

Reimagining Froebelian principles to engage and support low-income families in early childhood policy

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Abstract

This paper makes three important contributions to the early years field in England. First, it highlights the barriers to play experienced by low-income families. Second, it illuminates parents' affinity with Froebelian principles without prior knowledge of them. Third, it suggests how these affinities could be taken up in early years policy. This paper draws on previous research which revealed that many early years' practitioners believe low-income families often do not value play. In so doing, it presents findings from our recent study which invited low-income families to reflect on and explore the potential of applying Froebel's ideas in their interactions with their child(ren) during play. Through interviews, families shared their experiences, perceptions, and understandings of Froebelian approaches to play. Notably, parents engaged with Froebelian concepts in practice, even though they did not explicitly identify or label them as such. The findings suggest a need to adapt and extend Froebelian principles to be more inclusive and accessible to low-income families. This research offers valuable insights for practitioners by providing empirical evidence of diverse parental perspectives on play, highlighting opportunities to learn from families and support play-based learning at home. It also holds implications for policy, identifying areas where changes are needed to address the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on families with young children.

Keywords

early years policy, ethics, Froebel, low-income families, play, poverty

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Introduction

The lived experiences of low-income families with early years children, are often omitted in social research due to the reluctance of such families to participate (Wainwright et al., 2025), stemming from concerns about providing ethical consent, class stigma, and fear of social service intervention (Wilson, 2020). Our recruitment of low-income families was based on a stratified sampling method, aimed at ensuring a diverse representation of experiences within the annual income bracket of £7400 or less after tax and before state benefits. We recruited against the variable of income, based on our earlier work in this area and recognise that whilst it is limited, it provides a measure of relative disadvantage. This measure was consistently used to draw parallels across participants, with interview data expounding everyday complexities and allowing a more nuanced understanding of family context.

Low-income families are typically hard to gain access to in research terms due to ethical challenges associated with researching vulnerable groups, and the practical and material challenges associated with daily life (Wainwright et al., 2025). These challenges are particularly acute when it comes to low-income families from racialised minority backgrounds (Brannon et al., 2013). However, without the views and perspectives of such marginalised families, policy linked to Froebelian philosophy cannot fully address their needs or tackle social inequalities more broadly. Therefore, the aim of the research that informs this paper was to work directly with low-income families, on an annual household income of £10,000 or less (when state welfare benefits are included), to address the following research question:

1. What are the key challenges facing low-income families when providing play opportunities for their children?

The ongoing cost of living crisis has hit low-income households the hardest (Hill and Webber, 2022). Our research was carried out during the cost of living crisis to understand the challenges facing low-income families from diverse ethnic backgrounds in engaging their children with play opportunities. In doing so, this project bridges Froebelian philosophy and contemporary social science scholarship that considers low-income families in early years setting, developing Froebelian ideas in new, productive directions and interrogating their potential to address inequalities in early year contexts through policy change.

Low-income families and play

The importance of play in child development is widely acknowledged. Children's play allows them to make sense of the world and to develop their understanding of the workings of daily life. Through imaginative, child-led play, children have opportunity to explore new ideas, concepts, and characters, and in so doing develop their sense of self (Singer et al., 2006). From a social and emotional perspective, having time and space to play is a central aspect of developing key skills and capacities that allow for meaningful engagement in social life (Pellegrini, 2009). The different play traditions, for example Montessori, Steiner, and Froebelian, whilst distinct and nuanced, coalesce around the significance of play as a core component of growth in childhood (Miller and Almon, 2009). But play is differently experienced according to, amongst other factors, a child's socio-economic status. The opportunities and resources to support play vary significantly depending on a family's material realities (Lareau, 2011). For many low-income families, play is limited due to poor housing, lack of parental time to enable meaningful play, and restricted access to resources (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011). Amongst low-income families, child led play is more likely to occur in structured settings such as a playgroup rather than in the home (Li et al., 2022).

Black et al. (2017) provide substantial evidence that the quality of early life experiences can profoundly influence children's developmental trajectories, and that these influences are especially significant for children from low-income families. Children from low-income families are frequently confronted with a variety of environmental, social, and educational barriers that can limit their opportunities and negatively impact their development, thereby influencing their future life potential. Despite the importance of play, not everyone has equal access to quality experiences. In fact, a substantial body of research identifies an opportunity gap for children from low-income families, where systemic barriers prevent them from participating in quality early childhood education (ECE; Salaam Mohammed, 2024). Financial constraints (Cooper and Stewart, 2021), limited availability of programmes in low-income areas (Carlin et al., 2019), and jobs that frequently conflict with conventional childcare hours and costs (Luhr et al., 2022) are examples of these obstacles.

The home environment, however, represents an important space for addressing this gap. Parents, as their children's first and most enduring educators, can significantly influence their child's development. Research by Ogg et al. (2021) found that active parental involvement in children's learning can contribute positively to their educational outcomes and offset some of the disadvantages associated with low income. This involvement can take various forms, including providing supportive learning environments, and fostering beneficial routines.

As a result, it is important to explore how low-income parents can effectively integrate educational principles like those proposed by Froebel into their children's everyday lives. By doing so, low-income families might bridge the 'opportunity gap', augmenting their children's learning experiences despite their limited access to experiences.

However, it is also important to recognise that poverty shapes not only access to play but also the conditions under which relationships are formed and sustained. Constraints such as limited space, parental stress, and reduced access to shared play environments can influence the quality and frequency of interactions between children, as well as between children and caregivers. Attending to these interconnected factors allows for a more nuanced understanding of how low incomes impact both play experiences and the relational dynamics that underpin children's social development.

Conceptual framework: Froebel's theory of play

Friedrich Froebel, a German educator from the 19th century, established an influential ECE philosophy. His theory of play, 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). 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, 2012). As noted elsewhere:

The description of play provided by Froebel is one that encompasses the whole child – it not only attends to a child's physical need for activity, but it also makes reference to the need to provide space for nurture, for exploration, and to find joy and contentment in playful activities (Hoskins and Smedley, 2019).

Froebel's theories were considered revolutionary for their time, introducing the radical idea that structured and purposeful play should be central to early childhood education. This idea represented a major shift away from the rigid and formal teaching methods that dominated schools of the era. Rather than relying on strict instruction, Froebel advocated for a nurturing, engaging

environment where children could develop through play, creativity, and exploration. One of Froebel's central concepts, 'free flow play' (Bruce, 2012), emphasises the importance of play as the foundation for intellectual, social, and emotional development. His ideas of guided play and creativity through engaging in activities such as block building, nature study, and gardening have been heralded for encouraging curiosity, observation, and exploration (Hirschi, 2017). 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. This idea aligns with the contemporary emphasis on socio-cultural contexts in ECE and acknowledges the role that social interactions and cultural practices play in a child's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). 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. In recent years, Froebel's theory of play has been recognised for its potential in providing solid foundations for children's lifelong learning and development (Tovey, 2017). 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 (Hoskins and Smedley, 2019).

Contemporary scholarship confirms the value of Froebel's theory of play for the 21st Century (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). This work highlights the value of child-centred, exploratory learning environments in which play is viewed as the primary medium for meaning-making and development. Froebel's concept of 'self-activity' is reflected today in early childhood pedagogies that prioritise open-ended materials, guided discovery, and the integration of symbolic play with social interaction (Bruce, 2012). From a policy perspective, approaches such as play-based learning frameworks are included in the Early Years Foundation Stage in the UK, and echo Froebelian principles by valuing creativity, autonomy, and the role of the educator as a facilitator rather than instructor (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). Contemporary practice extends Froebel's gifts and occupations into flexible, multimodal resources, while maintaining the core idea that structured yet imaginative play fosters holistic development (Moyles, 2014).

Despite the attention given to Froebel's theory of play in a growing collective of formal early childhood education settings, the application of this conceptual framework 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. This paper addresses this gap by reporting on the play experiences of low-income families as they sought to engage with Froebelian play in their homes and local communities.

Although play in early childhood assumes different relational forms (solitary, child-child and child-adult), this article focuses on adult-child perspective because of its unique role in scaffolding children's learning, shaping emotional development, and mediating access to cultural and social meanings.

Methodology and design

The research was based on a qualitative design to understand the barriers to play experienced by low-income families, parents' affinity with Froebelian principles and how these affinities could be taken up in early years policy. Qualitative methodologies are particularly suited to exploring

complex social phenomena in context, allowing researchers to gather rich, descriptive data that reveal participants' experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This approach enables a deep understanding of how play is shaped by cultural, spatial, and relational factors (Creswell and Poth, 2018). At the heart of this project was a commitment to understanding the lived experiences of families and recognising them as active participants in the co-construction of knowledge about early childhood play.

We worked in partnership with Home-Start and the Red Hen Project, both UK charities that work with low-income families with young children aged from birth to six, and with whom we had established productive partnerships to support the identification of participants. We met with parents at these settings and shared with them information detailing the core elements of contemporary articulations of Froebelian principles and practice. Parents had the opportunity to read through leaflets produced by Froebel Trust and have informal discussions with the research team about the principles to ensure a shared understanding of core concepts. The research assistant was available to discuss parents' questions throughout this phase. Parents were then invited over a 4-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. After this, parents were then interviewed to discuss experiences, perceptions and understandings of Froebelian play. We collected data in four charity settings in differing geographical areas across phases one, two and three. An overview of these phases is detailed as follows:

Phase 1: Parent recruitment

Parents were invited to take part in the study, which would require them to reflect on their understanding of play at home and any perceived benefits/challenges they encounter. We shared key Froebelian principles of play (Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2016) with parents through an information sheet and question and answers-based discussion.

Phase 2: Play observations and reflections

Participants from the recruitment session were invited over a 4-week period, to observe and 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 (using voice notes, photos and videos) for discussion in the phase three interviews.

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' enactment of Froebelian play principles at home;
- Relevance of Froebelian principles to their families;
- Development of these principles to become more relevant to this group;
- Mobilisation of more inclusive iterations of Froebelian pedagogies.

These three phases allowed us to generate in depth data and represent robust and ethically grounded methods for engaging families in research on Froebelian play principles. Phase one, focussed on

recruitment and foundational engagement, and provided a critical starting point by introducing parents and carers to Froebel's pedagogy (Tovey, 2016). Sharing key concepts through accessible materials and a question-and-answer format ensured participants entered the study with a shared understanding of core values, such as the centrality of play, the importance of relationships, and the intrinsic value of 'childhood'. This initial phase not only built rapport but also promoted reflective thinking among participants, encouraging them to interrogate their own beliefs and experiences of play. Grounding the research in these pedagogical principles also supports ethical engagement, promoting trust and reciprocity, which are essential in research involving families (Clark, 2010).

The in situ reflections of phase two allowed for contextualised insights into family play practices. By encouraging participants to document their engagement with Froebelian principles over time, this phase promoted an element of longitudinal learning. It also privileged the voices and lived experiences of families, particularly by using flexible data collection tools such as voice notes, videos, and photos. This stage empowered parents through the data collection process, aligning with Froebel's view of autonomous, active learning, not just for children, but for adults too (Tovey, 2017). The data collected in this phase is not reported here due to space limitations.

Finally, Phase three provided a dialogic space to discuss parents' play reflections and consider how social, cultural, and economic contexts shape families' enactment of Froebelian principles. It enabled the research to move beyond description towards critical engagement with issues of inclusion, accessibility, and the contemporary relevance of Froebelian pedagogy. This phase also invited consideration of how the principles might evolve to better support diverse families, echoing calls for more inclusive and situated pedagogical frameworks (Moss, 2019).

Interview data were analysed thematically in relation to the research questions. We created a coding protocol based on a set of broad codes to ensure coherence and rigour in the process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The team coded the transcripts independently and then compared and discussed any differences, nuances and complexity in the data, resolving discrepancies through collaborative dialogue to ensure a consistent, and thorough interpretation.

Sample

Thirty one parents, all mothers, made up the sample of participants recruited through the two charities and across four locations. The age of youngest child ranged from 5 months to 4 years old, reflecting the work and focus of the charities from which parents were recruited. Most parents had more than one child, and 18 of them were first generation migrants. Tables 1–4 provide sample details with the use of parent pseudonyms to demonstrate the sample's diversity.

Each team member led the data collection in one area, supported by the research assistant (RA).

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from Brunel University of London ethics committee. We followed the ethical protocols set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018), ensuring the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants were safeguarded throughout the process. Informed consent was obtained by clearly explaining the purpose, methods, and potential impacts of the study in accessible and culturally appropriate ways. We maintained strict confidentiality and anonymity to protect participants from harm or unintended exposure. Special care was taken to recognise and address power imbalances and any potential distress, ensuring participation was voluntary and that individuals were free to withdraw at any point without consequence. Throughout the study, we adopted a reflexive approach, continuously evaluating the ethical implications of our

Table 1. Upton Marsh.

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children and age	Ethnicity – self described
Anna	27	1 (1)	Angolan/Portuguese
Elisa	30	2 (2; 5 months old)	Nigerian
Inayah	40	1 (1; 7 months)	Indian (Punjabi)
Marie	41	2 (2; 11 months)	Japanese
Polina	30	1 (2)	Belarusian
Poojam	31	1 (1)	Indian
Lisa	43	6 (26; 23; 18; 2; 5 months)	White British
Tanya	23	1 (1)	Polish

Table 2. Townsfield.

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children and age	Ethnicity – self described
Rita	36	1 (2)	Indian
Nigora	35	2 (4 and 2)	Afghan
Leila	33	2 (2; 5 months)	Iranian
Maha	39	1 (18 months)	Iranian
Leyna	24	1 (3)	White British
Flora	25	2 (3; 2)	Albanian
Amele	33	1 (1)	Algerian
Parveen	40	3 (8; 6; 2)	Indian
Julie	32	2 (15; 4)	White British

Table 3. East Hillshead.

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children and age	Ethnicity – self described
Emma	36	2 (4; 14)	White British
Britney	38	6 (13; 12; 10; 6; 4; 3)	White British
Carol		2 (2; 4)	White British
Jane	35	2 (18; 4)	White British
Lola	31	5 (13; 10; 9; 4; 2)	White British
Susan	43	6 (23; 20; 17; 14; 8; 4)	White British
Zahra	30	3 (7; 5; 3)	British Bangladeshi
Valerie	36	4 (14; 12; 8; 4)	White British

Table 4. Ridgeborough.

Pseudonyms	Age	Number of children and age	Ethnicity – self described
Ava		1 (1)	Black African
Rose		1 (1)	Nigerian
Stephanie		7 (12; 8; 7; 6; 5; 3; 1)	White British
Tara		1 (1)	Kenyan
Vivian	26	1 (1)	Black African
Tamara		4 (5; 9; 12; 20)	Zimbabwean

work and prioritising the wellbeing of vulnerable participants. This commitment fostered trust, respect, and equity, supporting meaningful and responsible engagement with the participants.

The interview process also posed challenges. In particular, there was a reluctance from some participants to be interviewed by male members of the research team. This highlights the gendered dynamics of research relationships and the need for ethical sensitivity to participants' comfort levels and cultural norms (Vasileva, 2024). We adapted our approach, accordingly, allowing for flexibility in who conducted interviews and creating spaces where participants felt safe and respected.

Perhaps the most ethically sensitive aspect of the project was our exploration of families' everyday lives in relation to play. We asked families to reflect on their routines, take photographs of play moments (often at home), and in so doing, share personal insights into their parenting and caregiving practices. While this approach aligns with Froebelian values of recognising play in everyday contexts, it also raised questions about the potential intrusion into private family spaces. We were aware of the need to be sensitive to avoid a sense of surveillance or judgement (Vasileva, 2024). We addressed this issue by approaching all conversations with respect and non-judgement. The research was also supported by the charities where participants felt comfortable and did not feel judged, which also enabled a trusting and sensitive relationship.

Despite these challenges, we generated extensive, insightful and detailed qualitative data. In what follows we present three key themes that emerged from the data analysis to illustrate the participants' perceptions of the Froebelian principles, and challenges of enacting them in relation to space, time, and resources.

Findings

Froebelian play: Perceptions of the principles

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the Froebelian approach to play with the majority noting its value in terms of building relationships with their child, engaging with nature and understanding their child's needs. Anna told us:

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).

Here, Anna highlights the positive experience of engaging with Froebelian principles of play. Froebel advocated the significance of play, arguing that it is the 'highest expression of human development in childhood' (Froebel, 1887 cited in Lilley, 1967: 83–84) and should be regarded as a serious, deeply meaningful, and natural activity through which children construct understanding, express inner worlds, and develop holistically. In Anna's experience, play became a mutual learning process rather than a one-sided interaction. She not only gained insight into '*what he wants and what he's capable of*', but also observed his own growing self-awareness, suggesting a development in his confidence and ability to play with different resources. The quote suggests a sense of discovery, as if both parent and child were surprised by his capabilities. Anna's experience emphasises empowerment and the importance of opportunity in revealing previously unrecognised skills and potential.

Rita's quote confirms a deepening connection with her daughter as a consequence of engaging in play: '*it makes sense to me because I think the more I'm playing with her the more I'm feeling connected*' (Rita). The quote reflects the importance of relationships and connections between parent and child. This expression of connection is reflected in Froebel's work when he contends:

To the child the sight of the grown-ups around him - and this is very true of his parents who at first command his whole field of vision - is the sun which draws him out; and when he establishes other relationships within and beyond himself, these are the climatic conditions, the broad sky, under which he grows up (Froebel, 1887 cited in Lilley, 1967: 78).

The quote suggests that if a child is surrounded by responsive, and emotionally available adults actively seeking to make a connection, they are more likely to feel secure and can subsequently be drawn into interaction, exploration, and learning. As their social world expands, the quality of these wider relationships continues to shape the conditions in which their development unfolds, influencing their confidence, social competence, and their overall growth. The importance to developing nurturing and respectful relationships is a cornerstone of learning in early childhood and underpins children's emotional security, sense of belonging, and capacity to form positive connections with others, all of which are essential for healthy development and playful learning.

The following three participants reflected on the potential of Froebelian principles to help them and their child develop their appreciation of and engagement with nature:

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 (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).

Yes, I think being able to engage with nature and other living things makes for really sensitive, really caring children (Stephanie).

Froebel (1887) emphasised the central role of nature in children's development, viewing young children's interaction with the natural world as a vital expression of joy, curiosity, and holistic growth. The participants note the potential of engagement with nature for the development of sensitive and caring children and again the idea of connection.

Taken together, the data illustrates how parents recognised the relevance and value of these principles in their own family contexts, particularly in relation to children's autonomy, connection to nature, and the importance of preserving natural and experiential ways of learning. These insights demonstrate not only a theoretical alignment with Froebelian ideas but also an emotional and practical resonance in everyday parenting (Bruce, 2012). Such responses affirm Froebel's vision of education as a deeply relational and holistic process, grounded in children's lived experiences and the environments in which they grow (Liebschner, 2001). The overwhelmingly positive responses indicate a strong resonance between the theoretical framework and parents' lived experiences, values, and aspirations for their children. Many parents expressed a deep appreciation for the principles, particularly those that affirm the agency and capability of the child (e.g. autonomous learning), the central role of play, and the importance of engaging with nature. Anna's reflection, for instance, highlights how recognising and facilitating her child's autonomy through play enabled them both to discover previously unacknowledged capabilities. This finding directly aligns with Froebel's concept of the child as an active, self-motivated learner, capable of constructing knowledge through meaningful interactions (Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2016).

Similarly, Rita, Maha and Parveen's responses demonstrate a strong appreciation for the principle of engaging with nature and maintaining a connection to the 'natural world'. These perspectives affirm Froebel's notion of unity and connectedness that learning is not compartmentalised but

emerges from relationships between the child, their environment, and their community (Tovey, 2017). Parveen notes the significance of nature-based knowledge, which Froebel saw as essential not only to educational development but to human flourishing (Liebschner, 2001). However, 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 (Julie).

Julie's comment draws attention to a key limitation in how these principles are communicated: the accessibility of academic or formalised language. While she finds the ideas relatable, she critiques the language as '*very formal*' and '*not user-friendly*'. This reflects a broader challenge in translating pedagogical theory into practice, particularly in diverse family contexts. If the terminology feels '*harsh*' or alienating, it may inhibit engagement, even when the principles themselves are meaningful. This finding confirms the need for co-constructed, culturally responsive interpretations of Froebelian pedagogy that are both theoretically sound and linguistically inclusive. Julie's comment echoes what Clark (2010) terms the importance of 'listening' in early childhood research not only to children, but to parents as a means of building participatory, accessible pedagogies.

The data suggest that parents are not simply endorsing Froebelian principles, but actively reinterpreting them through the lens of their own lived experiences, values, and constraints. For some, this manifests as relational connection (Rita), for others as aspirations tied to cultural or practical knowledge (Parveen), indicating that these principles are taken up in diverse and context-specific ways rather than as a uniform pedagogical framework. At the same time, Julie's response highlights a tension between conceptual resonance and practical accessibility, suggesting that the uptake of Froebelian ideas is mediated not only by their perceived value but also by how they are communicated and made meaningful within everyday family life. These findings are important for Froebelian educators as they both confirm the value of the principals in action and illustrate areas where these are perceived as exclusionary.

Challenges of enacting Froebelian play: Space

Despite participants' positive engagement with Froebelian principles, many families faced significant barriers that made it difficult to put these ideas into practice. Challenges related to time, space and resources were frequently mentioned, highlighting the gap between pedagogical ideals and families' everyday realities. These constraints often limited opportunities for free play, exploration and meaningful parent-child interaction, which are core elements of Froebelian pedagogy. A small selection of the data presented below illustrate some of these lived challenges, drawing attention to the ways in which environmental and socio-economic factors can shape and, at times, restrict the implementation of play-based learning at home:

Right now, space is quite hard because I'm living in a two-bed and the rooms are quite limited with space. Then even the living room, they can only have little toys [. . .] the garden they have limited space (Zahra).

At home he doesn't have so much freedom. At home there are walls and he's very—there's not so much space (Polina).

He didn't have floor time not much because it's very little space. He wants to walk but he has no space [. . .] I study and we live in a small place in the student flat so there's no space to play (Anna).

Space as well because we don't have our own house. I was living with my in-laws then we had to move out from there because of our situation and now I'm at my mum's and space is always a problem everywhere. At the moment we're just in one room (Poojam).

This set of data highlight significant barriers that families face when trying to implement Froebelian principles in the home, particularly around the availability of space. While earlier findings illustrate the philosophical alignment between parents' values and Froebel's pedagogy, the reflections here confirm the material constraints that can inhibit the realisation of these principles in practice. Froebel placed strong emphasis on the importance of the environment in children's learning, believing that children need space, freedom, and opportunities for uninterrupted play to develop holistically (Bruce, 2012). Yet, for families like Anna's, the lack of physical space in a student flat led to restricted movement for her child and developmental delays, revealing the tangible impact that housing insecurity can have on early childhood development.

Zahra and Polina's experience similarly reveal how limited space at home curtails children's autonomy, a key Froebelian principle. Polina's comment that her child is '*always by your side*' speaks to the absence of opportunities for independent exploration and self-directed play, which Froebel believed were central to learning and personal growth (Tovey, 2017). Froebel saw play not as a luxury but as a necessity, '*the highest expression of human development in childhood*', and this cannot be fully realised when environmental conditions inhibit movement, curiosity and experimentation (Froebel, 1887).

Poojam's narrative further emphasises how unstable housing situations compound these challenges. Living in shared or temporary accommodation, especially in overcrowded conditions, not only limits access to safe, and stimulating play environments but also contributes to stress and a lack of continuity, both of which can affect parent-child relationships and wellbeing (Moss, 2019). Froebelian pedagogy centres the importance of secure, loving relationships and the need for children to feel safe and rooted in their environment (Bruce, 2012). However, these ideals are difficult to uphold when families are experiencing housing precarity or transience. These insights point to the need for more flexible and inclusive interpretations of Froebelian practice; ones that recognise and respond to structural inequalities and the lived realities of diverse families.

Challenges of enacting Froebelian play: Time

While many parents valued the Froebelian emphasis on play, connection and responsive caregiving, a recurring theme throughout the data was the challenge of finding time to engage meaningfully with their children in play. Daily responsibilities, caregiving demands and the pressures of managing multiple roles within the home often left parents feeling stretched and exhausted. These accounts reveal how time scarcity can limit the enactment of Froebelian principles, despite parents' best intentions and emotional commitment to their child's development. The following examples illustrate how time constraints impact the ability to create playful, nurturing environments in line with Froebel's vision:

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 her 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).

For parents like Elisa, the competing demands of caregiving, household responsibilities and limited living space mean that opportunities for quality, sustained play are often disrupted or

deprioritised. Her comment reflects the reality that play is not only a pedagogical activity but one that exists within a complex web of family responsibilities and routines, often making the ideal of ‘present and attuned’ parenting difficult to achieve (Bruce, 2012). Rita’s account similarly speaks to the emotional and physical fatigue experienced by parents, particularly when caring for young children in high-intensity environments:

‘time is something I find really difficult, and then sometimes you just want to sit [. . .] because you’re so tired and mentally and physically’ (Rita).

Rita’s desire to simply ‘sit’ highlights a critical, often overlooked, aspect of early childhood pedagogy: the wellbeing of the adult. Froebel viewed the educator or carer as a thoughtful guide and someone who creates conditions for growth through calm, attentive and responsive engagement (Froebel, 1887). Yet, without adequate support or rest, maintaining this role becomes unsustainable. This finding challenges the notion of idealised parent-child interactions and instead calls for more realistic, compassionate interpretations of Froebelian engagement that consider the pressures faced by parents and carers, particularly those in under-resourced or demanding family contexts (Moss, 2019). As Britney notes: *‘I’m a very busy mum on my own with six kids so no I don’t really get a lot of time to do anything like that anymore’*. Britney’s situation, as a single mother of six children, starkly illustrates how structural and social factors intersect with personal capacity. Her statement, *‘I don’t really get a lot of time to do anything like that anymore’*, captures the cumulative effect of caregiving responsibilities that leave little space physically or emotionally for intentional play (Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020).

The data highlight the challenges that many parents face in enacting Froebelian principles of play due to time constraints, particularly within the context of everyday domestic life. Froebel placed strong emphasis on the role of the adult in nurturing children’s learning through observation, interaction and shared play experiences (Tovey, 2017). Froebel’s philosophy was built upon a vision of harmony between home, child and caregiver, but this ideal can feel out of reach for families navigating complex life circumstances (Liebschner, 2001). These data reveal the importance of framing Froebelian principles not as prescriptive or fixed, but as flexible, evolving ideas that must adapt to the lived realities of diverse families. Supporting time for play, therefore, may require broader systemic changes such as access to childcare, community resources and social support, rather than placing the full burden on individual parents to make time for Froebelian practice.

Challenges of enacting froebelian play: Resources

The following excerpts illustrate some of the practical challenges caregivers face when trying to implement Froebelian play principles, particularly in relation to limited resources and opportunities for creating varied, engaging activities. These reflections highlight how environmental constraints and economic considerations can impact a child’s play experiences, opportunities and engagement. As noted by Amele:

So in that two weeks, because we didn’t go out—the weather was so dull and it was so cold—it was really hard to keep him contained at home. So trying different types of activities, trying to keep him as engaged was quite challenging, we go to playgroups and it’s always the same toys. Nothing against the playgroups, they’re doing an amazing job [. . .] It’s a change of scenery, but it’s nothing engaging. It’s just plastics everywhere, and then all they do is fight over the same toys, so there isn’t a lot of interaction with different types of resources (Amele).

Amele's account reveals the limitations of local playgroups, which, while appreciated for offering a change of scenery, often lack variety, and depth in the materials provided. Her description of '*plastics everywhere*' and repetitive toy use highlights a departure from Froebel's vision of learning through rich, natural and thoughtfully chosen materials; what he referred to as 'gifts' and 'occupations' designed to connect children to the world around them in meaningful ways (Liebschner, 2001). The absence of engaging, varied resources can result in boredom, conflict and a lack of imaginative play, contradicting the principle that play should be joyful, creative and intrinsically motivated. As Lisa explains:

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 factor in food and petrol and everything else. So you really do have to use your imagination so they're not getting bored and it's "oh my God it's the park again"! (Lisa).

Lisa's reflection adds another layer to the issues faced by Amele, pointing to the financial cost of enriching experiences such as trips to the beach or swimming. Her comment that '*you really do have to use your imagination*' speaks to the emotional load placed on parents who are constantly working to compensate for limited material and financial resources. While Froebelian play encourages imagination and creativity, this principle can become burdensome when parents are left to fill the gap without adequate community or structural support (Moss, 2019). It is important to recognise that for many families, access to stimulating environments and meaningful resources is not a question of personal choice or effort, but one deeply shaped by socio-economic conditions.

These accounts highlight the complex challenges families face in accessing the kinds of resources, both material and experiential, that support rich, Froebelian play experiences. Froebel advocated for environments that offer variety, sensory engagement and open-ended opportunities for exploration, with materials that support children's natural curiosity, and creativity (Tovey, 2017). However, for parents like Amele and Lisa, limited access to diverse resources, stimulating environments and affordable outings presents a significant barrier to enacting these ideals in everyday life.

This data suggest, that to make Froebelian principles genuinely accessible, they must be reinterpreted in ways that respond to the material realities of families' lives. This includes advocating for greater investment in public play spaces, equitable access to high-quality early years provision and the development of resource-rich community hubs. As Tovey (2017) argues, Froebelian pedagogy must be accessible and inclusive to all individuals, particular attention to the needs and experiences of vulnerable groups, such low-income communities so that no one is excluded or disadvantaged in any aspect of participation or access.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper coalesce around three key contributions. First, the paper has highlighted the barriers to play experienced by low-income families. Second, it has explored parents' affinity with Froebelian principles without prior knowledge of them. Third, it suggests how these affinities could be taken up in early years policy.

The first theme reveals that the enactment of Froebelian principles by low-income families is often constrained by material realities such as limited living space, scarce time, and restricted access to diverse and engaging resources. To make Froebelian play genuinely inclusive, the principles need reworking to ensure they acknowledge these structural barriers and promote adaptations that reflect the lived experiences of diverse families. This could involve creating flexible

iterations, co-constructed with families, that respect their cultural, socio-economic, and environmental contexts, emphasising the importance of accessible natural play environments and community resources that support creative, open-ended play without requiring extensive financial or spatial capacity.

In terms of the second theme, the data points to an alignment between parents' values and Froebelian principles and confirms the real potential of this pedagogical approach to support holistic childhood development through autonomy, connection to nature, and play-based learning. The concepts of connection, relationships, nature, and play are important to parents and resonate with their parenting values. Whilst very few of the sample had any prior knowledge of the principles, all of them expressed an affinity with these ideas, suggesting that Froebelian approaches are both intuitively appealing, and readily understood. This finding confirms that a lack of prior awareness does not equate to a lack of engagement. There is an openness amongst the parents we interviewed to pedagogical models that prioritise the child's agency, emotional wellbeing, and engagement with the natural world.

Turning to the third theme, we argue that this work has important potential for future policy interventions. In addressing the practical challenges detailed above, the early years foundation stage policy could be enriched by articulating a clear commitment to Froebelian principles. Framing provision around a holistic, play-based approach that values children's agency, creativity, and connection with nature would: enhance developmental outcomes; and ensure that care and education are not reduced to merely a workforce support mechanism, but recognised as foundational to life-long learning and wellbeing.

Future early years policy interventions should also prioritise the provision of safe, stimulating public play spaces and invest in community hubs that offer varied, high-quality materials aligned with Froebelian ideals. Recognising that many parents face significant time pressures and caregiving demands, social supports such as affordable childcare, parenting programmes, and respite services can create the conditions for more sustained and attuned engagement with children's play. Policy should further encourage the use of inclusive, accessible language in communicating Froebelian pedagogy, co-constructed with families to ensure relevance and resonance. By integrating these measures, early childhood education frameworks can move beyond idealised notions of play and caregiving to embrace a compassionate, equity-focussed approach that empowers families to nurture their children's development despite environmental and social constraints.

Low-income parents integrating Froebelian principles into daily activities are confronted by numerous, substantial obstacles. To realise the potential of these approaches, comprehensive solutions will require a multifaceted approach, combining individual support for parents, community initiatives, and policy interventions.

Conclusion

To conclude, while Froebelian principles of play, autonomy, and connection to nature resonate deeply with parents and offer a valuable framework for early childhood development, their practical implementation is often hindered by socio-economic and material constraints. The participants in our research connected with Froebelian principles and intuitively understood and enacted them. Whilst we accept that our participants are likely to have engaged with the principles in relatively superficial ways when compared to experienced practitioners, their responses suggest a meaningful alignment between these ideas and everyday parenting practices. If we accept that poverty is time consuming, because families must continuously manage constrained resources, navigate complex state systems, and make frequent trade-offs to meet basic needs, then it follows that it can also limit the capacity for sustained engagement with educational approaches that require time,

reflection, and consistency. Whilst these limitations have important implications for understanding how Froebelian principles are experienced in practice, they nonetheless provide a framework for enriching child and adult relationships, starting from a point of building trust, and mutual respect and understanding. In Williams' book, *The Long Revolution* (1961), he argues that change unfolds gradually through everyday life, not just through formal political, or institutional shifts. Change requires a bottom-up, grassroots approach to become inclusive and socially just, grounded in a politics of recognition, and redistribution (Fraser, 2008). Engaging parents with Froebelian principles arguably represents a step towards meaningful change in the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis and associated pressures facing families.

To bridge the gap between theory and lived reality, policies must adopt an inclusive, flexible approach that recognises diverse family contexts and provides equitable access to resources, time, and supportive environments. By doing so, Froebelian pedagogy can move beyond an idealised vision to become a lived, accessible practice that truly supports the holistic growth and well-being of all children, regardless of their material circumstances. This is especially important considering the positive impact engagement in our project had on the many participants, with greater understanding leading to increased confidence. This is summed up in Anna's comment:

I think what changed really was the fact that I allowed him to play. Before I used to do it unconsciously, but I didn't know what I was doing. But now, after you gave me the sheet, now I know that I should be able to. That's what I want to do now is allow him to play.

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