

## Froebel and Childhood Practice: Assignment Cover Page

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### Declaration

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By submitting this assignment I confirm I have read and agreed to the above declaration.

## **Froebel in Childhood Practice: Assignment 2**

### **Introduction:**

This assignment will discuss my own practical project focused on developing a Froebelian experience in my setting; specifically focusing on planning for the classroom environment to support child development beyond P1.

Using the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) action research method of enquiry (GTCS, 2023), I will begin by discussing my rationale for the practical project and reviewing supporting literature. Next, I will focus specifically on the Froebelian environment, including reference to literature, and how I have begun to develop this in my own setting. Finally, I will review the impact of the project and discuss how I am going to ensure the changes are embedded and sustained within my setting.

### **Context:**

I currently work as both a primary teacher and as an acting head teacher in a very small, rural primary school. I job share the role of head teacher one day a week and then work as a class teacher for the P1-4 multi-composite class the rest of the week.

### **Practical Project**

*Does taking a developmental approach to designing the classroom environment enable children to develop both social and emotional, and fine motor skills through free play?*

#### **1. Identifying the Focus:**

In assignment 1, I identified that I wanted to focus my practical project on developing play pedagogy beyond P1 with a particular focus on pupils with additional support needs (ASN). My rationale was that within my setting, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found that each year more children are starting P1 without the fine motor skills required for handwriting and are lacking in both social and emotional development (Education Scotland, 2020). Additionally, I have also seen an increase in the number of children with developmental delays and other ASN in my setting. I felt that as “play offers children the opportunity to develop and hone a range of physical, emotional and social skills, helping them make sense of and relate to an increasingly complex physical and social

world” (Play Scotland, 2023, para. 3), moving towards a Froebelian play-based approach would support the development of these skills in all children.

## **2. Use research to inform your thinking:**

The flexibility within the Curriculum for Excellence, and other documentation from Education Scotland (2016) and the Scottish Government (2020; 2022; 2023a), support a developmentally appropriate approach which “places learners at the heart of education” (Education Scotland, 2023a, para. 2). Additionally, the National Improvement Framework aims to ensure excellence and equity for all children, irrespective of ASN or social circumstances (Scottish Government, 2023a). However, as Upstart (2015) correctly highlight “the policies concerned are not translating into practice” (para. 5).

Despite some developments in recent years, the focus on play pedagogy within Scottish Education still tends to be on nursery and P1 (Education Scotland, 2022; Palmer & Johnston, 2020); as this is when children *should* be working at Early Level (Education Scotland, 2023b). However, I would argue that the focus should instead be on children’s developmental stage (Fisher, 2013; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000; Tovey, 2020) and not on what they *should* be doing based on their stage within the education system.

Currently in Scotland children begin P1 at different ages and in some cases, children may be over a year younger than their peers depending on when their birthday is (Aberdeenshire Council, 2023a; Scottish Government, 2012). However, all these children are expected to achieve Early Level by the end of P1 (Education Scotland, 2023b) and, in my experience, a lot of pressure is put on class teachers to ensure their learners achieve this. This is problematic for many children but particularly challenging for children with developmental delays (Elks & McLachlan, 2016) and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Upstart, 2015). I personally believe that a focus primarily on child development rather than what learners *should* be doing ought to continue throughout the early years of primary school, as do many other 21<sup>st</sup> century educationalists including Sue Palmer (2016) and Greg Bottril (2022).

Sue Palmer (2021), a former head teacher and now chair of the Upstart Scotland campaign group (Seith, 2022), has been campaigning “for a rights-focused, relationship-centred, play-based

kindergarten stage (3-7 years) based on the Nordic model” (Palmer, 2021, para. 16). In a recent article Palmer (2022) states that “we must learn from Froebel, the Finns, and their tribal antecedents. The four *Curriculum for Excellence* capacities **develop**, in the early years, through play” (para. 14) plus, the Scottish Government (2020) states that a “Froebelian approach is applicable wherever adults work with children and families. This means that it can be used by practitioners working in rural and urban settings, in outdoor settings, and by child-minders looking after children at home and even in the early stages of our primary schools” (p. 103).

Froebel believed that *play* is how children instinctively learn and explore the world around them (Froebel Trust, 2023a) and “emphasised the importance of beginning where the learner is, rather than where the practitioner thinks the learner ought to be” (Bruce, 2019, p.89). I believe this approach would empower practitioners to focus on child development rather than the stage within the education system (Froebel Trust, 2023b; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000) and ensure they are “Getting it right for every child” (Scottish Government, 2022, para. 1).

### **3. Identify your specific focus:**

As described in both section 1 and assignment 1, I wanted to focus on continuing *play* as a means of learning beyond P1. I wanted to change my focus to what children in my P1-4 class “can do rather than what they cannot” (Froebel Trust, 2023b, para. 4) do and use this as the starting point for planning for learning and teaching (Bruce, 2019).

Froebel placed great importance on the role of a carefully planned environment to meet the children’s developmental needs (Cowgate Under 5s Centre, 2023; Tovey, 2016). When reflecting on this, and my own 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching practice, I realised something quite striking about my own practice. Although I was planning for the classroom environment in great depth, I was planning with a theme in mind rather than for the learners’ developmental needs and next steps. This really took me by surprise as I was spending hours planning and setting up activities, yet my efforts were likely futile. For example, I would focus the continuous provision activities within the classroom environment on the target letter/sound within the phonics lessons (Power of Play, 2022), yet I should have been focusing on what the learners needed to develop based on the documentation used within my local authority (Highland Literacy, 2016; 2018; 2019) and my ongoing assessments.

Thus, changing how I planned for the continuous provision within my classroom environment became the focus for my practical project.

#### 4. Plan and implement your intervention:

One of the key messages I took from my reading on a Froebelian environment was that in a Froebelian environment there are “no ‘pre-packaged’ play scenarios set up by adults as part of the ‘theme of the week’” (Tovey, 2016, p. 54). Yet when I started the Froebel in Childhood Practice course this is exactly what I was doing within my classroom. For example, if my learners were focussing on the /f/ sound in their phonics lessons, I would set up activities such as ‘*catch the fish with the fishing rod*’.



I now realise that not only was setting up these activities extremely time-consuming for the adult, but they also limited children’s learning and creativity. These activities were tenuously linked to the phonics curriculum but, most significantly, were not effective pedagogy for addressing the learners’ social and emotional, and fine motor skills. Instead, I should have started with my assessment that the children needed to develop their social and emotional, and fine motor skills and then supported my learners to develop their own play agendas by providing open-ended, developmentally appropriate resources to support their

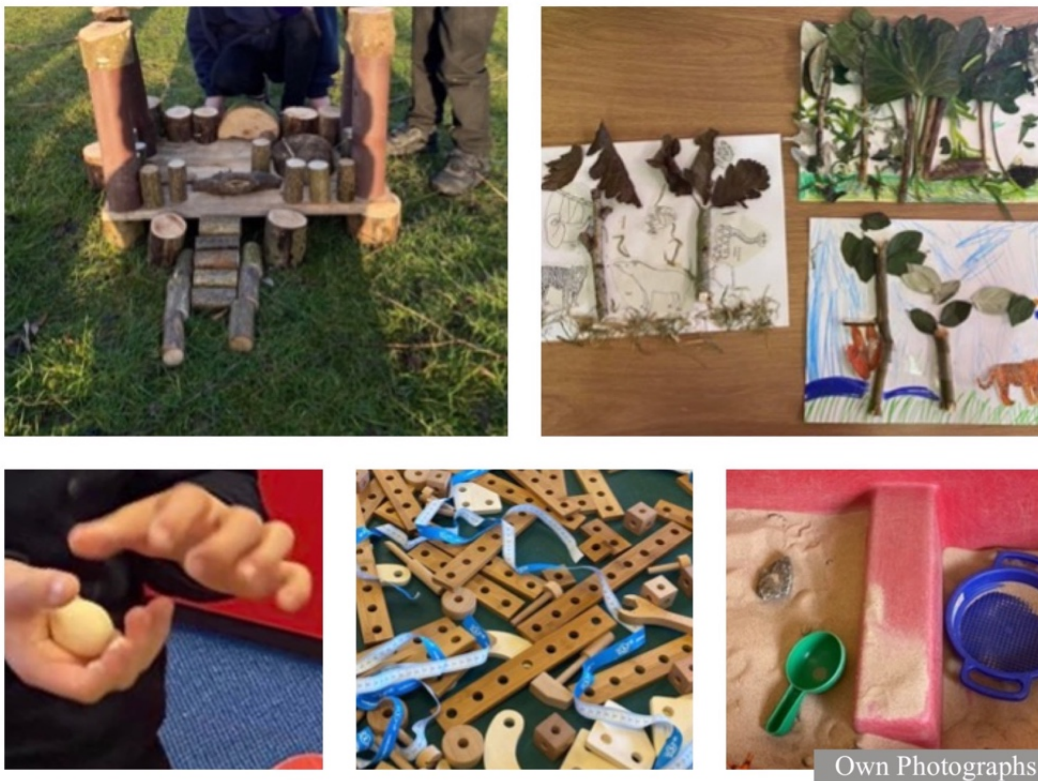
learning (Bruce, 2012). Yet, I also recognised the importance of free-play and *standing back* within the Froebelian approach (Tovey, 2017; 2020) so was keen to explore how this would work in practice. Would the “children instruct and educate themselves” (Lilley, 1967, p. 92) without an adult interfering?

I then went back to my original problem; my assessments showed that my learners were lacking fine motor skills and in both social and emotional development. What could I change within the classroom environment to foster the development of these skills? I began by reviewing Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations (Tovey, 2016) alongside current guidance on developing fine motor skills used within my local authority (Highland Literacy, 2015). However, I recognised the importance of “providing ‘whole’, unified experiences not fragmented activities” (Tovey, 2020, p. 7). Thus, I did not want to plan two separate sets of activities, with one set focused on fine motor development and one focused on social and emotional development (Bruce, 2012), as this detracts the focus on *play*. Additionally, I realised that the resources I had been using were mainly plastic, commercially manufactured ones which should be avoided within a Froebelian environment (Tovey, 2016), so I was also keen to reduce them where possible. Thus, I focused on the following areas of **core provision** to support the development of fine motor skills “and then offering a calm, attentive presence and ‘emotional anchorage’” (Tovey, 2016, p. 51) to foster the development of social and emotional skills.

**Table 1:** Core Provision

<b>Core Provision</b>	<b>Froebel’s Occupations</b> (Tovey, 2016, p. 50)	<b>Highland Literacy</b> <b>Pre-Handwriting – Development Continuum</b> (Highland Literacy, 2015, p. 1)
Sand	Sand	Fine Motor Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a dominant hand and an assist hand during activities.</li> </ul>
Clay/Dough	Clay and wax for modelling	Fine Motor Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control and manipulate small tools effectively.</li> <li>• Rolling play-dough balls</li> </ul>
Construction	Peas and sticks for construction	Fine Motor Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picking up small items</li> </ul>
Arts and Crafts	Painting and drawing	Pre-Writing Skills
	Paper cutting, weaving, and folding	Scissor Skills
	Threads and punched cards for sewing	Fine Motor Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threading</li> </ul>

The Froebelian “environment is seen as flexible, transformable and responsive to children’s changing interests” (Tovey, 2016, p. 35) so, in addition to introducing the core provision shown in Table 1 into my P1-4 multi-composite classroom, I also discussed and adapted the rest of the classroom environment with the children. I wanted to encourage the development of social and emotional skills through listening and talking with others (Education Scotland, 2016), thus chose to follow the children’s lead on what they would like in their setting (Cowgate Under 5s Centre, 2023). For example, we changed the storage of some of the resources within the classroom to make them more accessible for the children.



To measure the impact of the changes I used the *Leuven Scales for Wellbeing and Involvement* (Laevers, 1994) and *Pre-Handwriting Skills Tracker* (Highland Literacy, 2016) to assess the learners' social and emotional, and pre-handwriting skills at the beginning and end of the practical project.

## **5. Gather data:**

The study was conducted according to the guidelines laid down in the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2018) and all procedures involving human participants adhered to

local authority policies and procedures. I used the methodological triangulation approach to data collection, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data during my practical project (Bhandari, 2022).

**Quantitative Data:**

**Table 2:** Assessment Results

Date of Assessment	Leuven Scales				Pre-Handwriting – Development Continuum					
	Wellbeing		Involvement		Fine Motor		Scissor		Pre-Writing	
	17/4/23	23/06/23	17/4/23	23/06/23	17/4/23	23/06/23	17/4/23	23/06/23	17/4/23	23/06/23
Child 1	3	4	2	4	2	5	3	5	4	5
Child 2	3	5	2	5	4	6	4	5	5	5
Child 3	2	3	3	4	5	7	5	6	5	7
Child 4	2	5	3	5	2	3	4	5	5	5
Child 5	2	3	2	4	7	7	7	7	7	7
Child 6	2	4	2	4	5	7	6	7	7	7

**Qualitative Data:**

Below are a sample of the learner comments and teacher observations taken during the practical project. I have split them into two sections: planning for a theme, and, planning for core provision and with the children.

***Planning for a theme:***

*Example 1:* Child 4: “Can we get the pet boxes and animals out as well? I want to make a vets.”

*I had set up toy doctor equipment and dressing-up clothes with the sign “do you need a doctor?” for the /d/ sound but [Child 4] saw it as a vet clinic.*

*(Teacher Observation)*

*Example 2:* Child 5: “When can we get the stencils again?”

*Example 3:* Child 1: “Why can’t we have the cars out?”



***Planning for core provision and with the children:***

*Example 4:* [Child 3] used wooden blocks to build pens for the toy animals. [They] appeared to be estimating the size of pen required for each animal as the pens were proportionally different sizes.

*(Teacher Observation)*

*Example 5:* Child 3: "I'm building a zoo for all the animals."

*Example 6:* Child 2: "Let's make an aquarium in the water [tray]."

Child 4: "Yeah, a dinosaur aquarium."

Child 2: "YEAH!"

*[Child 2] and [Child 4] were playing well together. They were discussing, planning, and setting up a small world in the water tray.*

*(Teacher Observation)*

I also observed that children who struggled with pre-handwriting skills often asked for help when accessing the core provision:

*Example 7:* Child 4: "Can you get this off?"

Teacher: "Try and twist it" (with Makaton sign)

Child 4: "No, I want you to do it."

*Example 8:* Child 1: "[Child 5] can you cut this?"

**6. Analysing data:**

Statistical analysis was carried out using Social Science Statistics (2023) with  $p < 0.05$  considered statistically significant.

**Table 3:** Mean results of Leuven Scales assessments at the beginning and end of the practical project

	Mean Score			P value
	Beginning	End	Difference	
Wellbeing	2.33	4.00	+1.67	<0.005
Involvement	2.33	4.33	+2.00	<0.0005
<b>Both</b>	<b>4.67</b>	<b>8.33</b>	<b>+3.66</b>	<b>&lt;0.0005</b>

**Table 4:** Mean results of the Pre-Handwriting – Development Continuum assessment at the beginning and end of the practical project

	Mean Score			P value
	Beginning	End	Difference	
Fine Motor	4.14	5.83	+1.69	>0.05
Scissor	4.83	5.83	+1.00	>0.05
Pre-Writing	5.50	6.00	+0.50	>0.05
<b>All</b>	<b>14.50</b>	<b>17.67</b>	<b>+3.17</b>	<b>&gt;0.05</b>

The analysis of the quantitative data shows that the introduction of the core provision, based on Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations (Tovey, 2016) and the Highland Literacy (2015) *Pre-Handwriting – Development Continuum*, had a positive impact on learners’ wellbeing, involvement, and pre-handwriting skills. This is supported qualitatively through the learners’ comments and teacher observations.

### 7. Evaluate and report the results:

The results show that changing the classroom provision to resources based on Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations, rather than focusing on a theme (Tovey, 2016), had a positive impact on learners’ wellbeing, involvement, and pre-handwriting skills. However, although a significant ( $p < 0.005$ ) improvement was observed in wellbeing and involvement; the improvement observed in pre-handwriting skills was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

As described in section 4, Froebel placed great importance on the role of the environment on supporting learners’ health and wellbeing (Cowgate Under 5s Centre, 2023; Tovey, 2016). Thus, unsurprisingly the move towards a more Froebelian-based classroom environment correlated with a significant improvement in learners’ wellbeing ( $p < 0.005$ ) and involvement ( $p < 0.0005$ ) which was also supported through qualitative teacher observations and learner comments.

Although an improvement was also observed in pre-handwriting skills, it was not statistically significant ( $p>0.05$ ) and, without a control group it is difficult to know if it was the move towards a Froebelian environment that had the positive impact or was due to another confounding factor. For example, all the learners continued with twice-weekly handwriting lessons in addition to the core provision plus the fine motor skills required for handwriting are known to develop with age (Kid Sense, 2022). Additionally, I observed children who particularly struggled with pre-handwriting skills asking others for help if the activity posed challenging. Thus, they were not actually using and developing their fine motor skills through the core provision.

Overall, the findings are consistent with previous research that Froebelian settings support intrinsic motivation and involvement (Bruce & Dyke, 2017), wellbeing (McMillan, 1930; Tovey, 2016), and fine motor skills (Pound, 2019; Whinnett, 2020). However, further research involving a control group and larger sample size is desirable. Additionally, it would be useful for an external practitioner to assess the learners or to take the mean value of multiple practitioners' judgements to reduce bias. It would also be useful to repeat the assessments after a longer period as this project was restricted due to the academic calendar (Aberdeenshire Council, 2023b).

## **8. Taking Informed Action:**

The initial findings of the practical project, along with previous research, demonstrates that a Froebelian environment supports wellbeing (McMillan, 1930; Tovey, 2016) and involvement (Bruce & Dyke, 2017), and may also support the development of pre-handwriting skills. Thus, I will continue to use a Froebelian approach to planning for the learning environment in my setting. Now that I have begun to establish this approach in my own classroom, my next steps would be to:

- Continue to build on progress to ensure the Froebelian approach to planning for the learning environment becomes fully embedded.
- Focus next on how I can embed a Froebelian approach to planning for the learning environment across my school. I am currently in a part-time acting head teacher position, in addition to my role as class teacher. Part of my remit for my acting head teacher role is to develop play pedagogy across the school. Thus, the next step is to share my practical project with staff and then support staff with making changes to their own environments.

I feel that using a Froebelian approach to planning for the classroom environment will be sustained in my setting as it:

- Is less time-consuming than planning for a theme (Power of Play, 2022).
- Is favourable for children's health and wellbeing – a key priority for the Scottish Government (2023b).
- Links with the curriculum documentation used within my local authority (Highland Literacy, 2015; 2016)

**Conclusion:**

Taking a developmental, Froebelian approach to planning for the classroom environment was shown to significantly improve children's wellbeing and involvement. The children that participated in the practical project also demonstrated an improvement in pre-handwriting skills however further research is required.

Word Count: 3000

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