Exploring ‘Freedom with Guidance’ in Outdoor Nursery Environments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report of a Froebel Trust funded research project explores the Froebelian principle of **Knowledgeable and Nurturing Educators** supporting children's interests through 'freedom with guidance'. Our research has developed new professional learning knowledge about the ways in which nursery educators offered 'freedom with guidance' in outdoor environments. Our study aimed to support knowledgeable, nurturing early childhood educators to use wearable technology to 'slow down' (Clark, 2023) and carefully observe and professionally reflect on the ways in which they were offering 'freedom with guidance'. We captured the 'tensions in translating Froebelian ideas into practice' (Aksoy-Kumru, 2024) and further explored the challenges in guiding educators to guide children (Cameron and Boyles, 2022). Educators of all participating settings had the opportunity to share their research insights in a final workshop we organised. This enabled them to start developing a Froebelian mindset and common research discourse, akin to a community of practice.

The key findings in this study are:

Freedom and guidance was observed to co-exist in the day-to-day practices outdoors.
Freedom existed within parameters such as routines, safety and prosocial rules. Guidance was effective when the participants (adults and children) had the freedom to make decisions and choose.

Freedom with guidance was influenced by all: adults, children and the environment.
It was not only the educator who influenced what freedom with guidance looked like in practice but the environment too. It included several agents (human and material) in constant interplay. It may be offered by the environment and natural resources; by children to adults; adults to children; children to other children; and by adults to adults.

Freedom with guidance involved dynamic and demanding pedagogical thinking, requiring attentiveness, inquisitiveness, curiosity, knowledge of the children, skill and confidence.
Watching and reflecting on actions enabled educators to appreciate the importance of being flexible, in-the-moment, opportunistic and prepared to change course in short notice, if children's 'guidance' suggested that a change of plan was needed.

Wearable technology assisted educators to become more consciously aware and reflect on their pedagogical thinking.
The use of wearable technology offered new insights into children and educators' first-hand experiences from their vantage point/perspective. This helped educators to reflect on how they facilitated freedom with guidance and influenced their future interactions in natural environments.

Research conversations within and between settings created opportunities for educators to share knowledge, priorities and values.
They enabled educators to commonly explore Froebelian concepts and the ways they informed their pedagogies and to develop a common discourse. In our project, this led to the emergence of a Froebelian community of practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

Outdoor learning in natural environments is beneficial for children and adults (D'Ascoli and Hunter, 2022). Prins. *et al*. (2023) claim that learning out of doors and being in nature increases the complexity of young children's language and also appears to have social and emotional benefits for children *and* their educators (Natural England, 2016). However, constraints in practice include educators' individual values and experiences, limited resources and policies that demand conformity to particular ways of doing things (Mart and Waite, 2023). Furthermore, outdoor learning can be a victim of competing curricular demands (Streelansky, 2017; Fiennes *et al*., 2015; Waite, 2020) that arise from a culture of performativity where pedagogical decision making is determined by external goals and metrics determined by policy makers.

This research study built upon previous participatory action research using wearable technology in outdoor nursery environments (Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025). We employed Participatory Action Research (PAR) to enable our participants to collectively examine the conditions shaping their practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) in relation to the Froebelian principle of 'freedom with guidance'. Through this project, reflective engagement with instances of their practice enabled our partners to develop new pedagogical knowledge and confidence and to conceptualise and generate knowledge about Froebelian practice and in particular, the principle of freedom with guidance.

Our study aimed to:

- develop early childhood educators' ability to offer 'freedom with guidance' when children play outdoors
- support early childhood educators to be knowledgeable, nurturing educators through (a) careful observation and (b) professional reflection
- create a Froebelian community of practice of early childhood educators via the creation of a Froebelian hub in Kent.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Froebel viewed play as children's most natural way of engaging with and making sense of the world, describing it as 'the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul' (Froebel, 1887, p. 57). Bruce (2011, p. 24) argues that child-initiated and child-directed play and creativity provide young children with distinctive opportunities for learning, development, and wellbeing. This emphasis on 'free expression' and child-directed activity, however, has often been misread as advocating mere free play (Broström, 2017), suggesting that adults should adopt a passive observer role and allow children unrestricted freedom to learn autonomously (Bruce, 1991; McNair & Powell, 2020).

The relationship between children's freedom and adults' guidance has frequently been framed as dichotomous, reflecting broader tensions in the literature between play and learning, progressive and instrumental pedagogies (Broström, 2017; Smedley & Hoskins, 2020) and the longstanding divide between education and care in early years practice (Smedley & Hoskins, 2020; Stephen, 2010). However, Froebelian educators seek unity and connectedness, rather than separation and division fostering the connectedness of children with the world, between learning and play and between freedom and guidance (McNair & Powell, 2020). 'Froebelian thinking is a dynamic endeavour rather than a fixed state of mind' (Aksoy Kumru, 2024, p. 12) thus requiring decision making and attuned judgement by educators on behalf of children. Froebel advocated that children should be free from 'inappropriate teaching' considering freedom as the ability to participate, choose and decide, and for children to be learning at their own speed. In other words, 'a freeing of the individual to achieve' (p.66) attained by his or her own endeavour as 'self-government' or able to determine their own actions (Leibschner, 1992, p.67). Leibschner (1992, p. 69) continues that '...he (the child) is free to determine his own actions according to the laws and demands of the play he is involved in, and through and in his play, he is able to feel himself to be independent and autonomous' (Leibschner, 1992, p.69).

Bruce (2021) used the metaphor of a conversation to describe these playful exchanges between adults and children. In the spirit of this conversational dance, all partners interact and take turns in initiating, triggering, following or altering the route of the interaction. She argues 'sometimes children begin to initiate play, and sometimes adults trigger it. This is *freedom with guidance*' (p. 66).

This dialogic relationship between children's free play and adults' guidance continues to be debated in the early years sector. Educators often express concerns about and resistance to adult guidance, increasing pressures for "schoolification" that narrow children's experiences

into measurable outcomes (Broström, 2017; Stephen, 2010). They often feel uncertain about how and when to get involved (Bubikova-Moan *et al.*, 2019) and how to interact with the children and develop a play-based pedagogy without interfering (Fisher, 2016) and hijacking their play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). These tensions are especially significant today as accountability frameworks intensify and early learning becomes increasingly outcome driven and reduced to measurable skills (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2022) which constrains child led play practices.

The adult's role in offering freedom with guidance 'appears deceptively simple yet is extraordinarily complex' (Bruce, 1997, p.97). It requires a deep understanding of children's play, openness to the play themes, and a willingness to relinquish control. It also requires adults' sensitivity, flexibility and continuous judgements about when play should be left uninterrupted and when intervention or support is needed. Careful observation and ongoing reflection are central to this process, enabling adults to understand children's learning and make meaningful connections with wider learning intentions. Froebel considered observation to be a fundamental part of early years practice (Louis, 2022). A Froebelian observer is 'internally active, externally passive' (Kalliala, 2006, p.124) and participation requires purpose to facilitate a process of 'unfolding' and enabling what is within the child to emerge (Gill, 2025). Gill (2025) argues that this is not about shaping or moulding to preexisting adult initiated ideas but instead about nurturing the conditions in which children can flourish. She claims that 'freedom with guidance is the living practice of unfolding'.

A key aspect of a Froebelian approach is knowledgeable, nurturing educators 'who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice… [and] observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through freedom with guidance' (Froebel Trust, 2026). Tovey (2017) argues about the importance of ongoing professional learning through training, observation, research, reflection and discussion. What is crucial is 'the sensitivity of the adult, the ability to adjust his or her interactions to the child and the context, and the understanding to make informed judgements' (p.111).

The originality of this research study is in its focus on supporting educators to enact freedom with guidance in outdoor environments. A key Froebelian principle is engagement with nature. Tovey (2017, p.3) argues that 'direct, everyday experience of the natural world outdoors is essential so that children can learn to appreciate its wonders and begin to understand the interrelationship between all living things'. Outdoor spaces offer children unique opportunities for freedom to initiate, sustain, and extend their own play and for movement, imagination, creativity, and sensory engagement (Bruce, 2021; Tovey, 2017). From a Froebelian perspective, the outdoor environment complements indoor provision while also offering distinctive learning experiences that cannot be replicated indoors. The garden is central to a Froebelian early years setting, where children learn through direct immersion in nature rather than solely about it (Tovey, 2017). Within this framework, adults

play an active role in supporting play by providing materials and engaging in informed, sensitive observation and interaction (Tovey, 2017).

The outdoors was the research context and a significant aspect of this study. Children's and adults' relationship with (outdoor) places were at the centre of the educators' considerations. Outdoor environments offer rich opportunities for exploration and playful learning and, as such, it was seen as the third teacher in this research study (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Our research aimed to support educators to develop this 'ability to adjust his or her interactions to the child and context' (Tovey, 2017, p.111) within outdoor learning spaces.

3. METHODOLOGY

RESEARCHING WITH EDUCATORS

This research celebrates the value of professional learning opportunities that are centred on the pedagogical priorities of nursery educators who are viewed as experts within their own contexts. Researching *with* educators, rather than *on* educators places them at the centre of the production of knowledge (Wilson, 2017). Our study aimed to support nursery educators to review and reconsider their pedagogical interactions with children. Educators used wearable Go-Pro camera technology to capture instances of their pedagogical practices as they offered 'freedom with guidance' and reflected on the opportunities, tensions and challenges in relation to freedom with guidance.

Working in partnership with educators from three nurseries previously, we had developed a visual and reflective methodology, called 'we-search' (Vincent, 2021; Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025), that educators used to closely examine the ways in which they interacted with children in natural environments. We-search is a democratic participatory methodological approach to making sense of pedagogical reflections. It is framed by Bakhtin's (1984) notion of language as a struggle for meaning. Within collaborative focus groups, we had previously captured interpretivist, reflexive and dialogic episodes of learning by using wearable cameras. We had found that this approach was effective in supporting educators to see their practice from alternative viewpoints. Chen (2020) claims that if educators can select the episodes themselves, it leads to greater focus and less overwhelm from the data quantity. The advantage of using action cameras is that they can provide viewers with the view of the wearer. This is not as easy with using other digital capture technologies. They appear to have many advantages such as their ability to resist the elements as well as offering good viewing quality and ease of use (Magnar Hov and Neegaard, 2020). We had found that there is potential in the use of video for professional learning however we also found that educators needed to feel that they were part of a strong learning community and prepared to review in the company of trusted we-searching peers. The educators held a dual role as researchers and educators.

This approach had offered our we-searchers opportunities to reflect on their pedagogical beliefs and values in relation to the ways that they were interacting with children (Sumsion *et al*., 2015). They were able to review their decisions for sharing particular excerpts and theorise on what was important to them and why. It helped to elucidate their tacit thinking (Polanyi, 1966) and to enable them to be more consciously aware of what they thought and reflect on this. Video had enabled our participants to collaboratively examine interactions from alternative viewpoints and to reconsider their pedagogical approaches, personal values and beliefs in relation to the teaching episodes that they selected. It had supported their self-reflection as it drew attention to new knowledge not previously noted (Harlin, 2014), because they had to make a decision about what to record and why thus constituting a

theory (Goodwin, 1994) and conveying a professional decision. We felt that because using technology as a tool for professional learning had enhanced the educator's abilities to reflect on how their beliefs and values affected their interactions with children.

OUR RESEARCH PARTNERS AND ARRANGEMENTS

We approached three nurseries within our university partnership who were known to us from our previous research and who have an established relationship with us. This is because we knew that establishing trust and mutual collaboration for close-to-practice research takes time and we had already established relationships with them. Then, we formally invited these three nurseries to be part of the project. Ten staff members with different roles in the nursery were involved. The nurseries expressed a commitment to capturing themselves in practice working with 2–4-year-olds and using Go Pro cameras to record their interactions with children in the outdoors. They were committed to develop their understanding of 'freedom with guidance' and to support the establishment a Froebelian hub in Southeast England and to activities relating to this. Our previous research has shown that the research is enhanced if the technology is already part of the routine practice in the nursery (Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025). The children and adults in the nurseries taking part were already familiar with using wearable technology.

We had an initial meeting with the three settings to explain the project aims, timescales and commitments required. This served two purposes: firstly, to introduce Froebel's principles and the concept of 'freedom with guidance' and give them the opportunity to discuss this. (There was no requirement to know about Froebelian practice for participating settings). Secondly, to create a social space and opportunities for the development of a community of Froebelian practice for our partners. This was in line with one of our research aims. There was a second meeting that all educators attended together at the end of the study, which will be discussed later.

THE SEQUENCE OF OBSERVATIONS-REFLECTIONS-FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The research process involved three interconnected stages (observation-reflection-collaborative discussion), repeated in three cycles. Firstly, educators wore the cameras to capture several episodes of interactions with children in a natural environment, before reviewing these independently. They then each selected a couple of short interactions where they considered themselves to be offering 'freedom with guidance', that they were prepared to share with their colleagues and us (university-based academics) in focus groups.

During the focus groups, which took place within the university, we viewed/re-viewed, commented on and discussed these episodes in turn. Audio recorded conversations were then transcribed and shared with educators before the next focus group. . As the research developed, the educators noticed the various ways in which they, and others in the group, were interacting with children and discussed ways of developing this further to enhance the children's experiences of learning. They were encouraged to consider their own relationship with nature and the living world as a way of facilitating pedagogical considerations. As Tovey (2022) claims, "dispositions towards the natural world are formed early in life and Froebel argued that if adults show indifference or disdain for nature, the child's seed of knowledge and interest which is just beginning to germinate can be crushed. It is therefore important that those who work with young children should be knowledgeable and keen observers of both children and nature" (Tovey, 2022, p.5).

At the end of each focus group educators would make collective decisions about what, whom, or where to capture the next data set. This protocol of capture, individual reflections and group discussions was repeated three times (see Figures 1 and 2).

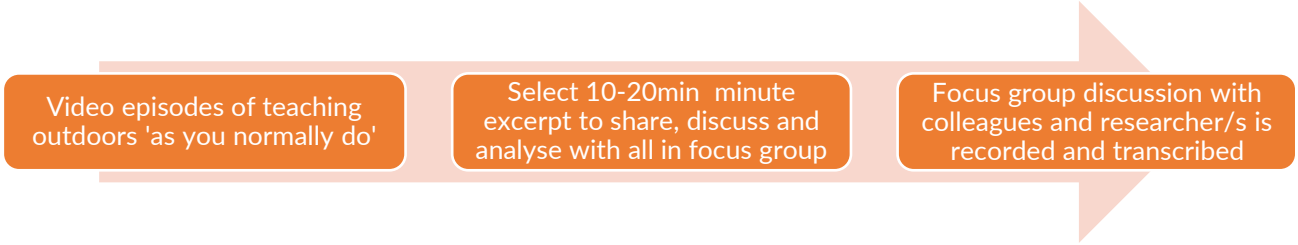

Figure 1: The sequence of data capture

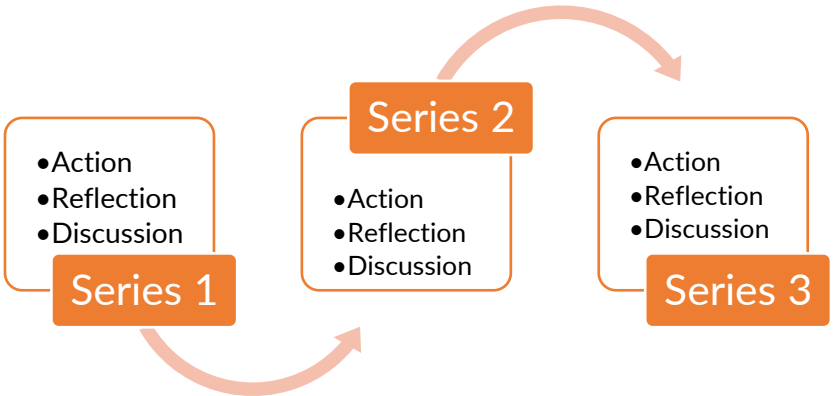

Figure 2: A series of three discussions

A final meeting took place with all three settings together, to discuss the Froebelian journey and to further consider the ways in which the fledgeling community of practice could develop next. In preparation for this collaborative discussion, educators from each setting had analysed their own data (for more information about analytical processes see next section) and shared their findings with the other settings. This final meeting enabled educators to explore their values, priorities and conditions shaping their practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) and to begin to develop a shared discourse about the concept of freedom with guidance and to establish a Froebelian Community of Practice (Bruce, 2021).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data in the form of transcripts from our conversations in focus groups and in the two meetings (initial and final meetings), were sequential in nature. In other words, the focus of conversation in one meeting informed the next one (see Figure 3). We therefore had to transcribe and conduct a preliminary analysis of each data set before the next meeting. This enabled us to adopt a funnelled approach, progressively refining our focus.

Data were analysed inductively and deductively drawing on Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach. Inductively, collaborative conversations throughout the focus groups formed the first layer of the approach. This began with each educator describing specific events of what they did and how before gradually progressing to higher levels of abstraction. The next layer focused on understanding perspectives in relation to Froebelian principles, aims and beliefs about offering 'freedom with guidance' through further analysis. The themes from this layer informed the final layer, where the educators and researchers analysed the transcripts separately, increasing internal validity before collaboratively settling on the key themes.

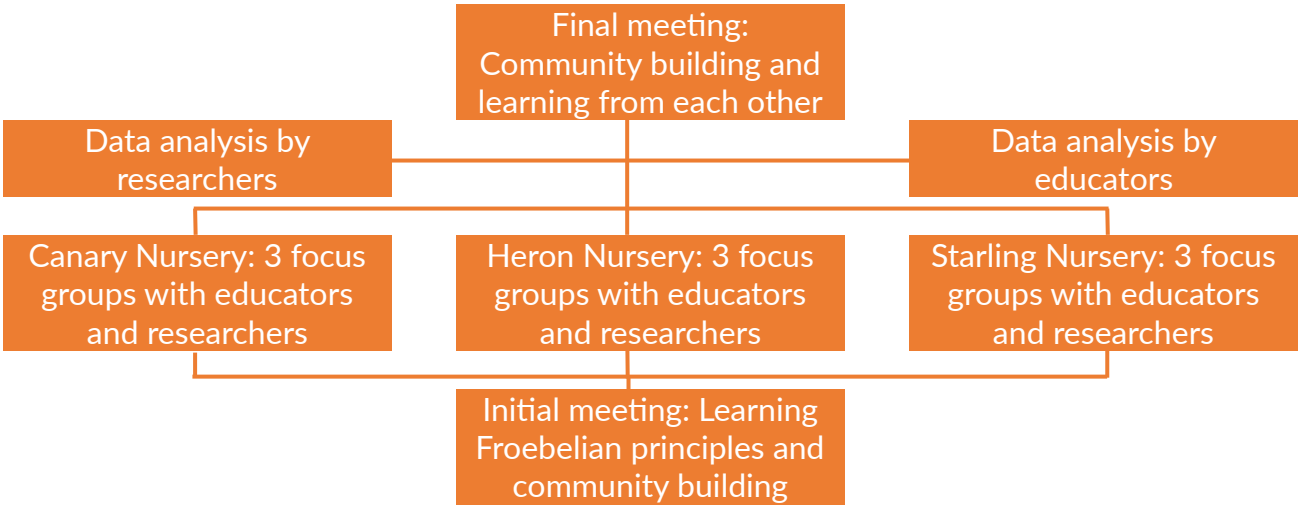

Figure 3: The interconnected nature of data

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This project involved human participants and the processing of data not in the public domain and as such, an application for ethical approval and agreement from our university's ethics committee was gained before fieldwork commenced. The project was conducted using British Education Research Association (BERA, 2024) and European Early Childhood Education Research Association (Bertram *et al*., 2025) ethical guidelines. Data collection involved video and audio content, educators' job roles, gender, qualifications, children's ages, genders and information about SEN. The information collected was for public interest and is of interest and relevance to the study aims. The lawful basis for the collection and processing of personal data was based on consent. All video data was stored on individual setting devices and not shared with the university. Audio data was stored on a CCCU password protected device. As part of the ethical review, a health and safety risk assessment was conducted and submitted.

Participants were supported by the university researchers throughout the project. Consent for adult participants and verbal and parental consent for children's participation (as routinely occurring activity within the setting) was requested. The adult participants also sought additional assent from the children for filming. Information about the project accompanied the invitation and timelines and protocols were shared and discussed within each setting. Information for parents was shared via the settings' routine ways of communication with families, and they were invited to speak to staff should they require further information. All data was stored and managed by the settings and the researchers did not have access to video data. Adult participants were supplied with the contact details of the lead researchers in the participant information sheet in the case that they wished to withdraw from the research. They were required to contact the lead researcher asking to have their data removed. (No one selected to have their data removed).

Our aim was to establish a collegiate ethos. There was ongoing communication between the researchers and the educators to ensure they felt comfortable and positive about their engagement. All participants' contributions were of equal value, irrespective of their roles and responsibilities at the setting. Having honest conversations about roles and expectations and enabling individuals to step back and withdraw from the study should they wish helped mitigate potential impact on professional relationships (no one selected to do this). The aim of this activity was to help educators to feel empowered through this research process and this was shared from the start of the research study.

4. FINDINGS: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM EACH OTHER

Our research conversations generated a wealth of findings. These are divided into three broad categories each consisting of several interconnected and often overlapping themes. The broad categories are:

1. Insights into the relationship between freedom and guidance; what it involves, how it can manifest and the role of participants and the natural world
2. Conditions that shape or constrain freedom with guidance
3. The role of the methodology (observation and reflection) in supporting educators' professional knowledge

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEDOM AND GUIDANCE

Educators did not see freedom and guidance as opposites, neither did they see them as existing independently of each other. They viewed these concepts as co-existing, mutually dependent, alternating and interacting within a dynamic relationship. Freedom could only exist if there was guidance about rules, limits, routines and the need to stay safe.

Educators shared several incidents reflecting their beliefs in the importance of establishing 'ground' rules before allowing children freedoms to explore.

> *Children need boundaries to feel safe… they need to know what the expectations are … you need to show them how to behave… show them what you want them to do…* (Starling Nursery educator).

They referred to safety, rules, the importance of holding hands and staying close to adults when visiting the park; the height children could reach when climbing fences in their nursery garden; the rule of not throwing objects and hurting others; or prosocial rules such as sharing, helping others, taking turns, to name a few. These were the parameters within which freedom could exist. In these instances, guidance took precedence over freedom.

There were also times when freedom took precedence over guidance. Participants discussed the need to have an open mind when engaging with the children, to have freedom to enable children to lead activities, rather than holding preconceived ideas about what children should and could learn. Guidance should emerge from freedom:

> *I think I agree that the freedom has to come first because you don't know how to guide them until you are observing what they're doing on their, from their own perspective, from their own interests. And every day they might come in with something slightly different* (Starling Nursery educator)

> *Freedom comes first. If you go out with the idea of guiding with something in mind, even if it's just an area like so and so's next steps is around maths, the more you try and go and play with that and try and push that, if that's not where that's going, that's not happening. You really do have to have that mindset of go out with a blank slate* (Canary Nursery educator)

One of the educators thought that the degree of guidance they offered was age-related and that their toddler group needed more explicit guidance when exploring a new environment:

> *The toddlers need that bit of guidance because I can see wherever we are, whatever we're doing, they just want to go and explore. Without that guidance, they don't get much learning out of it* (Canary Nursery educator)

Freedom with guidance as multi-dimensional and multi-directional

When guidance is referred to, it can often centre on adults offering guidance. Our participants, however, perceived it as having a more complex, multi-dimensional and multi-directional nature: guidance could emerge from adults *or* children; from children to adults, from children to each other and from the environment to all participants within it.

Educators often referred to the opportunities for exploration that the outdoors and being in nature offered. Natural spaces offered possibilities for freedom with guidance by presenting opportunities for action: to explore, imagine, experiment and listen to each other:

> *I had a little boy, he was looking for bugs, and he found a centipede. He was so excited because that's not one that we find very often. It's like a rare Pokémon. It was just..., OK, we've got a centipede - this is not a worm. And he was so excited, we put it in a little jar, and we went and we extended it by going to find books* (Canary Nursery educator)

Adults often resourced natural environments in ways that provoked children's curiosity and free exploration. The children could seek adult guidance when they needed it:

> *I think it's providing those opportunities. So, these two colleagues created a bug corner for the children to explore. And obviously bugs do come to it, but they can explore themselves. So, the opportunity's there and then it's that freedom to explore and obviously be guided…* (Heron Nursery educator)
>
> *Yes, and they are finding bugs more, aren't they? We were saying at the beginning of the year they weren't really looking for nature. But I think that's what we've learnt. We've started putting resources and ideas in place and when we do something, they are interested* (Starling Nursery)

All educators indicated how well they knew the children, their interests, needs, next steps and challenges. Knowing the children well gave them guidance about ways of best supporting their learning and meeting their needs.

> *Actually, that's being knowledgeable about the children in your care. Like, if you know that some actually don't wanna be engaging with this right now, and some really do, you can offer that freedom* (Heron Nursery educator)
>
> *We've got a particular little boy who we think may have some additional needs, but if there's not an adult there, everything we put out is trashed and it's really frustrating because there are other children …so we felt it needed the guidance of an adult there. Having an adult there guiding him … he could get more out of it* (Starling Nursery educator)

Children often sought guidance from adults by inviting them to participate in their activities and asking questions:

> *So, letting the children explore it first, potentially seeing and then thinking, do I need to go over? Can I go over? What if I go over? But sometimes it's just going over, and the children might call you in if you're just kind of looking over. I don't always say something but then the children ask you when they want to know something* (Heron Nursery educator)

Freedom with guidance was often distributed between adults and children. There were instances where adults stepped back to allow children to support each other:

> *Well actually, the older ones are taking the young ones under their wing. They're showing them how to do that. I can step back and let them do that and have that freedom* (Canary Nursery educator)

Deciding when to get involved

Educators frequently grappled with the risk of disrupting children's freedom and agency whilst trying to offer guidance. They wondered whether there was a 'good time' to step in or whether it was appropriate at all with some of the children some of the time.

> *That mixture between - you want to teach your children, and they need to learn things, but you do narrate what they're doing to an extent, but it's weighing up how much do you do that? How much with the older ones particularly? Do you get them to think for themselves?* (Heron Nursery educator)

One of our participants argued about the need to step back and give children the space and time to explore independently before offering guidance:

> *I think letting them explore a little bit more … specifically with the topic of nature, just letting them be with it and you know, explore it by themselves and not exactly talking … They were just sitting there and looking at it. And I thought, well, I could go and ask them questions, or I could just let them just look at it and observe it. So, I didn't speak to them as I usually would I just left them there. And you know, they did get up quickly, but they had that time to look at it and see if they were interested by themselves and take their own lead* (Heron Nursery Educator)

Educators claimed that knowing the children and trusting their ability to pursue their interests were important. Trusting the children enabled adults to give themselves permission to step back and grant more freedom.

> *I think just letting them have a little bit more freedom because we do trust them and we know the children. And I think we have to have just a bit more confidence in them that they can do it. And I think a lot of people think, ohh, they're a child, they don't know this, they can't do this, but they are so capable* (Heron Nursery educator)

Freedom with guidance as a mindset

Freedom with guidance was seen as a holistic pedagogic ethos, as a mindset underpinning educators' interactions with the children, rather than an isolated strategy. When asked to describe its essential features, educators thought it required flexibility, open mindedness, trusting the children's competence, agency and motivation to 'do it themselves' and willingness to release control. They argued about the importance of being-in-the moment with the children; being sensitive, attentive and responsive to children's behaviours; prepared to step back and forth flexibly and 'on demand'; change course of action and plan at short notice; be opportunistic with emerging opportunities and always prioritise children's

interests over predetermined plans. The extracts below are a small selection of instances where educators adopted a dynamic, organic and flexible pedagogy when offering freedom with guidance:

> *Anyway, it does come down a lot to your own pedagogy and your own mindset about being in the moment and allowing it to sort of just unfold in front of you. You just have to let go of all of that control just to allow that freedom and guidance to really come through organically. And those were the moments that were the best* (Canary Nursery educator).

> *Yeah, the freedom to let go of that expectation and that guidance and that what's going to happen today outside because, I've got to write an observation tomorrow and maths is what I'm missing. You have to let go of that and you will find those opportunities will present themselves* (Canary Nursery educator)

> *I think freedom with guidance was loosening the reins, providing more freedom to the activities that the children have on hand ... And then the guidance then comes in with when they reach something they've never experienced. Like with the soil, they maybe won't know what to do with it. And most children, it doesn't have to be verbally or vocal or anything, but they will come to an adult, come to someone and ask, what's going on with this? What do I do with this? And then that's where we step in. It's almost waiting for them to come to us or waiting for them to approach us and allowing them the independence to try solving it themselves or try experimenting.* (Heron Nursery educator).

THE CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE OR CONSTRAIN FREEDOM WITH GUIDANCE

Our partners were in agreement that freedom with guidance requires significant decision making along with flexibility. As such it can only happen if adults are also granted freedom and autonomy to make and change their approach as they find suitable in the moment. The educators' freedom to act, however, was often limited constrained by the settings' routines and requirements, parental expectations, broader pressures from policy but also educators' own self-imposed criteria. However, freedom with guidance seemed to be enabled through immersion in nature and the natural world.

Setting-specific requirements

> *Our partners often referred to their settings' structures, routines and regulations. They recognised the necessity of boundaries, as a condition for freedom to exist. Yet, there were instances where they found them restrictive:*

> *Yeah, that often happens with us, doesn't it, with the garden and the fact that we've got to have two people outside and two in and they want something* (Starling Nursery educator).

The structure in the toddler room of one nursery was also restraining opportunities for flexible, spontaneous action:

> *...in the toddler room, we are very, very structured in our room. Everything is at a certain time and it does work very, very well for the children. But for them to have that freedom it doesn't really work* (Canary Nursery educator).

Educators sometimes had to interrupt their flow to do things such as change a nappy or respond to accidents and this, although unavoidable, these activities limited their ability to offer freedom with guidance. One of the educators spoke about the need to think creatively to support children's activity outdoors whilst she remained indoors to maintain the ratios:

> *I think it was half logistics, half "I need to keep their attention." So the logistics was: our tap is in the baby garden, and then I would technically not be in the garden. So, obviously, my key focus is ratios, so I needed to stay in the same garden as all the children* (Heron Nursery Educator).

Educators from one of our settings felt the pressure to achieve set learning outcomes for their children. This constrained possibilities for spontaneous interactions:

> *I think you're not limiting yourself intentionally towards thinking in a particular way. Because you kind of, you almost think, oh yeah, that's what we're doing, we're doing freedom with guidance, but today I know that, you know, I need to get something on maths because I've covered so many other areas of this child, but maths is today, and then ... it's not that sort of organic learning and you kind of, you really have to put that freedom first and you will eventually find those opportunities to scaffold, whereas if you kind of try and guide it before it's happening, it kind of doesn't work (Canary Nursery Educator).*

Participants also referred to the constraints to their freedom instigated by other educators. For example, some of their colleagues had fixed ideas about tidiness, order and risk avoidance and they were unwilling to consider alternative ways of engaging with the children. This became problematic when working in the same room or when these colleagues were in position of authority.

> *But the little things, sometimes that's where freedom of guidance gets a bit challenging because you kind of like, you overhear someone saying, oh no, don't do that, that's not safe. And I'm kind of like, well, actually I think that would have been okay to let them, to see how that went. I wouldn't have quite stopped them there.* (Canary Nursery Educator).

Policy related constraints

Participants referred to the need to keep detailed records of children's progress, up-to-date observations, individual lesson plans and targets for children to achieve. They also had to record observations of the children's progress alongside other assessments as evidence of progress. Paperwork took time and a more adult-led frame of mind:

> *So then when it comes to assessments, you use all your observation list, and we do them three times a year, so every four months you do the assessment and then, you know, you use previous observations* (Canary Nursery Educator)

Thinking of the next learning steps compromised educators' ability to be in the moment and be guided by the children:

> *When you go in there thinking about those next steps, you're already thinking about where you're going to try and guide it, whereas, you know, the real, the moments of real freedom of guidance that I felt have, you know, the next steps have come to me in that moment.* (Canary Nursery educator).

> *It's almost like going back to sort of Ofsted, isn't it? It's almost like we are planning next steps. We are proving to you that we do think about the children's next steps and their future learning. It's almost like a tick box. We've got a next step, and it's recorded for you to see.* (Canary Nursery educator).

Self-imposed constraints

Ironically, some of the challenges educators identified seemed to be caused by their commitment to achieve freedom with guidance. One of our participants explained that planning freedom with guidance in advance compromises the flexibility to be adaptive and in the moment:

> *We really got on board with the idea of freedom with guidance. But I think sometimes what I found is when you start to overthink it, you almost don't do it. So, from the last time when I was really trying to recreate what we had previously, that's not real freedom with guidance, because I'm already going in with how I want to sort, steer it and manoeuvre it and, and, you know, really what it is about just being in the moment. And so I think sometimes when you start thinking about having to do it, you almost sort of don't do it, if that makes sense* (Canary Nursery Educator).

A group of educators working in the same setting spoke about their self-imposed restrictions. They described their setting's ethos as child centred, committed to children's learning through free play and avoided adult led activities. This resistance to anything adult-initiated was put to the test and questioned by the team when they started grappling with ways of offering freedom with guidance without compromising the value they placed on children's freedom.

Following ongoing conversations about ways of guiding without restricting children's freedom, the team came to the conclusion that they could guide by offering children options (by setting up activities) and the children would decide whether to engage:

> *Children need adult guidance. It is not restrictive of their freedom. They have the option to participate. We offer different options of guided activities, if and when children need them* (Starling Nursery educator)

THE IMPACT OF THE METHODOLOGY IN SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

All educators shared the view that the methodological tools used in this study (visual and reflective) had significant impact on their professional development. Watching themselves in action enabled them to evaluate the extent to which they were attentive to the children's interests and effective in offering freedom with guidance. These reflections enabled them to plan future interactions accordingly:

> *I find the GoPro really helpful to see how they interact with things I'm doing with them. So, then I can look back and say, they don't like doing that. Or that works, but I need to tweak that a little bit because she did enjoy it, but she's not getting the concept as such. In the moment you've got so many things going through your head, it's hard to judge that. Whereas when you're looking back, you're like, oh, okay, you can see on her face because I'm wearing the camera, or you can see what they're doing in that moment. You can see that that's working, what you're doing. Or that might not be working that bit, so I might need to do that differently with that particular child* (Canary Nursery Educator)

Watching the videos showed instances of high-quality interactions that educators were already having with the children but were perhaps not so consciously aware of. The visual tool enabled them to step back, reflect on and theorise about their pedagogies and as such it affirmed what they already did well:

> *I think it's, for me, it's given kind of given me confidence to sort of reinforce that actually our pedagogy, the way that we do planning in the moment following the children's development, giving, realising that we give when we watch the videos, we're giving guidance all of the time without, you know, thinking, oh, we've got to do one, you know* (Starling Nursery Educator)

It also helped educators identify instances where their interactions were not as 'organic' as planned. Studying the children's responses on video gave a different perspective to the one they had whilst in the moment:

> *...because the only time I went out there, even with a broad area in mind, those unique moments of learning that we were having before, they just did not sort of organically come and you kind of felt when you watched it back that you were pushing it a bit more* (Canary Nursery Educator)

Watching children's interactions on camera enabled educators to appreciate their interests, needs and ways of communicating. This in turn helped educators adjust practice to meet children's needs:

> *And for certain children as well, I mean, I have had, or currently have, quite a few SEN children. And you have to change your practice completely with them because one of them is completely non-verbal, another one has a few words, etc. I find the GoPro really helpful to see how they interact with things I'm doing with them* (Canary Nursery Educator).

Watching the footage enabled educators to appreciate how interested, self-driven, focused and competent children are.

> *...you can see that the children have that knowledge and we can trust then because you can see on the cameras how much they know...but also noticing how much the children learn, not without us, because we're always there, but when you are stepping back and just recording their interactions, you think, wow, there's all that learning going on* (Heron Nursery Educator).

Participants also referred to the collaborative nature of the methodology. Watching and reflecting on the videos with their teams allowed them to develop trust for each other and a routine of sharing views about their practice. Similarly, participating in focus groups offered them opportunities for dialogue and development of ideas.

> *...we loved doing this project it made us do it [pedagogical discussions as a team] more and we came away from all our times with you guys just like sort of buzzing really oh wow yeah, we do that and oh I love the way you do that. That was quite special and watching the videos as ourselves as well that we found it was that was different looking at the videos together and really it was nerve-wracking at first because you feel a bit looking at what I do and whatever we kind of got used to it and trusted each other a bit* (Starling Nursery educator)

Participants spoke about the impact that this methodology could have for professional development. All settings intended to use it to evaluate other areas of their practice:

> *I've really sort of been trying to encourage the management team to sort of disperse the GoPros through other rooms and just use that as a self-reflection tool if nothing else, because we found that, we picked up so much about our own practice, the things we liked, the things we didn't, and we just thought it was such a great way* (Canary Nursery educator)

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In line with the first aim of this study, we engaged in we-search conversations with our partners and considered the nature, manifestations and conditions that encouraged or restrained opportunities for freedom with guidance. Educators conceptualised freedom with guidance as a complex, fluid, dynamic approach; as having a multi-directional and multi-dimensional nature; and as a holistic ethos, rather than an isolated event. The role that nature played was significant in offering novel, engaging and dynamic opportunities for engaging in reciprocal learning episodes with children. Nature itself offered freedom with guidance.

Freedom and guidance were seen as interdependent and mutually constituting of each other, rather than as a binary. One cannot exist without the other. Freedom cannot exist as an absolute and guidance, on its own, cannot be effective unless participants (adults and children) have the freedom to make decisions and choose. Freedom and guidance are thus not opposites, not independent of each other and perhaps not even in a continuum. They may be depicted as a complex system of dynamic interactions, as ongoing transactions between children, adults and the environment. Furthermore, in our study, nature was a significant aspect of adults offering freedom with guidance. Our participants described interactions between adults, children AND nature in a dynamic blend. This triangular model of three affecting elements working together, produced high quality practice. This offers a different approach to the ongoing debates about play and learning and adult versus child centred play (Bubikova-Moan, et al, 2019; Fisher, 2016; Smedley & Hoskins, 2020) and is potentially an area for future research.

Froebel in his writing does not provide educators with the means to solve the contradictions that exist between freedom and guidance but instead he stresses the importance of being aware (through observation) of 'when to guide and when to leave alone' (Liebschner, 1992, p.70) while following a child's natural 'inclinations'. Yet freedom with guidance is often perceived as single directional: from adults to children. Indeed, Froebelian writings focus on the role of adults in scaffolding children's play. Our participants identified a number of other agents in multi-directional relationships. It could be offered by the environment and natural resources; by children to adults; by children to other children; and by adults to adults. Once again, this realisation points to a broad, holistic and complex ecology with multiple, ongoing interactions between adults, children, the natural environment and resources. The learning ecology needs to be considered when reflecting on practice.

When reflecting on their role in offering freedom with guidance, educators spoke about the importance of being in the moment, continuously attentive to the children's behaviours and needs and prepared to change plans at short notice. All the educators participating in our study claimed to have a child centred ethos from the start of this study. Engagement with this research, however, gave them opportunities to focus on, analyse and sometimes question their roles in supporting rather than constraining children's freedom. Their research experience and ongoing dialogues with peers and academics enabled them to begin to theorise the ways and types of freedom they offer and receive from the children. Freedom with guidance was seen as requiring a complex and demanding set of pedagogies, requiring skill, attentiveness, inquisitiveness, knowledge of the children and confidence. They argued against the rigidity of lesson plans or preconceived ideas as these may restrict educators' alertness to what is happening in the moment. The kind of learning that emerges through freedom with guidance is organic and opportunistic, rather than preplanned. Developing the skills, attentiveness, curiosity and knowledge to support, guide and extend children's interests through freedom with guidance requires nurturing educators so that they are able to support children.

The kind of learning that emerges through freedom with guidance seems to be at odds with the specific, set and measurable targets that educators are increasingly expected to adopt in order to help children be 'school ready'. Engaging in this study gave our participants the opportunity to watch, reflect and appreciate the benefits of freedom with guidance; it gave them the knowledge and confidence to advocate about it in their settings and use their knowledge to resist schoolification pressures (Broström, 2017; Stephen, 2010). The methodology was seen as an effective evaluative and professional development tool that participants are now using routinely to reflect on different areas of their practice. It was a bottom-up, grassroots participatory approach that enabled participants to define the parameters of their practice based on their own concerns and priorities and helped them to become more knowledgeable and nurturing adults. Finding ways to capture the self in practice within trusted communities seems to be important when reflecting on practice in relation to freedom with guidance.

Participants engaged in collaborative reflections with colleagues from their setting, from other settings and with us, the academic researchers. These conversational spaces enabled all partners to share insights, negotiate ideas and begin to develop a common discourse: a shared language about what freedom with guidance means to us, its different forms and manifestations. The conversations that took place within each setting, in focus groups and in the two meetings with all settings enabled us all to get a sense of belonging in a larger collective with its own distinct ethos and discourse: the seeds of a Froebelian community of practice.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

BEGIN WITH THE EVIDENCE

Seek out new ways to capture yourself interacting with children and review this through the lens of freedom with guidance. This could be through visual means using Go Pros, like we used in our study, or iPads. Alternatively, you could try audio capture, engaging with children's interpretation of events (drawings, role play etc.), or asking colleagues to narratively capture interactions through observations of practice. Get creative!

FIND WAYS TO TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU SEE IN TRUSTED CIRCLES

This might take some creativity and ingenuity. Could you for example, create spaces within team meetings to talk about pedagogy and freedom with guidance? Alternatively, could you work as pairs utilising planning time to review and discuss what you see? Start in ways that make you feel safe to share.

FIND NEW WAYS TO SPEND TIME OUT OF DOORS WITHIN NATURE

Remember that this is all around us. Looking up as well as down is important! The environment is an educator, inviting opportunities to explore further. The smallest spaces can offer children new learning experiences, as can manmade environments as nature strives to take over. You could use the Froebelian occupations as a framework when considering provision.

OBSERVE AND ENGAGE IN REVIEWING AND REFLECTING ON FREEDOM WITH GUIDANCE AND THE ROLE OF NATURE

Aim to be flexible, opportunistic and in the moment, prepared to change course of action at short notice; to allow learning opportunities to emerge 'organically'. Consider the ways in which being in nature offers freedom with guidance opportunities, and observe your thinking in action in relation to this.

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