



The potential of Froebelian philosophy to support and engage low-income families in the early years

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Research Objectives

This project has worked with low-income families (with annual income of less than £10,000) from diverse ethnic backgrounds in early years settings run by HomeStart and Red Hen Project (both UK charities) to explore the potential of Froebelian philosophy to support and engage such families in ways that matter to them. Focusing on play, the project addresses the following objectives:

- To understand the significance and relevance of play in the daily lives of low-income families.
- To understand the key challenges facing these families and examine the way play opportunities can be improved for them.
- To build on and develop Froebelian ideas to consider how they could become more relevant and meaningful.
- To inform policy by mobilising more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies as an instrument for multidimensional social justice.

The research was undertaken between April 2022 and November 2024.

Key Findings

- The integration of Froebelian principles by low-income parents confronts several substantial obstacles. First, a lack of resources and time can limit their ability to apply Froebelian concepts. Parents who are striving to meet their families' basic needs often have limited time to devote to child-centred, play-based activities. Furthermore, limited access to child-friendly materials for hands-on learning poses a challenge.
- Second, stressors related to poverty are also a major deterrent. Chronic stress associated with low income, such as worry about finances, housing instability, and food insecurity, can impact parents' capacity to consistently apply Froebel's principles. Parents in these circumstances can therefore find it challenging to create the calm, secure environments Froebel advocated for children's play and exploration.
- Third, there is possibly limited awareness or understanding of Froebelian principles among these parents. They might not fully engage with Froebel's ideas due to the language used, which can be off putting and creates a distance between families and the principles' intentions.

Executive Summary

Recommendations

While these challenges are significant, there are potential strategies to mitigate them. For example, parental education programmes can be an effective method to equip low-income parents with Froebelian-informed knowledge about the importance of play. Such programmes could include hands-on training and resources to help parents integrate these principles at home. The programmes should be sensitive to materialistic, emotional, and time constraints of low-income families.

Another solution is community-based initiatives, such as family hubs, toy libraries or playgroups, which could provide access to child-friendly materials and social opportunities, further supporting play-based learning.

Policy interventions are another crucial component of the solution. Policymakers could address systemic issues, such as the high cost and limited availability of quality early childhood education for low-income families. Potential interventions could include subsidies for early childhood education programmes, providing free or low-cost educational resources to low-income families, and investing in community infrastructure to create safe and stimulating environments for children to play and learn.

In conclusion, while the barriers to incorporating Froebelian principles among low-income parents are substantial, various strategies offer promising avenues for overcoming these challenges. However, comprehensive solutions will require a multifaceted approach, combining individual support for parents, community initiatives, and long-term policy interventions with the associated financial commitment.

Introduction

This project worked with low-income families (with annual income of less than £10,000) from diverse ethnic backgrounds in early years settings run by HomeStart and Red Hen Project (both UK charities) to explore the potential of Froebelian philosophy to support and engage such families in ways that matter to them. Focusing on play, the project addressed the following objectives:

1. To understand the significance and relevance of play in the daily lives of low-income families.
2. To understand the key challenges facing these families and examine the way play opportunities can be improved for them.
3. To build on and develop Froebelian ideas to consider how they could become more relevant and meaningful.
4. To inform policy by mobilising more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies as an instrument for multidimensional social justice.

The proposed project is particularly timely since the early years sector has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing economic, social and emotional support to low-income families (Seivwright, Callis, and Flatau, 2022). The ongoing cost of living crisis too has hit these households the hardest (Hill and Webber, 2022). Research is therefore needed to understand the challenges facing low-income families from diverse backgrounds in engaging their children with play opportunities. In doing so, this project bridges Froebelian philosophy and contemporary social science scholarship on low-income families in early years setting, thereby developing Froebelian ideas in new, productive directions and interrogating their potential to address inequalities in early year contexts through policy change.

Context

The day-to-day lived experiences of low-income families are often omitted in social research due to the reluctance of such families to participate (Xu et al., 2021; Wainwright and Hoskins, 2021; Wainwright et al., 2024; Hoskins et al., 2024), stemming

from concerns about providing ethical consent, class stigma and fear of losing their children (Wilson and McGuire, 2021) amongst other complex reasons. These families are therefore hard to reach and this gap in the literature is particularly acute when it comes to low-income families from ethnic minority backgrounds (Brannon et al, 2013). Without the views and perspectives of these marginalised families, policy and practice, including those linked to Froebelian philosophy, cannot fully address their needs or tackle social inequalities more broadly.

Contribution to Froebelian philosophy

Friedrich Froebel, a German educator from the 19th century, established an influential early childhood education (ECE) philosophy (Bruce, 2021). His pedagogical approach, often referred to as "Froebelian principles", is based on the belief that children learn best through self-directed play and hands-on experiences, echoing a "learning by doing" philosophy (Hoskins and Smedley, 2019; Castner and Maron-Puntarelli, 2022).

One of Froebel's central key concepts, "free flow play" (Bruce, 2011), emphasises the importance of play as the foundation for intellectual, social, and emotional development. His ideas of guided play and creativity through activities such as block building, nature study, and gardening have been heralded for encouraging curiosity, observation, and exploration (Hirschi, 2017; Hoskins and Smedley, 2019). These principles help create a space for a child's growth, including their thinking skills, feelings, and physical development.

Furthermore, Froebel championed the idea of 'unity' (Dar, 2018), stating that children should be educated in the context of their family, community, religion and nature, an idea aligning with the contemporary emphasis on socio-cultural contexts in ECE acknowledging the role that social interactions and cultural practices play in a child's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1977). He also emphasised the role of educators, viewing them not as instructors, but as facilitators who guide children's learning and foster their innate abilities (Taylor and Boyer, 2020). This idea has significantly influenced the development of modern early years' pedagogies, promoting an active role for the child in their learning journey, often referred to as child-centred education (Bruce, 2011).

In recent years, Froebelian principles have been recognised for their potential in providing solid foundations for children's lifelong learning and development (Tovey, 2017; Murray, 2018; Hoskins and Smedley, 2019; Cowan and Flewitt, 2020; Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). There is a growing body of research indicating that the creative, play-based learning championed by Froebel can lead to positive learning outcomes and lifelong achievement, enhancing children's cognitive and emotional development, creativity, and social skills.

In spite of the considerable attention given to Froebel's principles in formal early childhood education settings, their application in informal learning contexts, such as homes, has been less explored. This gap in the literature is particularly pertinent considering the significant role families play in children's early development, especially in the context of low-income families where access to formal, high-quality early childhood education may be limited.

The Research

We took a three-phase qualitative, family-centred approach to examine how parents with children attending HomeStart centres and Red Hen Project understand and enact play at home and any opportunities and/or challenges they perceive or experience in relation to Froebelian principles. The study includes three contrasting case study locations in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Phase 1: parent/ recruitment

An informal discussion was held in each case study location. Parents/carers were invited to reflect on their understanding of play at home and any perceived benefits/challenges they encounter. We shared the key Froebelian principles of play (Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2016), with parents/carers through an interactive, question and answers-based discussion.

Phase 2: in situ play reflections

Participants from the question and answer based session were invited over a four-week period, to reflect on and consider the possibility of enacting Froebel's ideas in relation to their involvement in play with their child/children. Participants were encouraged to keep a note of their perceptions, understanding and experiences of Froebelian play and to record two or three examples of play (notepads were provided – voice notes, photos, videos etc).

Phase 3: interviews

Finally, parents were invited back to discuss experiences, perceptions and understandings of Froebelian play, reflecting on the:

- Influences of socio-economic status on parents'/carers' enactment of Froebelian play principles at home.

- Relevance of Froebelian principles to these families.
- Development of these principles to become more relevant to this group.
- Mobilisation of more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies.

Families with an annual income of less than £10,000 from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds were recruited. They were located in a mix of urban, suburban and rural areas. Each team member led one case study, supported by the research assistant (RA).

To construct the sample, we worked in partnership with HomeStart and Red Hen Project, both UK charities that work with low-income families with young children aged from birth to six with whom we have established productive partnerships.

Sample demographic information

Setting 1 - Upton Marsh (suburban)

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children (ages if known)	Profession (If any)	Ethnicity
Anna	27	1 (14 months)	Student	Angolan/Portuguese
Elisa	30	2 (2 years old and 5 months old)	Unemployed	Nigerian
Inayah	40	1 (1 year and 7 months)	Unemployed	Indian (Punjabi)
Marie	41	2 (2 years and 4 months; 11 months)	Unemployed	Japanese
Polina	30	1 (2 years old)	Unemployed	Belarusian
Poojam	31	1 (14 months)	Unemployed	Indian
Lisa	43	6 (26; 23; 18; 21 months and 5 months)	Unemployed	White British
Tanya	23	1 (1 ½ months)	Unemployed	Polish

Setting 2 - Townsfield (urban)

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children (ages if known)	Profession	Ethnicity
Rita	36	1 (2 ½)	Unemployed	Indian
Nigora	35	2 (4 ½ / 2 ½)	Unemployed	Afghan
Leila	33	2 (2 years and 5 months old)	Unemployed	Iranian
Maha	39	1 (18 months)	Unemployed	Iranian
Leyna	24	1 (3 years old)	Unemployed	White British
Flora	25	2 (3 and 2 years old)	Unemployed	Albanian
Amele	33	1 (18 months)	Unemployed	Algerian
Parveen	40	3 (8; 6;2)	Unemployed	Indian
Julie	32	2 (15; 4)	Unemployed	White British

Setting 3 - East Hillshead (rural)

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children (ages if known)	Profession (If any)	Ethnicity
Emma	36	2 (4; 14)	Unemployed	White British
Britney	38	6 (13; 12; 10; 6; 4; 3)	Unemployed	White British
Carol		2 (2; 4)	Unemployed	White British
Jane	35	2 (18; 4)	Unemployed	White British
Lola	31	5 (13; 10; 9; 4; 2)	Unemployed	White British
Susan	43	6 (23; 20; 17; 14; 8; 4)	Unemployed	White British
Zahra	30	3 (7; 5; 3)	Unemployed	British Bangladeshi
Valerie	36	4 (14; 12; 8; 4)	Unemployed	White British

Setting 4 - Ridgeborough (rural)

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children (ages if known)	Profession (If any)	Ethnicity
Ava		1 (1)	Unemployed	Black African
Rose		1 (1 and half)	Unemployed	
Stephanie		7 (12/8/7/6/5/3/1)	Unemployed	White British
Tara		1 (1)	Unemployed	Kenyan
Vivian	26	1 (1 and half)	Unemployed	Black African
Tamara		4 (5/9/12/20)	Unemployed	Zimbabwean

The findings are presented in the two following sections, with the first section focusing on Objectives 1 and 2, the second section on Objectives 3 and 4.

The significance and challenges of low-income families’ efforts to enact play

This section is organised by themes identified through the data analysis and the key research objectives under investigation, as follows:

Obj. 1 - To understand the significance and relevance of play in the daily lives of low-income families

We noted that the play was significant and relevant to all of our families. We focused on parents’ own past experiences of play to understand where, what and how they played. These play experiences were often marked by coming from low-income families:

- My family is not rich, so poor family (Inayah)
- We didn’t have a lot of toys, and we had to makeshift with whatever we had. We played with barely minimum, but we used a lot of imagination (Amele)
- We basically grew up in a war country...Whatever we had, even the small things that made us appreciate a lot (Nigora)

Within our sample of 32 families, the majority of parents (n=18) are first-generation migrants. There is limited research on parents’ childhood rememberings of play (Mavroudi and Holt, 2021), and implications for children. Parental experiences of migration mediate conceptualisations and aspirations for childhood and their low-income and limited resources shape current/ future play possibilities. Gender was a salient feature shaping play amongst the migrant participants, who reflected on their own childhood play as follows:

- I had to take care of other children, my siblings (Maria)
- To be honest, parents in India, for girls, they want to keep us in ... the girls who start their periods, not allowed to go out playing with the boys (Parveen)

Despite the different experiences of play in their own childhoods, all participants noted that play was very important for their own children:

- Oh, it's (play) very important (Polina)
- I search and I read a lot of articles that shows that playing with the babies ... it's very important for their future (Maha)
- I want her to be playful. I want her to explore things (Rita)

These findings confirm that play is both significant and relevant in the daily lives of low-income families.

Obj.2 - To understand the key challenges facing these families and examine the way play opportunities can be improved for them

There were real challenges related to time, space and resources. A selection of the data we collected confirms these points as follows:

- He didn't have floor time not much because it's very little space. He wants to walk but he has no space... Before I wasn't playing with him at all I would just let him in the crib just because... I study and we live in a small place in the student flat so there's no space to play. I would just put him in the crib but then realised that he was not meeting the milestones so he was having a lot of delays (Anna)
- At home he doesn't have so much freedom. At home there are walls and he's very - there's not so much space. He's just always by your side and you're always looking at him yes (Polina)

- I wish I could spend more time to play with her. Now she's starting to get very much into books she wants me to read to her... sometimes I can't. I can't do that every time because I have to attend to the brother I have to make meals I have to clean the house and it's sometimes difficult when you have a small space because everything is going on in that space (Elisa)

- You can't just get up one morning and think oh I'm going to take them swimming or we're going to go to the beach because you go to the beach you've got to counter in food and petrol and everything else. So you really do have to use your imagination so they're not getting bored and oh my God it's the park again (Lisa)

We also noted that the seasons played a role. In the winter months our families reported limited access to affordable indoor play spaces, making it difficult to maintain play routines.

- It's so hard to keep him entertained when it's cold outside. He loves to run around, but in winter, we're stuck indoors most of the time (Amele)

- We go to the park every day when it's warm, but in winter, it's hard. The kids want to play, but it's too cold outside. We end up going to indoor places like Snakes and Ladders, but we can't go too often because it's expensive. So a lot of the time, we just stay at home, but then they get bored (Flora)

- He loves being outside, but we don't have a garden, so we have to rely on the park. But even getting to the park isn't always easy, especially if it's raining or cold. And when we're at home, it feels like there's not enough space for him to really play. He wants to run around, but we don't have the room for that (Leyna)

- There are high costs associated with indoor play centres. The participants noted there are hidden costs, even in "free" spaces like cafés with play areas. The requirement to buy food or drinks to use the playroom adds to the financial burden already faced by low income parents during the winter, when indoor alternatives become essential as they are often living in confined accommodations. Thus, many families are forced to "stay at home", further restricting their children's play opportunities. Maybe twice a month I try to take them somewhere different, like to the soft play, but as you know, they are so expensive, I can't do it every day (Nigora)

- There's another church, there is the café and the playroom inside [...] because it's in the church, it's more expensive than in a normal café, but you have to buy a coffee for them to play there (Flora)

These findings point to the challenges facing low-income families as they seek to provide play opportunities for their children. The participants expressed strong aspirations for children's play and future childhoods. We note that our parents find ways to recreate positive playful, and counter negative playless, experiences, but support and resources are limited and have diminished due to the cost of living crisis in the UK. The current context contributes to a situation where “the ‘everydayness of play’ is not adequately facilitated” (Casey and McKendrick, 2023: 1369).

The relevance and meaning of Froebelian play to enhance inclusion and multidimensional social justice

In this second finding section, we address objectives 3 and 4:

Obj. 3 - To build on and develop Froebelian ideas to consider how they could become more relevant and meaningful

The participants expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the principles:

- I actually liked the approach... I learned what he wants and what he's capable of and he learns that he - even himself I think he didn't know that he was capable to play with cars or anything like that and he can do that (Anna)
- Actually I really like it because I see that for example if I want to tell about the children's centre it's really good and sometimes they have events for the baby to connect them to the nature. ... For example in my childhood I could learn from nature easily by myself by playing in the street in the alley. Now because it's not safe there is lots of class and there is lots of events here that learn the baby most of things (Maha)
- I completely agree with the principles. I think that's what should happen, because we need to keep the natural things. If it's come up to me or my children, I will teach them how to survive with the natural things. I think it's very important (Parveen)

But some participants expressed reservations such as those shared by Julie:

- It's interesting reading these because I could see a lot of very relatable things within it. Personally I think the language is quite... I don't know how to describe it. I mean it's obviously meant to be formal but very formal. They make sense and like I say I can relate to them but just initially they don't feel very user-friendly. They just feel a bit harsh.

We noted that parents naturally integrate Froebelian principles, such as creativity, autonomy, and connection to nature, into their children's play. Despite limited resources, they use everyday materials and household items to support creative and exploratory play. These practices align with Froebel's emphasis on letting children learn through exploration and creativity.

- He went to pick raspberries... we started crushing them and drawing on the pavement. He was engaged for a good half hour... It's all about letting him lead the way (Amele)
- But we've been doing it for so many generations, we just don't know it, especially coming from different types of backgrounds. We used to sleep on the floor... Yes, I think these principles are much more connected to real life (Maha)

However, the specifics of Froebel's educational philosophy (the principles) were never explicitly mentioned by the participants. Their understanding seems more general, focusing on the broader aspects of child-centred play and development rather than the subtle pedagogical approach of the Froebel principals.

Obj. 4 - To inform policy by mobilising more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies as an instrument for multidimensional social justice

This study aims to connect Froebelian educational principles with social justice by making Froebelian-inspired practices more accessible to low-income families, particularly in early years settings. Our research explores ways to adapt these principles to address the needs of families facing substantial financial and practical challenges, paving the way for more inclusive and equitable applications of Froebel's ideas, which traditionally tend to benefit educated, middle-class families (Hewes, 1985; Brehony, 1988; Hoskins and Smedley, 2016).

In particular, our study highlights:

Making Froebelian Principles more adaptable: The findings reveal that although low-income families face many challenges, namely, financial and spatial, they can still incorporate Froebelian ideas when these practices are tailored to their specific needs. There is evidence of the need to create inclusive approaches that take into account the limited resources of these families and allow Froebel's focus on nurturing children's creativity, independence, and exploration accessible to a broader range of families.

Supporting policy recommendations: We suggest that policymakers consider financial and spatial barriers and implement supports, such as community-based play resources and subsidised access to early years facilities, to allow Froebelian-inspired play to flourish. Providing affordable access to indoor facilities, particularly during the winter months when outdoor play is restricted (Ergler et al., 2013) would allow families to overcome seasonal limitations on their children's play routines.

Encouraging Community Partnerships: Working with organisations like HomeStart and Red Hen Project, our study shows the importance of community support in promoting Froebelian play. Collaborating with local councils, early years centres, and other non-profit organisations could extend play-based learning resources to low-income families, making this educational approach more widespread and allowing more families to benefit from it. In addition, there is a need to shift the responsibility for children's play away from individual parents alone and invest in durable and affordable social infrastructure that enables parents to support their children's play and incorporate Froebelian principles therein.

Through targeted policy changes and strong community support, our study aims to make Froebelian play and learning accessible for all children, giving every child the chance to benefit from the Froebelian principles, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Conclusion

This study has provided significant insights into both the challenges and opportunities facing low-income families as they seek to engage with Froebel's principles of play. The findings lead us to make several recommendations for change, from the need to work on the principles to ensure that are as inclusive as possible for culturally diverse low-income families to the need for policy and community interventions that will enable an increase in the provision of safe play spaces for all.

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Appendix: Interview Aide Memoire

Purpose: parents and children over the age of three will be invited back to discuss experiences, perceptions and understandings of Froebelian play, reflecting on the:

- Influences of socio-economic status on parents'/carers' enactment of Froebelian play principles at home.
- Relevance of Froebelian principles to these families.
- Development of these principles to become more relevant to this group.
- Mobilisation of more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies.

Introductory questions

- How did the play sessions go? Describe them to me?
- What was the role of adults in that play?

Thinking about your own child's play

- On reflection, how important is play to your child?
- Where did your child play?
- Did you play with them? What/who else do they play with?
- What were any of the challenges to your child's play? Prompt – space, resources, time, safety

Appendix: Interview Aide Memoire

Froebel: principles and practice

- Taking each principle in turn, ask how relevant they are to the family
 - Unity and connectedness
 - Autonomous learners
 - The value of childhood in its own right
 - Relationships matter
 - Creativity and the power of symbols
 - The central importance of play
 - Engaging with nature

What are the issues of taking a Froebelian approach to supporting and enabling your child's play?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your participation in this project not already covered?

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