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Learning to be Froebelian: student teachers' life histories 1952–1965

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Drawing on the life histories of nine women who were trained at Froebel College in the 1950s and 1960s, this paper examines the women's narratives as Froebelian student teachers and explores their remembered constructions of their experiences. Using an analytical framework underpinned by theories of identity and language their stories are shown to shed light on the women's engagement with and commitment to Froebelian ideas and their sense of identifying with what the college stood for. The women's stories illustrate a version of professionalism, located in time, place and culture, which incorporates contradictory elements of self-belief and self-effacement. In reflecting on their identities as Froebelians, their stories enact an understanding of politics and advocacy which demonstrates professional autonomy. Unexpectedly, their stories also show some difficulties with articulating Froebelian principles, and instead express an emotional attachment. That emotional engagement, rather than being seen as an inadequacy, is argued to be a strand in developing a hopeful, motivating and enabling professional workforce, capable of working effectively in the challenging current context of increasing statutory pressures towards performativity, regulation and control in early childhood education and care.

Keywords: Froebel; early childhood professionalism; women teachers; life history

Introduction

If three hundred years after my death my method of education shall be completely established according to its idea, I shall rejoice in heaven. (Froebel, quoted in von Marenholtz-Buelow 1877, 17)

The life histories of the nine Froebel-trained women whose stories form the basis of this research show that Froebel's philosophy and approach had a profound and lasting effect on their professional identities. We can barely speculate about early childhood education in 2152, which would be three hundred years after Froebel's death (1852), but our analysis of these stories demonstrates how the non-prescriptive nature of his theories and the acute sense of belonging and believing that his ideas engendered in these women in the 1950s and 1960s contribute to the enduring qualities of Froebel's philosophy.

We are driven by a contemporary commitment to Froebel's educational ideals (1885, 1896) and to protecting and developing them to the benefit of early years pupils and practitioners today. This is in resistance to ongoing statutory pressures to follow a more didactic and assessment-driven pedagogical approach, as highlighted

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by Osgood (2006, 2010), Taggart (2011) and Rose and Rogers (2012). This article draws on life history interview data, collected as part of a research project funded by the Froebel Trust, and seeks to explore how Froebelian principles were understood and put into practice in the 1950s and 1960s, as narrated by a group of women who were trained at Froebel College during that time. What was their educational experience at Froebel College? How did they engage with Froebelian ideas? What was the impact of that experience on their work with children? Whilst the content of their stories is of interest in itself, our analysis presents readings of the women's intentions as they construct professional identities and enact themselves as 'Froebelians'. This allows us to consider the impact of Froebel's ideas on the women's identities, principles and practice, as early years practitioners.

The women's stories are contextualised by the past and the present, as are our readings of them. The 1950s and 1960s were decades of considerable social change, as post-war liberalisation led to shifts not only in education, but also in cultural and economic domains. More recently, the training of early years practitioners as professionals, and early years education policy have undergone many changes and been the subject of numerous concerns, relating to the ethos of early childhood education and care and to practitioners' professionalism in England (Rose and Rogers 2012, Taggart 2011) and beyond, for example in the Republic of Ireland (Maloney 2010), Scotland (Adams 2008), Australia (Woodrow 2008), Finland (Karila 2008), New Zealand (May 2006) and the US (Martin et al. 2010).

Background: a Froebelian tradition

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel (1782–1852) has an international reputation as a pioneer, and is perhaps most well known for his creation of the 'kindergarten' which encapsulates several of his key ideas about the importance of children's self-directed activity, nature, and the community. His overarching belief in the unity of human beings, God and nature and his pantheistic beliefs (Brehony 2010) tie his principles together in a philosophy which was to him as much spiritual and mystical (Lilley 1967, Whitbread 1972) as it was practical and pedagogical.

Influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), Froebel was a man of his time, although his ideas were considered revolutionary (Liebschner 1991). Froebel's work in Keilhau, Germany, between 1817 and 1831, and then in Lucerne, Switzerland, between 1831 and 1836, provided the foundation for teacher education courses at Froebel College, in particular, his commitment to developing 'all the faculties of his pupils through the exercise of their own activity in subjects whose interconnection had been carefully thought out and which were seen to be in close connection with life' (White 1907, 66). It is these sentiments, explained in Froebel's (1885) *Education of Man*, which made important contributions to the distinctive development of Froebel College teacher training programmes since they were established in 1892. The commitment to learning through play, and to nurturing children's own interests, enabling them to engage meaningfully with their surroundings, were central Froebelian tenets.

Froebel wanted to liberate children from rote learning and to acknowledge and respect children's own ideas (Liebschner 1991). The whole child was the focus and in conjunction with this, all aspects of learning were to be linked through first-hand experiences and play. Froebel believed children's self-directed play was an expression of their imagination, creativity and understanding. Symbolic activities, such as art,

language, music and dance all nourish the child's inner life as well as providing a means to transform and express understanding (Bruce 2011). In-keeping with this, Froebel created the gifts, the most well-known being wooden blocks. Their simplicity and their aesthetic appeal encouraged children to use their imaginations to express themselves and their ideas in construction.

Froebel respected young children as individuals and as valued members of the community. Each child was given a plot in the kindergarten as their responsibility, as well as being expected to tend larger communal plots (Liebschner 1991). However, Froebel's approach which fostered young children as independently-minded people, met with a hostile political context (Brehony 2010) and this led to the 'Kindergarten Verbot', the banning of kindergartens in Prussia and the subsequent move of Froebelian supporters and ideas to London and, for example, Budapest, Ontario and Tokyo (Liebschner 1991, xiv). This historical development ironically seemed to add energy and determination to the dissemination and protection of Froebel's ideas worldwide.

Froebel was ridiculed for his at-the-time revolutionary belief that women should be recruited and trained as teachers of young children (Liebschner 1991). He stressed the importance of the mother-child relationship, poignant, given the death of Froebel's mother when he was nine-months-old. His belief in the contribution of women as skilled teachers of young children when few professional careers were available to women, helped, according to Whitbread (1972, 34), 'to promulgate an idea that became entrenched'. Aspects of the so-called 'feminisation' of early years and primary education today are seen as problematic (Skelton 2002; Smedley 2007), but this long-established expectation that women make good teachers sheds some light on the ease with which the women we spoke to, chose to train as teachers at Froebel College.

In line with its own principles, a Froebelian approach does not offer a prescriptive pedagogy, but rather sets out an understanding of young children, and of learning, which should guide and inform adults' interactions with them (Tovey 2013). From that basis, and with an attitude of respect and interest, adults could judge when and how to intervene to support children's learning. Liebschner (1991) describes Froebel's emphasis on observing children, rather than taking an overtly didactic stance. The interpretation of this approach to the teacher's role in contemporary early years practice is not uncontroversial and is of central importance. Bruce (2011, 30) cites one of Froebel's 'most famous remarks', 'Begin where the learner is, not where the learner ought to be.' A contemporary emphasis on didactic approaches, targets and assessment levels clashes with this child-centred philosophy. There is a tension between following the interests and needs of young children and meeting short-term goals (Orlandi, 2014). Such concerns are widespread. Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroec (2012) review early childhood education and care in 15 European countries and highlight the 'schoolification' (527) of the early years and the risk that this undermines play-based learning; there are also concerns about 'schoolarisation' of early childhood education in Chile (Pardo and Woodrow 2014).

Although the 'Statutory framework for the early years' states 'Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others.' (DfE 2014, 9, 1.8), this gives little sense of the creativity, determination and joyful engagement that Froebel emphasised as fundamental to play. In addition, recent research by Rose and Rogers (2012) highlights an absence, in practice, of play-based activity for reception class children, as evidenced by 100 early years student teachers on their final placements. However, Froebel's

legacy is evident in twenty-first century publications on early years theory and practice (for example, Bruce 2012; Tovey 2013), and in nurseries such as Annan Farm, The Froebel Small School in East Sussex (<http://www.thesmallschool.co.uk/>), as well as internationally, for example, a kindergarten in Soweto, where a Froebelian approach is being developed (Louis 2013). The life-history research which is the focus here, examines that legacy and its potential further, by looking back to consider how a Froebelian training in the 1950s and 1960s shaped students' pedagogical beliefs and practices.

Methodology and methods

This project utilised a qualitative methodology to understand the 'the daily actions of people and the meanings that they attach to their environment and relationships' (Williams and May 1998, 8). This approach enabled us to explore the respondents' perspectives and constructions of the value of Froebelian education both historically in relation to their training and early career experiences and in relation to the contemporary context in terms of their recent career experiences. This approach was useful for us to gain insights into the respondents' worlds through their eyes, giving their meanings and understandings of their educational biographies and careers.

The primary research tool was interviews informed by a biographical life history method, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to understand how the respondents 'subjectively remember and understand significant events of their lives' (Rubin and Babbie 2009, 220). Taking a life history approach to the research has allowed us to situate our respondents' lives in the wider social, economic, social and education context, which has furthered our understanding of their complex life stories, as well as their values and beliefs. Life history interviews also provided respondents with the space to discuss the issues important to them, within the context of the wider topic under investigation.

The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (2011) revised ethical guidelines, the British Sociological Association (2002) ethical guidelines, and our university's ethical guidelines (University of Roehampton 2011). As the research involves semi-structured interviews, ethical concerns relating specifically to the process of qualitative interviewing will be addressed (Delamont 2002; Harding 1987). In terms of procedures, these include obtaining informed consent: care will be taken to protect the rights of the respondents and make them aware that they can withdraw at any time and/or choose to not answer questions during the research process. Confidentiality and anonymity will be respected: pseudonyms are used, and educational establishments are not named. Audio-files and transcripts will be securely stored and password-protected. Principles of honesty, sympathy and respect (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) underpin our approach to the collection and analysis of the data.

Our task is to contextualise the women's stories in order to understand their professional lives, what Goodson describes as 'the life story and the life history' (Goodson 1992, 6). Research is imbued with values. As Goodson and Sikes argue, multiple realities must be acknowledged, and we also 'see informants and researchers as being each engaged in interpreting the world from their own various perspectives' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, 39). No research approach is neutral (Walsh 2001) and neither a researcher's involvement nor their detachment guarantees validity (Hammersley 1993). All data and research accounts should be read in the light of

their being produced through social practices that take place in specific contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Goodson and Sikes (2001) point out that researchers could recreate life histories unethically and to counter this, reflexivity about our roles as researchers helps us to approach the interactions involved in carrying out life-history research with sensitivity and integrity (Delamont 2002; Scott and Usher 1999).

Through personal contacts, we accessed a sample of nine respondents who all studied at Froebel College between 1952 and 1965, a period of relative professional autonomy. The nine women were all white British, eight described themselves socially as middle class, and had attended private school for at least part of their school-days. One woman described herself as working class and had attended a secondary grammar school (her primary school was not mentioned). Four of the women's mothers worked as teachers, and four were full-time 'mothers/housewives' (one respondent did not specify). As to their fathers, four were involved in teaching, lecturing or research, three were in business, one was in the army, and one had been in the army and then later became a teacher and then head teacher. The respondents had all experienced their early years teacher education at Froebel College, and spent most of their careers working in education, networked with Froebelian colleagues and participated in Froebelian societies and thus they are all sympathetic to Froebelian ideas and the value of their teacher training.

The analytical framework employed to understand the data is underpinned by theories of identity and language. The process by which individuals take up certain subject positions has been called 'investment' (Hollway 1989), 'negotiation' (Mac An Ghail 1996) and 'invitation' (McLaren 1997). Each emphasises a sense of encounter, rather than a simple recount, where individuals construct, maintain, or resist possible versions of their identities. This active performance is enacted in each interview as the women share their narratives, which serve to construct a sense of self, past, present and future. Memory is selective and creates and recreates the past; events are given form and purpose in relation to contemporary and past concerns. They are not straightforward, objective accounts of past events, but involve a process of intention and selection, making experiences into something with meaning. Their stories shape (rather than straightforwardly reveal) identity. The life histories we have heard carry traditions, power relations, values, expectations, insecurities and desires.

To analyse the constructions of professional identity in the life histories, theories about language and agency are needed. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Bakhtin (1986) consider the dialogic relation between the individual and their social world. 'Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances' (Bakhtin 1986, 91). There is a 'ceaseless struggle' for meaning (Vygotsky 1986, 132) engaged in by individuals with a social and cultural past, present and future.

Britzman's (2003) psychoanalytic examination of what it means to be a teacher is also helpful here. Her focus is to explore how certain positions are produced through language – 'to trace the invention' (247) of a specific identity. This dialogic perspective shifts the focus from an initial yet, ultimately, potentially narrow interest in each life history, to a focus on the 'conditions of its production' (237). The women's life histories are mapped out through 'narrative conventions' (Britzman 2003, 11) which draw on, are shaped by and reinforce versions of being Froebelian.

Analysis

Our analysis of the women's life histories focuses on two main themes. Firstly, the ways the women engaged with Froebelian ideas, and secondly, the ways the women construct their professional identities as Froebelians.

Engaging with Froebelian ideas

The women expressed their strong sense of belonging to a community and believing in the Froebelian principles and approach that they had learnt about. The following two sections consider these themes of belonging and believing, demonstrating the many resonances with the women's own childhoods and attitudes to learning, as well as their enthusiastic and joyful attitudes.

A sense of belonging

The strong reputation of the college predisposed the women to high expectations of their chosen course, as well as a clear sense of commitment. For example:

... only one place you should go to be a teacher and told by a friend '... you will be in the very, very, very best hands'. (Jennifer)

I read a bit more about the [Froebelian] principles and I thought, 'That's what I want, that's what I want to do.' ... I really wanted to come. (Jane)

Given the nature of the sample, positive comments were to be expected from the women. The passionate enthusiasm that is enacted through language here was striking, however, and shows the women's active connection to and affinity with Froebelian traditions. Vygotsky (1986) describes such active construction of identity as an ongoing process, where meanings and learning a sense of self are constructed in purposeful interactions with others. The teachers' own narratives act as a 'glue for a collective professional identity' (Sachs 2001, 158). There was an emphasis on pleasure and personal fulfilment:

I just had a ball. (Theresa)

I absolutely loved it ... absolutely took my breath away. I was just enraptured. (Ruth)

I absolutely adored it. (Sandra)

It has been hugely rewarding and I've enjoyed it immensely. (Isabel)

Flora, in particular, encapsulated the strength of commitment and identity engendered by seeing herself as Froebelian:

We were just 'The' Froebel Institute, we were Froebelians, we were principled and high-minded. We were going to get out there and rule the world, do you know what I mean? (Flora)

Flora's confidence and entitlement as she identifies herself with the Froebelian tradition suggests a self-belief that has been motivating and inspiring. A similar identification with a Froebelian tradition is examined by Nawrotzki (2006). Writing about members of the Froebel Society in the early twentieth century, Nawrotzki describes how 'the Froebel name provided a unique rallying point in their struggles to defend the youngest children' (217). Nawrotzki argues that a sense of Froebelian tradition,

rather than the detail of Froebel's original ideas, gave the Society a legitimacy and a quality which strengthened it. In this research, the sense of a 'rallying point' is evident in the women's stories of their engagement with a Froebelian philosophy and is both inspiring and motivating for them, giving them a confidence in their identities as Froebelians and early years practitioners.

There were connections that the women were able to make with Froebelian theories:

... it was so like my childhood. (Theresa)

We [Una and the principal] just saw eye to eye basically. ... So, suddenly I was able to be myself. (Una)

It just all spoke to me and I knew it was right. ... I felt very, very lucky. (Ruth)

These observations point towards an affirmation of the women's perspectives on childhood and learning and a sense of destiny, enacted through their constructed memories. It is through intentional and selective narrating of experiences that meanings are shaped (Vygotsky 1978). Such encounters can create moments of satisfaction, 'a sense of euphoria – the outcome of feeling whole' (Hey 1997, 144). The 'rightness' of the experience bolstered their sense of belonging and their adherence to the Froebelian tradition, as they now construct it. Bruce (2009), Froebel-trained and a lifelong early years practitioner, theorist and advocate for young children, also writes of being 'in tune' with Froebelian ideas when she arrived at Froebel College. She also tackles a pertinent question when she asks whether her allegiance to Froebelian principles is founded on a 'romantic myth' (60). In countering that, Bruce shows that core Froebelian tenets, such as beginning where the learner is, and creating the conditions where children can become 'imaginative problem-solvers' (68) are as relevant today as they were in Froebel's lifetime. Central to this is the non-prescriptive nature of Froebel's approach, which rests on 'reflective practitioners who carried their reflections into their practice' (69). Without this inherent progression, any mythical status attached to Froebel's ideas would be detrimental and lead to dogmatism or create a built-in obsolescence. However, *with* that inherent progression, in the narratives of the women in our research, what could be described as Froebel's mythical status inspires emotional engagement and appears to be positive and inspiring for their work with young children.

Believing in a Froebelian approach

The main pedagogic principles that emerged from the interviews related to understanding children and their interests, the importance of active learning, creativity and nature, and the teacher as facilitator.

Everybody followed the same mantra ... the Froebelian principles that the child is at the centre of all learning, that you start with the child, that the curriculum is imaginative, that it's diverse, it's challenging, it's constructive ... it's the foundation ... you know everyone spoke with the same voice. (Flora)

To start with the child and the child's own interests seemed to be a given:

And of course the old Froebel ... 'interest', follow her interest, find out where she is at, and start there ... and all of that just, you know ... (Ruth)

The emphasis was on getting to know the children, listening to them and understanding child development. This empathy and ‘respect’ (Jane), which Theresa specified as ‘respect for children’s minds’ (Theresa), was to be coupled with ‘having fun’ (Jane), making sure the child is ‘happy with you ... and, of course, love’ (Ruth). Flora emphasised the importance of ‘allowing their individuality to shine through’. Jane claimed that we should ‘Let children be children’. Their language is rooted in Froebelian principles and also child-centred ideals which were formally expressed in 1967 in the Plowden Report, which stated that ‘at the heart of the educational process lies the child’ (CACE 1967, 7). The women’s stories therefore draw on established narratives, what Britzman calls ‘narrative conventions’ (2003, 11) which operate as ‘familiar justificatory strategies’, legitimising the positions and perspectives of some and marginalising others (Harding 1987, 3). Their position is therefore validated: the women have demonstrated their ‘investment’ (Hollway 1989) in their understanding of Froebel’s philosophy and of child-centredness. Oberhuemer (2005) identifies a ‘professional disposition’ (13) which resonates with the professionalism the women aspire to. It presupposes that adults acknowledge children as active social agents, who are entitled to be listened to, ‘It foregrounds the professional skill of listening attentively and at length to children, seeking to understand their points of view, their interests, their questions and their intentions, seeking to learn more about their individual lives (Oberhuemer 2005, 13). However, it is important to note that a child-centred approach is not unproblematic. As Walkerdine (1983) argues, the centrality of the nature of the child, as expounded in the Plowden Report, has a power ‘which resides in its status as incontrovertible fact’ (80). That emphasis on ‘the child’ can detract from a recognition of difference and the impact of social context and the socially constructed nature of the child and childhood (Epstein 1993; Kehily 2008). Paradoxically, child-centred ideals, can, according to Walkerdine ‘construct the individual itself and, at the same time, prohibit us from seeing children any other way’ (81). Yet child-centredness and a focus on children and their interests, in spite of these reservations and critiques, is a necessary check and a valuable challenge to dominant twenty-first century discourses, which construct professionalism as hierarchical, regulatory and outcomes-driven (Urban 2008) and silence its relational, less-tangible and affective dimensions.

The women articulated a sense of the importance of physical activity and of nature:

... huge importance of physical learning through the senses and symbolic behaviour.
(Theresa)

free expression and creativity ... involved ... active experience. (Jane)

My classroom was really Froebel perfect ... a glorious outside, so we were able to go pond-dipping and there were no restrictions. It was absolutely fabulous. (Una)

And Ruth shows how a focus on nature suited her own interests:

Always so connected to nature ... so I was brought up with such a strong connection with nature and there was Froebel. (Ruth)

Alongside this clarity and commitment was an apology:

I’m not making much sense but ... (Jane)

It was not always easy or straightforward to articulate an understanding of Froebelian principles and practice:

Really Froebel has affected me the whole of my life. I couldn't say why and how. ... Difficult to say what Froebel things I used, but I'm sure I did. (Madeleine)

The experienced, New Zealand early years teachers Grey (2011) interviewed, also had some difficulties 'articulating their philosophies' (24), suggesting commonalities with our data from the 1950s and 1960s.

Some comments seem to assume a shared understanding of what Froebel represents:

I think we just did the Froebel thing really. (Jennifer)

I hope I've flown the Froebel flag. (Jane)

... rooms weren't as easy to make sort of Froebely. (Una)

The role of the teacher was seen to be in 'setting up that love of learning' (Jane) and is explicitly not about cramming facts into children. Rather it was about 'giving people navigational tools to go through life ... it's not very tangible (Theresa). It was an enabling role:

We were imbued with this idea that you start with a child that ... that a child is an individual, a creative being, that you are there, as the teacher, to facilitate learning in a very creative way. (Flora)

The fact too that you've got to listen to children, not just talk at them. Find out what they're thinking. (Sandra)

... guiding them towards true learning. (Flora)

Rather than you talking at them, you're talking with them and that's ... child centred ... Not there to pontificate. More a facilitator. (Una)

Jane and Jennifer describe a spontaneity that they valued as Froebelian teachers:

And there weren't the constraints then in those days you know if you had a lovely day and you wanted to go to Kew Gardens and write poetry by the lake, then you could ... You can't have that sort of spontaneity these days so much. (Jane)

Well that's the training as well, you know, go from where the child is. Develop from the individual child, you know if somebody brought something interesting in, in the morning you know their little treasure, you'd spend 10–20 minutes on talking about it and what it was precious to them, and what could they tell the children about it. ... You know that was their little moment, their day. They never get that any more. (Jennifer)

The individual stories serve as justifications, and anchor the women to ideals which exist in a social and cultural context (Vygotsky 1978). Their stories can also forge patterns of thinking and opinion that can work to silence other possibilities (May 1997), for example versions of professionalism that centre on pre-determined knowledge, a didactic approach or competitiveness.

Una provides another example and states 'being 'Froebely' was about energy and freedom:

One day I looked out of the window in an English lesson and I whizzed down to my headmistress – well I was there very early preparing in the morning and I said, 'Do you know it's the most stunning day, I want to write some poetry'. She said, 'Let's ring up the parents, we've got five cars' and we stuffed about 30 kids into five cars, roared into Windsor Great Park, lay and wrote poetry all morning. ... And that's what I mean about being 'Froebely' we grab the moment, we'd seize the moment. (Una)

Sandra and Isabel describe aspects of the ways they were taught as students. In discussion groups with tutors they had to try to ‘fathom it all out’ (Sandra) and if they questioned something, would be asked, ‘Well, how would you have handled it?’ (Sandra). Isabel noted the emphasis placed on thinking about observations, ‘to go back and re-look and re-look and re-look’ (Isabel). The tutors were described as ‘very supportive’ (Una), ‘very principled, high-minded and passionate about Froebel’ (Flora).

Froebelian students ... I can only speak for my generation erm, came, generally speaking from very principled backgrounds ... perhaps privileged backgrounds, where we were taught to think. ... I have been enormously indebted to my Froebelian roots. Erm, the tolerance, the principled, high-minded, energised, lofty ideals that probably one didn’t really take on board or terribly understand, have stuck with me in my educational career. ... I feel very privileged to have been to Froebel Institute. (Flora)

Sandra’s comments hint at an energy and the camaraderie of shared aims and beliefs, when she describes the tutors:

If I say they were inspirational that doesn’t ... it sounds a bit OTT [over the top] now, but they got you to do stuff that you really couldn’t have imagined yourself doing when you went there. (Sandra)

Vygotsky (1986) shows that meanings, including learning a sense of self, are constructed in purposeful interactions with others, and Sandra’s sense of self here is shaped by her relationships with her tutors. Vygotsky tackles the highly complex interrelation of thought and language and provides an understanding of individuals’ ever-present intentions in language use, of utterances as inextricably entwined with social relations and context. Sandra continues, and emphasises the less tangible dimensions of her professionalism,

No national curriculum, there was no framework for training colleges to instruct, so the Froebelian aspect of the instruction was at a very high level ... at a very theoretical level, at a very principled level. ... That philosophical stance has stayed with me professionally all through my career. (Flora)

Flora was not idealistic about her experiences. She valued her training enormously for providing a principled approach to working with young children, but felt ‘completely clueless’ (Flora) when it came to some of the practicalities of teaching:

But so much of that, we didn’t have and neither did we really have the tools to teach. ... Having said that which sounds very critical, I don’t mean it to be taken in isolation because I think the philosophical approach has been the core of my entire professional life. (Flora)

The wider context of these comments is a long-established and complex tension between theory and practice, complex in particular from a Froebelian perspective for two reasons. Firstly, although Flora felt that ‘Everybody followed the same mantra’ at college, the wider context of the progressive 1960s in England was coupled with fierce criticism of child-centred approaches, characterising them as *laissez-faire*. That dissonance (Opfer and Pedder 2013) was important for professional growth. The excesses of progressive education were vilified in the first three *Black Papers* published in 1969 and 1970, and, according to Chitty (1992) articulated the views of

‘preservationists’ who wanted to ‘put back the clock: to the days of formal teaching in primary schools’ (16), and also critiqued by philosophers, academics and politicians, as reviewed by Darling (1993) and Epstein (1993). Secondly, an important tenet of Froebel’s philosophy is that teaching should be guided by understanding the child, by observation and by the practical interpretation of principles such as respect for the child and their ideas. As Bruce (2009) has argued, a Froebelian approach is not prescriptive and formulaic: its adaptability should be a strength, but it is also a challenge. Teachers need to be prepared to ‘tolerate and work with uncertainty’ (Lindon 2012, 37) and to exercise educational judgment. The women here work to articulate their understanding of Froebelian philosophy and their interpretation of that in practice, and it emerges as a powerful, affective connection, which also helps to shape their professional identities.

Professional identity as a Froebelian

There is debate, in England and elsewhere (for example, Australia (Barber 2002); New Zealand (Grey 2011); Finland (Moriarty 2008); Sweden (Kuisma and Sandberg 2008) about the concept of professionalism, which is pertinent to our reading of the women’s narratives. Oberhuemer (2005) and Lindon (2012) highlight narrow and outdated versions of professionalism as inadequate. Oberhuemer (2005) questions ‘traditional notions of professionalism, notions which distance professionals from those they serve’ (13). Lindon (2012) uses the analogy of a battery, to challenge a limited idea of professionalism as something to be attained by being ‘charged-up with knowledge’ (34). To acknowledge the complexity of early years practitioners’ work, a version of professionalism is needed that takes account of teachers’ wide-ranging aims, responsibilities and practices, from what Dalli refers to as ‘ground-up perspectives’ (Dalli 2008, 183).

Professionalism is socially constructed and must be considered in a context (Grey 2011). It is an ongoing process, ‘and has all the complexities of learning itself’ (Smedley 1996, 24). According to Moriarty (2008), for example, there is a clear difference between understandings of professionalism adopted by early years educators in Finland and England. Moriarty (2008) makes the distinction between ‘professionalism’: issues of occupational status, and ‘professionality’: understandings that inform practice (Moriarty 2008, 236). Images of women as ‘Mary Poppins’ figures working in the ‘happy garden of untroubled childhood’ are ‘now outdated, and perhaps whimsical’ (Woodrow and Busch 2008, 89). However, it is important to consider the gendered nature of professionalism (Drudy 2008). In spite of the fact that men can and do care for and nurture young children (Smedley and Pepperell 2000), assumptions and expectations about women’s so-called natural abilities persist and shape the women’s narrating of professionalism.

Dalli (2008) notes an affective dimension to professionalism, and Simpson (2010) states that professionalism relates to ‘dispositions and orientations’ (6), all of which resonates strongly with the narratives of the women we interviewed, as their stories enact commitment, care and strong ethical values. Specialist knowledge is not disregarded, but is considered alongside pedagogical style and practice, and collaboration. Knowledge is anchored to ‘attitude’ (Kuisma and Sandberg 2008, 189). Wilkinson (2007) adds another important dimension to the concept of professionalism, by identifying ‘twin professional ideals of children’s civic welfare and democratic citizenship’ (379). This ‘civic professionalism’ (Wilkinson 2007, 392) focuses on the well-being

of the whole child, with a particular emphasis on preparing the child to be a critical citizen in a democratic society.

The version of professionalism suggested by the women's anecdotes and comments introduces three main themes: the women's perception of themselves as practitioners, the effect of politics, and the women's role as advocates. Running through the women's stories is an inherent tension about professionalism. Urban (2008) describes how early childhood practitioners are expected 'to achieve predetermined, assessable outcomes and are 'increasingly being told *what to do*, what works and what counts (139). Urban highlights how this policy-driven expectation clashes with his understanding that early childhood practitioners' work is rooted in human interactions, which are unpredictable and complex, and it is that process of interaction which constructs a meaningful version of what professionalism is. The women's constructions of professionalism here, acknowledge that tension and form a resistance to a narrow, technical version of professionalism. Their understanding is culturally and historically specific, shaped significantly by their Froebelian principles in early years education.

Self-belief and self-effacement

Jane Miller's reading of Vygotsky's work connects his theoretical approach to the learning of self, which the women's stories enact:

Such a theory ... makes learning, and particularly the learning of self, a process of strenuous and intention-directed activity, mediated by language and performed always within specific social and cultural relations. So that the learning of 'I' ... has always entailed the learning of 'not I' ... And it follows from this that the learning of identity is also the learning of 'the other' and the 'not self' as well. (Miller 1990, 126–127)

Through their narratives the women carefully construct identities as strong, capable professionals, but also soften these identities with stories that suggest self-effacement, humour, and a lack of seriousness. Isabel and Flora describe the confidence they felt as Froebel-trained teachers:

I thought I ruled the world [on my first teaching job]. ... Well that was paradise, there were no boundaries. (Isabel)

I think the training we had as Froebelians ... we were considered the best ... we had such confidence. (Flora)

Una explains the breadth of skills and the attitude that she considered central to the professional attributes of being a 'good Froebelian':

I mean the great thing about the Froebel thing is I came out with the confidence to run a show, as I've done a lot of drama with kids, to play an instrument, to swim in a swimming pool, get in, to paint a mural to cover these walls, to hopefully educate them in the three Rs as you would expect ... All these things are Froebel. A good Froebelian would say, 'Yes, I'll tackle any of that'. (Una)

Professionalism was understood to be underpinned by a principled passion, coupled with a breadth of practical accomplishments. However, a clear counterbalance was also expressed. Flora describes how she and her colleagues hid from the children:

We used to lock ourselves in our stock cupboards, in our classrooms for about 10 minutes at a time to get away from the children, it became a joke – ‘Do you know how long that you’ve been in your cupboard?’ I mean it does seem terribly irresponsible now. (Flora)

This anecdote tempers the versions of the women as skilled and talented professionals in specific ways and shows how through their life-histories the women are engaged in an active constructing of a specific and contextualised sense of identity (Vygotsky 1978). Eccentricity was welcomed, similarly shaping the version of professionalism being constructed. Isabel talked of a colleague being ‘as mad as I was’ and ‘barking mad’ and Una noted that the headmistress in the school where she taught, ‘was very eccentric’.

This apparent resistance to professional efficiency and ability is cuttingly characterised in Ruth Adam’s novel, *I’m not complaining* (1938). Madge, an infant teacher describes how she portrays her work to others:

I can’t help pretending feebly that I’m awfully bad at it really, and I can’t keep the little ones in order at all – you know, *so* madcap and attractive of me. (Adam 1983/1938, 333–334)

For fictitious Madge, as in the women’s narratives, their understanding of professionalism is culturally and historically specific and in particular gendered: professionalism has a history of association with men and masculinity (Miller 1996). The weight of expectation on women was more domestic and private than career-oriented and public. This results in a careful negotiation here between their achievements as professionals and their perception of what is expected of them as women. The stories they tell work to accommodate and reconcile that conflicting position.

Politics

Sandra, Isabel and Theresa describe their impression of the politicising of teaching as a detrimental interference of politicians and government policies:

But until they stop politicising it, I think it’s going to be very difficult. (Sandra)

I mean I would keep out of all this politics. (Isabel)

They seem to think you have to have a class of children and do the same thing to all of them ... since education has become so politically driven. (Theresa)

Theresa, Una and Sandra identify undesirable change and what they think has been lost:

We’re talking about collaborative learning in a Froebelian context you know, so why would I want to compete with you? (Theresa)

You still ticked the box and it was complete nonsense. (Una)

I don’t think we are training teachers now, to concentrate on the child. They’re concentrating on, what they’ve got to teach; whether they’ve got to get the right tick in the box, and it’s the end product, it’s not the process of learning that seems to be important. (Sandra)

In the context of the prevailing educational discourse today which prioritises competition, knowledge, outcomes and accountability the women are constructing professional identities which reflect the principles and ideals which the women retain from their Froebelian training. They are trying to reconcile tensions between current

discourse and their sense of professionalism. In so doing, they are enacting their dialogic relation with their social and cultural past, present and future (Bakhtin 1986; Vygotsky 1978, 1986). To understand a child's intentions and thinking was central and Sandra thought being neglected:

To draw out what the children are thinking or feeling, and I think we've lost that. (Sandra)

Sandra also mentions the pleasure to be gained from being a teacher:

A job that I really enjoyed, and I don't see that joy any more, with teachers. (Sandra)

Jennifer and Jane believed that teachers' autonomy and a level of trust have also been compromised:

Freedom began to be taken away from you. ... You know, I think people relied on the fact that you knew what you were doing. (Jennifer)

The onus was very much on the teacher then. You chose a project that interested you and one that you could weave in all the subjects. ... The music, the art, the drama and dance – all of which you can weave into your projects and they just become so meaningful. (Jane)

Autonomy enabled the women to work creatively and sometimes spontaneously with the children. When Una says 'Nobody cared', this comes across as positive and desirable:

It was the most amazing school, but there was no health and safety you see. Nobody cared, the kids would roar around ... [climbing trees/pram races]. (Una)

Oberhuemer (2005) notes that the 'traditional post-war model of the autonomous professional' (12), when teachers could make their own decisions, has been re-shaped by increased state control, which has implications for conceptualising professionalism. A statutory framework, with shared aims, curriculum content and practices, is a double-edged sword in terms of professionalism. As Oberhuemer (2005) argues, some might welcome the implied increase in professional status, resulting from 'documented principles' (12), while others might see their early years principles being disregarded. A critical approach to professionalism is needed which enacts educators as 'interpreters' rather than 'implementers' (12) of the statutory curriculum.

Isabel's comment shows that she was aware of potential shortcomings in her teaching approach, in spite of the positive aspects of having time for children:

So, I think because we were under less pressure, we gave the children more time and some of them did very well by that, but also I did think that some of our children ... we could have educated to a higher standard. (Isabel)

Being a teacher is about values, ideals and the possibilities of change. The women draw attention to the importance of autonomy, spontaneity, joy and understanding children developmentally and individually. Osgood (2006) is critical of a government agenda that seems to undermine professional autonomy by emphasising technical competence and increases the regulatory control of early childhood practitioners. So, although practitioners might be seen as more professional, at the same time the version of professionalism they attain is constrained. Miller (2008) is more optimistic, and, drawing on Fenech

and Sumsion's research (2007) in an Australian context argues that regulation can be 'enabling as well as restricting' (Miller 2008, 261) in terms of professional practice and identity. It could be argued that the professionalism the women narrate here is problematic, in valorising their individual freedom as teachers. Public accountability is not emphasised. However, their moral obligation to the children they teach, is articulated.

Read (2003) describes Froebel's intentions as far-reaching and political. At kindergarten Froebel wanted children to learn social responsibilities and to become 'a new breed of public-spirited citizens' (Read 2003, 20) in a unified Germany. This was driven by his desire 'to counteract what he regarded as self-seeking individualism' (20). This resonates with 'civic professionalism' (Wilkinson 2007, 392). There are parallels with the 1960s and with today. The context of the 1960s and theories and discourses emphasising the child, and child-initiated activity clash with the prevailing discourses of today, which centre on accountability, assessment and attainment. Although the women articulate politics as an external interference, the priorities they express implicitly demonstrate a political dimension to their professionalism, by emphasising principles such as respect. Teacher professionalism is political in that it should be based on reflection on fundamental issues such as equality and social responsibilities (Smedley 1996). A nursery or classroom can be a microcosm of the social world that practitioners want to create.

Advocacy

Being an advocate for Froebelian principles and practice was seen as underpinned by personal endeavour. Theresa stressed the need for teachers' commitment to their own learning:

Being highly educated yourself actually ... keeping your own learning going. (Theresa)

Una describes this in detail and in so doing highlights the importance of an individual's thirst for knowledge and experience as well as the philosophical dimensions of teacher professionalism as she sees them:

Get as much personal experience as you can ... Educate yourself ... in the widest way you can, go to concerts, go to an opera, go to a football match ... you know connect yourself ... become the best educated person you can, that doesn't mean to say just sitting down, you know doing a degree with books, get out there. ... Be not judgmental, remain flexible, remain open, keep your eyes open and educate yourself as best as you possibly can, every field you can think of. (Una)

She emphasised the need for personal strength, which would facilitate withstanding criticism or external pressures to adopt practice out of step with Froebelian values:

What I say to young people is get strong on the inside by getting all these experiences. (Una)

Moriarty (2008) describes this approach as 'critical professionalism' (240). Isabel and Una in particular saw themselves as advocates for Froebelian traditions and practices and described their confidence in expressing their views and standing up for their principles. Una described how she resigned from one teaching position 'on principle' (Una) and on another occasion was direct in her advice to the headteacher:

With a headmistress who always had ladders in her tights, and skirts up around her rather fat bottom and used to eat custard like this [demonstrates]. I said to her one day, 'My darling you are not going to have any respect from your children if you have custard that drips down your shirt'. I was bold, she said, 'Yes, you're quite right'. (Una)

This forthright approach is echoed by Isabel who said she had 'stopped being polite' and would not 'let myself be bullied about what a child should be doing'. Moriarty's (2008) data resonates with this. The early years teachers she interviewed in England voiced two dilemmas: concern about the 'inappropriateness of the curriculum' and the pressure 'to teach in more formal ways than they believed were pedagogically correct' (240).

There is some contradiction in the emphasis on the importance of advocacy. Isabel recognised that 'some teachers aren't good at putting over, with authority, their beliefs and what they feel passionate about' (Isabel). Added to this, the women themselves sometimes struggled to articulate the Froebelian approach in detail. Instead, an emotional engagement was expressed with some of the principles they associated with Froebel's ideas. MacLaren (2012 in Bruce 2012, xii) highlights the 'emotional appeal of Froebel' whose ideas she sees as fostering an innocent, natural childhood with freedom and curiosity at its heart. Whether such a position is critiqued for idealism or not, the women's emotional, as opposed to technically theoretical engagement with Froebel's ideas, could be read as a limitation to their version of professionalism, a weakness or alternatively as the product of time passing. However, it could signify an expression of the essence of their values, which become validated by an affective association with a tradition (as re-constructed by the women) of Froebel's ideas. That emotional engagement then represents a personal and deeply-felt theoretical position, shaped by an immersion in Froebel's ideas, which chimed with the women's personal experiences and ideas of childhood, and with the child-centred principles and practices which were gaining momentum in the 1960s.

Conclusions

The women's stories of their Froebelian training during the 1950s and 1960s have highlighted a strong sense of belonging and of believing in the ideas they engaged with. To talk of 'flying the Froebel flag' (Jane) suggests an active commitment to a clearly identified philosophy, which effectively contributed to the women believing in themselves as advocates for what they understood to be worthwhile early years practice. That emotional engagement, rather than being seen as a limitation, is argued to be a central strand in developing a hopeful, motivating and enabling professional workforce. Their sense of professionalism is rooted in confidence, spontaneity, optimism, creativity and a joy in learning and in young children's lives, priorities which must themselves be protected and nurtured, but which seem to be silenced in current dominant discourses. Froebelian principles should be protected and developed, to counter increasing statutory pressures towards performativity, regulation and control, and to foster a personal professionalism that is rooted in respect for children, as well as energetic commitment to philosophical ideals, which are continually interpreted in practice.

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