledged and changed. Through play, children understand and experience the world and others.

The importance of childhood and children's rights

Childhood is important both in the present and for the future. It is not just a preparation for the next stage in life, however experiences in childhoods also have longer term impacts.

Children have rights to protection, participation and provision that need to be protected, safeguarded and materialised.

Free play, Creativity and Freedom of expression

Free play, self-directed and child-community centred play is so important for children's and adults' learning, creativity and being. Creativity and freedom to express ideas, emotions, feelings and experiences through multimodal ways enables children and adults to express themselves in different ways. Through this children and adults express their 'inner outer and their outer inner'.

Autonomy and Living together Harmoniously

Autonomy and interdependence in children's play and social experiences are important. Being able to participate and be part of larger communities through community organisations, civil society, families and friends is also important. Everything in the world is connected, entangled and interdependent. Both children and adults are relational and interdependent and seek to live together in harmonious, respectful and collective co-existence. The play cafe is a one stop space for both children and adults/carers to play, learn, enjoy, relax, get support. A space that also enables parents/carers to co-work whilst the child plays.

Attunement with nature and Sustainability

Being attuned with nature and paying attention to the world and things around us, ensuring that our actions create a sustainable impact both for the now and for the future.

Love, Care and Meraki

An ethics and praxis of love and radical care of both self, others and the wider world, is key for living well, for learning and emancipation. Pedagogy that is guided by professional love, care and meraki provides children with transformational, liberatory, curious and inspiring experiences.

Knowledges, Embodied, Experiences and Critical Reflexivity

All knowledges are valued and respected, academic, practice-based and embodied & lived knowledges. The play cafe space encourages continuous critical reflexivity and lifelong learning developments. Checking our biases and prejudices personally and collectively and taking action is essential. The play cafe values co-created knowledge towards more equitable and sustainable livelihoods.

Social Justice, Anti-discrimination, Anti-racism and Anti-colonial

Play cafe spaces are spaces that practice social justice principles, anti-discrimination, anti-racism and anti-colonial practices. This means going beyond celebrating diversity and seeking 'inclusion', to radical transformation and equitable and liberatory processes, practices, structures and experiences. Social justice principles acknowledge interconnected and entangled common worlds, inequities and seek to challenge and remove these. Social justice approaches strive towards empathy, respect, solidarity and emancipation/liberation.

Joy and hope

Joy and hope are important for living well, resisting hardships, and imagining better futures.

A pedagogy that is attuned to the different rhythms of childhoods. Encouraging the best play experiences through participative approaches, mutual collaboration and understanding of children's and families' lived experiences, interests, needs, their histories and cultures.

Participatory pedagogies

Pedagogies that are attuned to children's rhythms

Pedagogies of the commons

A slow approach that places children and their communities at the heart of practice. Providing spaces, processes and resources that enable children and their communities to actively co-create, design and research equitable, sustainable and accessible spaces and experiences in their communities

Community, families, children, parents, carers, policymakers and stakeholders working together towards a collective and shared approach in providing the best play and social experiences to children and families, sharing ideas and resources in an equitable, participatory and democratic way.

Our other work

Find below our other published resources and social platforms to keep updated with our work.

We would love to hear from you, join us on instagram and on our mailing list.



The Play Cafe
Project: 1st Briefing



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The Play Cafe Project



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Designing a
Play Cafe



Design
Proposal: Small
Family Space
at MHSES

Stay updated on our work,
conferences and seminars
through our website,



Refer to our 'Final Briefing: The Play cafe Project' for
a detailed and longer version.



The Play Cafe Project

The Final Briefing. Short version



@theplaycafeproject

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