

# FROEBEL YOUNG VOICES ON COVID PROJECT

March 2021

## FINAL REPORT TO THE FROEBEL TRUST



REPORT PREPARED BY  
THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements                             | 3  |
| Executive Summary                            | 4  |
| 1. Background to Project                     | 8  |
| 2. Project Aims                              | 12 |
| 3. Project Methodology                       | 13 |
| 4. Project Implementation and Deliverables   | 16 |
| 5. Findings: Plural COVID-19 Narratives      | 20 |
| 6. Legacy Learning and Next Steps            | 43 |
| 7. References                                | 46 |
| Appendix 1: Country Contexts and Study Sites | 48 |

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- Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre, England.
- Auckland Kindergarten Association, New Zealand;
- Birdwood Kindergarten, New Zealand;
- Cowgate Nursery and Family Centre, Scotland;
- Greengables Nursery School, Scotland;
- Centre for Research in Early Childhood, England.

We have each learnt a lot about ourselves and each other during this project, and got closer to the children and families who have been our collaborators. We have also developed our skills at listening more carefully and dialoguing about how we can work together in the spirit of collaborative and appreciative inquiry to better support young children and their families through this very difficult time. It has been an enormous privilege to share this journey together.

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Professor Chris Pascal and Professor Tony Bertram  
March 2021

## Executive Summary

### Background

What's it been like to be a young child living through the last 12 months of a global pandemic? What do they know and understand about the threat of the coronavirus? How have they experienced the restrictions on their daily life? What and who have they missed? What have they enjoyed about being largely home bound and spending a lot more time with their families? How do they feel about these changes to their life? What's been good and what's been difficult for them? Are they able to express their feelings and who has been listening?

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed multiple challenges across all areas of society and human life but there are particular and additional ones for young children growing up in the modern world. Listening to the experiences and perspectives of young children on the pandemic is important in sustaining a society, which aims to be inclusive and to value the right for all to be heard. Yet all too often the voices of young children are excluded from consideration. Children have powerful narratives about how they have been affected by lockdowns and the subsequent opening up of public spaces and places, and we believe that this deserves serious consideration by practitioners and policy makers. Giving these young children the opportunity to express and document their lived experiences can enable them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life.

This report presents the evidence from a study of how early years practitioners in England, Scotland and New Zealand have used a Froebelian approach to storytelling in their pedagogy to encourage young children to explore their COVID experiences through their play. This study reveals a great deal about the children's resilience, creativity and wisdom as they have navigated the last twelve months. The study also shows how early years practitioners and families have supported the children through these experiences, building deeper and more connected relationships and adapting daily routines to enable the children to manage the radical changes to daily life. There is much in these reported COVID-19 narratives to stimulate further thinking and action by parents and carers, practitioners and policymakers as societies round the world develop their responses to this shared global crisis. Children have become our teachers in this shared story.

### Project Aims

Our aims in this project were:

- to support children (aged 3-4 years) to express their narratives about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- to document Froebel pedagogic storytelling strategies and their capacity to promote children's reflection on their lived experiences over the course of the pandemic crisis;
- to explore the power of storytelling within a Froebelian pedagogy to promote children's social and emotional health and contain COVID-19 fears and anxieties;
- to promote children as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives, ensuring that children are valued, listened to and nurtured.

We believe this project has provided a unique opportunity for the Froebelian and wider early childhood community in three countries to explore the contemporary power and purpose of storytelling as a key element of Froebelian practice; and to disseminate this learning to a world community which has been devastated by the pandemic.

## Methodology

This project was carried out in four different Froebelian early years settings; one in England, two in Scotland and one in New Zealand. Each setting is working within less advantaged communities which have experienced COVID-19 at very different levels of intensity and with different national and local responses to the virus. This context allowed us to explore how wider societal responses have shaped children's lived experiences. Practitioners in each setting were also operating at a different stage in their experience and adoption of the Froebelian pedagogy but all were trained in a Froebelian approach to storytelling and in action research methodologies at the onset of the project. The children's play narratives were curated by the practitioner and link researcher working collaboratively to select those where COVID-19 experiences were central to the child's attention. These narratives were then subject to analysis that revealed common themes and issues, which can be addressed, and highlighted the shared concerns and responses of children to COVID-19 from different cultural contexts. We also documented how the Froebelian approach to storytelling in play was implemented in the four different contexts to support young children's social and emotional health and the impact of this on children's wellbeing. In total we gathered detailed play sequences from 43 children from three to four years of age. In this way 295 play narratives were generated through this project. Alongside the play narratives, a series of parent/carer and practitioner reflective dialogues were conducted in which the adults close to the children were encouraged to think about the children's play. These adult dialogues explored how the play reflected the daily experiences at home and what they might do to better support children's social and emotional wellbeing at this time.

## Key Findings

This programme of work has generated a wealth of new knowledge about the COVID-19 experiences of young children and their families and the power of storytelling as a key element in Froebelian pedagogic practice. This learning is now being disseminated at both policy and practice level locally, nationally and internationally, ensuring the project has legacy and impact. Major findings from each of the project participants are set out below.

### Children's COVID-19 Narratives

Children are very capable of reflecting deeply on their experiences and analysis suggests six dominant narrative themes in their reflections: transitions and settling; children's friendships; children's silences and expressions of resilience; the need to play; the importance of outdoors; and children's COVID wisdom. The project reveals that children in all three countries are expressing a desire to:

- Regain their daily life and routines
- Be with their friends
- Have extended time to play

- Be outdoors
- Have authentic information

### **Parents' COVID-19 Narratives**

The experience of parents and families in the project was clearly nuanced and individual, affected by each country's COVID-19 policies in relation to the stage of the pandemic spread or retreat, but also according to a family's particular circumstances. All families in the study had faced challenges in adjusting to the crisis and were happy to share these with us, but many also saw positives in the experiences they were sharing.

The challenges include: worries about infection and vaccine; lack of extended family contact, especially with grandparents; social isolation of selves and child; worries about the impact on children's progress; pressures of home schooling; home routine disruption; stress on home relationships; and worries about jobs, finance and housing.

However, most parents also acknowledged a range of benefits from the pandemic which included: more time together as a family; slower pace of life; appreciation of nature and seasons; strengthened relationships between parents and siblings; open dialogues about virus risk and crisis; and an optimistic view of the future.

### **Practitioners' COVID-19 Narratives**

The study practitioners had all been trained in Froebelian storytelling approaches and in action research methodologies, including pedagogic documentation and analysis. They were encouraged to document the pedagogic strategies they used to support children's storytelling about COVID-19. Many of these storytelling strategies were not new but were employed specifically or more frequently to encourage the children to explore their COVID-19 experiences, thoughts and feelings through the introduction of materials and resources. Other strategies were new to the practitioners and the children, as they created and innovated within their practice to extend and deepen their existing pedagogy. Each of these strategies could be employed indoors or outdoors. Some techniques were deemed to be more successful than others but practitioners revealed an openness to experiment and try out new ideas being determined to offer children a rich range of options and opportunities to express and share their own COVID-19 stories. Some of these storytelling strategies include: sustained shared conversations; TV screen and news; role play; picture/photo prompts; puppets/Persona Dolls; singing and music making; craft work and modelling; drawing and painting; mind mapping; book sharing; and story squares.

The practitioners also reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on children and suggested that attendance at nursery had, interestingly, largely improved since the pandemic hit. They also indicated a growing awareness that the behaviour of children had also changed once they returned to nursery, with social interaction, sharing, and operating in larger groups harder for some children.

The impact of being part of the Froebel COVID-19 project on the practitioners at this challenging time was also documented and revealed that many practitioners do have anxieties about the risk to their own health and that they could potentially transmit the virus to their own families. However, their

professionalism and dedication has meant that they have continued to come to work, unless they have tested positive, and have put the wellbeing of the children and families first: a huge tribute to their strength and deep commitment to their work and the leadership within each of the study sites. They also report significant shifts in their professional expertise and confidence, particularly in relation to having a deeper understanding of a Froebelian approach; a reinforced understanding of the importance of outdoors and the natural world; being able to lead deepening and more equitable relationships with the children and their families, and an excitement about being a practitioner researcher and part of a community of practice.

### Legacy Learning and Next Steps

The project has had a significant impact on all participants, as evidenced above, and we believe has secured a strong legacy in all four study sites, which will feed future development and collaborations.

In summary, the project has flagged:

- The need to slow down, listen more to children, parents and each other.
- The benefits of action research for the triad of parent, child, practitioner learning together with no preconceived agenda.
- The shift to more email and phone contact with parents that has strengthened relationships and made them more equitable as all parents get the same offer.
- The value of posting information and news about the nursery activity on social media. Parents have been very appreciative of staff reading stories that they can then share at home and all the practical activities shared with parents.
- The real value of home visiting.
- The value of starting sessions outside and then opening up inside rather than the other way around has had a positive impact on children. Settling children outside has been extremely positive.
- Having virtual meetings with professionals, such as child protection teams, which has meant far less time out of nursery for staff as there is no travel time.
- The slower pace of life and re-prioritising of what is important which has benefited many.

We feel this project offers a challenge to all of us to respond actively and authentically to what the children are saying (and to their silences) – and echoing Froebel, this will be a test of our judgement and feelings too. We believe that the knowledge generated has real value for many stakeholders in the sector. We have already made good progress to realise our mission to better support young children to express their narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and through this to promote their social and emotional health and contain their COVID-19 fears and anxieties. We have also learned a lot about how to use storytelling strategies within a Froebel pedagogic approach to ensure children feel themselves as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives. In short, collectively we are taking great care to value, listen to and nurture these young children well during this devastating time. We hope our experiences can reach out to others to do the same for their children.

# The Froebel Young Voices on COVID-19 Project

## 1. Background to Project

As with most areas of society and human life, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional challenges to young children growing up in the modern world (Andrew et al 2020; Hunnikin et al, 2020; Pascal et al 2020; Paull et al 2020; Unicef/Save the Children, 2020). The economic and public health consequences of the crisis are threatening to deepen the well documented existing patterns of vulnerability and under-achievement for young children and families, especially attributed to those living in poverty and disadvantage (Andrew et al 2020; Howes et al 2020; Pascal et al 2020; Unicef/Save the Children 2020). The impact of the additional stress, depression and mental health issues caused by the pandemic crisis is likely to be grave, especially in low income households and for disadvantaged young children and their families (Fegert et al 2020; Howes et al 2020; Pascal et al 2020; Singh et al 2020). Evidence is beginning to emerge about how the anxieties linked to COVID-19 are affecting the everyday life of young children (Howes et al 2020; Pascal et al 2020; Singh et al 2020). It appears that the impact of restrictions on social interaction and participation in society's cultural life is highly individual and structured by many hierarchies, including hierarchies of age.

Remote contact cannot replace the need for the human contact and interaction that is offered by early years communities and which are crucial to healthy development and intersubjectivity. It is well established that children thrive in the company of other children and interested adults and many children have been experiencing total isolation from this (Howes et al 2020; Fegert et al 2020; Pascal et al 2020; Singh et al 2020). Giving these young children the opportunity to express their lived experiences and felt realities acknowledges their agency, wisdom and also their strong need for companionship and also enables them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life. Research by Pascal et al (2020) indicates that in the pandemic fallout there is a risk of isolated young children developing issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment problems or a sense of grief which could have fundamental and long term effects. This report shares the progress and outcomes of a trans-national, qualitative study, which was funded by the Froebel Trust, of how practitioners in three countries have used a Froebelian approach to storytelling in their pedagogy to encourage young children to express and explore their COVID-19 experiences through their sequenced play narratives. The curated play narratives generated by the practitioners working with children have been analysed to identify what children and their families are saying about the pandemic and how it has impacted on their lives.

### 1.2 Children's Experience of COVID-19

At CREC, we have been motivated to enhance and support the expression and realization of children's voice in early childhood practice for many years, seeing this as an essential mission to realise children's rights and the civic role of early childhood settings. It informs, and is informed by, our clear view that early childhood education and care is a political project in which children's citizenship and rights to participation are embodied and embedded (Pascal et al 2009; Pascal et al 2012; Gaywood et al 2019; Lyndon et al 2019; Pascal et al 2020). Our work has been strongly influenced by liberation theorists such as Freire (1970) and sociologist Bourdieu (1990) whose work highlights how power and agency is



distributed in society to maintain and control social order. In particular, we have used Freirean concepts of power, 'conscientization' and voice to inform our support to children in the process of '*naming their world*' in which the children's play narratives can enable the expression of their sense of their changed worlds and their place within it. This process aimed to afford the children an authentic sense of their rights and a realization of their power to not only receive but to shape their experiences. In congruence with Freire we aimed to

*...develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which, and in which, they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (Freire, 1970: 64).*

We strongly believe that young children, who are at a formative stage in their lives and in their growing civic awareness, have equally valid knowledge, views and feelings about the pandemic which they are capable of expressing if given the opportunity. They have powerful and specific narratives about how they have been and are affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent gradual opening up of public spaces and places, which deserve serious consideration and which provide important evidence to inform how early years provision and policy should respond. Giving these young children the opportunity to express and document their lived experiences and felt realities can enable them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life. The narratives can also help parents and carers, many of whom are also highly anxious and fearful, to have a fuller understanding of their children's responses and help them to emerge stronger from this crisis.

Our collaboration (funded by The Froebel Trust, in the UK) about pedagogic principles and practices with a group of Froebelian-inspired practitioners from England, Scotland and New Zealand lent itself to a project designed to document young children's voices about COVID-19 in order to better inform early childhood policy and practice. Some questions about children's COVID-19 experience that fascinated us and which we wanted our partnership to explore were:

- What have children been doing during lockdown?
- What has changed in their daily lives at home and in their community?
- How do they feel about these changes?
- What have they missed and what have they enjoyed?
- What has worried them and what has sustained them?
- How has coming back to nursery/preschool been for them?
- What has changed and what are they enjoying and missing?
- What do they think the future will hold?
- What might and should happen next?
- How can the children's concerns and ambitions revealed in these narratives be disseminated to policy makers and practitioners more widely as they plan for the future?

### 1.3 A Froebelian Approach to Storytelling

In dialogue, our partners agreed that the pandemic also provided a vital opportunity to consider how the Froebelian philosophy, principles and associated pedagogic approaches might adapt and respond to children's particular need for expression of voice and emotion at this time. Our collaborative project therefore aimed to capture both the COVID-19 narratives of young children and the pedagogic narratives of Froebelian practice in responding to the children. It focused particularly on the Froebelian approach to storytelling and its veracity and relevance in the current times and in three different national and cultural contexts: England; Scotland; and New Zealand. Froebel principles and pedagogy foreground the use of storytelling in play, music and dance as being a vital strategy for helping the child's 'inner world' to be expressed:

*The telling of stories refreshes the mind as a bath refreshes the body: it gives exercise to the intellect and its powers; it tests the judgement and the feelings* (Froebel, Education of Man, (translated by Hailmann) 1887:307.

Froebel's philosophy suggests that young children tell stories through their play, through their use of symbols, through telling their story to an older scribe and through music and dance (Tovey, 2020). Froebel argued that play helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences with the wider world and to see a connection between them (Froebel 1887). He believed that play helps children to reflect on and better understand themselves as well as the world and people around them. He believed that all children have the potential to be creative if creativity is encouraged and enabled; and he argued that playing with ideas and telling stories show us how children are making sense from, and of, the world around them. The power of storytelling in Froebelian practice has been further developed by Bruce et al (2020) who suggest that the stories children tell provide us with unique insights into the child's world as they experience it and reflect children's fundamental being and their lives. This emphasis on the power of children's stories to provide a sense of children's understandings and capacities is also reflected in the 'Learning Stories' approach to assessment pioneered in New Zealand by Carr and her colleagues (Carr et al 2012). Learning stories are a form of detailed observation and documentation of children's worlds and their activity within it that is written in a narrative story format. This approach is highly respectful of cultures, such as the Maori, which are traditionally oral storytellers. Carr et al suggest that when the oral tradition is strong, story making and storytelling have a powerful and central place in helping both children and adults to locate, dwell in and integrate their inner and outer worlds. This approach has synergy with Froebelian storytelling and both approaches have inspired the pedagogy and ethical approach used in this project.

The skilled practitioners in the four study settings participating in the project agreed to offer many opportunities or 'affordances' for the child to express these 'inner world' insights about their COVID-19 experiences e.g. offering new play spaces and resources, photo/picture prompts, puppets, music making, craft work, dance and movement - always following children's leads. These stories or narratives could take many forms e.g. role play sequences, songs/music, dancing, models, drawing, conversations and may emerge at any time in the child's daily life and activity. It was understood that the child

narratives may be fleeting or drawn out, repeated or singular, complex or simple, direct or embedded expressions. They could also be recorded in multi-media forms.

Additional questions about storytelling in Froebelian pedagogy within COVID-19 realities that interested us and which we wanted our partnership to explore are:

- What are the key practice features of a Froebelian approach to storytelling and how can the digital world be utilised more effectively within it?
- How does a Froebelian approach to storytelling create a context for children to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings about COVID-19?
- How can play and the symbolic life of the child identify the interests, fascinations and learning needs of children as they emerge from COVID-19 lockdown?
- Does a Froebelian approach to storytelling enable children to express their inner emotional life?
- How can we better understand children's stories about their inner emotional life?
- What impact does a Froebelian approach to storytelling have on the symbolic and emotional life of the child?
- Can digital narratives promote parental involvement and enhance their confidence in supporting their children as they deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### 1.4 Country Contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon and has impacted dramatically on human life in all affected countries, but the scale and impact has been differentiated significantly by the responses of governments and populations to it. In this project we focused on children's experiences in three countries which reflect both the global and local nature of the experience: England; Scotland; and New Zealand. Analysis of the three country contexts (for more detail see Appendix 1) reveals that although the rate of infection and the government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in each country and locality are individual there are shared saliences across the contexts. England recorded the highest numbers of infection and deaths, and New Zealand the least, yet there is commonality in that in all study sites there have been periods of very limited opening or closure (WHO, 2020). Key restrictions are still in force, with many children not fully accessing their place and, for those that are, it is still a very different experience being offered. In all three countries there remains the possibility of future closures, although governments have expressed a priority for continued opening of schools and early years sites even if local and national lockdowns occur. The pandemic crisis is clearly still in full force in England and Scotland but much less in New Zealand where the impression is that they are largely through the pandemic and normal life is resuming.

Details of each study site and its current offer are also provided in Appendix 1. The descriptions reveal that all the study sites are prioritizing their offer to children and families of continued high-quality experiences and support, with a key focus on enhancing mental and physical wellbeing and enabling the children to interact socially with their peers and the adults in the setting. They are also working hard to connect to those children who are not able to attend for a range of reasons with home learning support

for parents. It is clear in all sites that the practitioners are under great pressure to make the experience as positive as possible for their children, and at the same time they are generally very positive about opening up their service again for a wider group of children. In all three countries there remains the possibility of future closures, although governments have expressed a priority for continued opening of schools and early years sites even if local and national lockdowns occur.

It is clear in all sites that the practitioners have been (and remain) under great pressure to make the experience as positive as possible for the children, but at the same time are generally very positive about opening up their service again for a wider group of children. They have also expressed pleasure about being involved in the Froebel Children's Voices Project at this time, feeling it will help them support the children more effectively and enhance their pedagogical practice.

Looking towards the wider transferability of the knowledge generated from this study internationally, we should state our awareness that early years education praxis from and inside the West is underpinned by constructivist social theories and psycho-social theories of development, (Gupta, 2006; Yang, et al. 2020b). Early years education praxis inside the West is underpinned by constructivist social theories and psycho-social theories of development, (Gupta, 2006; Yang, et al. 2020b) and so we should note that this is the case in each of the three study countries and also within Froebelian philosophy and pedagogy. Play based early childhood systems, the English language of instruction and ideas around developmentally appropriate early years praxis, are often regarded as a progressive by other countries outside the West, (Viruru, 2001; Wood and Hedges, 2016; Yang and Li, 2020a). Learning theories such as socio-emotional, physical and cognitive development are generally viewed through the philosophical prism of constructivist learning theories and psychosocial development, and profoundly shape curriculum and pedagogic approaches to early years education, (Campbell-Barr, 2019). The dominant features of these education models include placing the child at the heart of all teaching and learning activities, often termed as child-centred learning, (Gergen and Wortham, 2001). This is not to say that this study would not have transferable learning in non-Western contexts but that we should be aware of its genesis and cultural location.

## 2. Project Aims

Our aims in this project were:

- to support children to express their narratives about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- to document Froebelian pedagogic storytelling strategies and their capacity to promote children's reflection on their lived experiences over the course of the pandemic crisis;
- to explore the power of storytelling within a Froebelian pedagogy to promote children's social and emotional health, and contain COVID-19 fears and anxieties;
- to promote children as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives, ensuring that children are valued, listened to and nurtured.

We believe this project has provided a unique opportunity for The Froebel Trust and its associated educators in three countries to explore the contemporary power and purpose of this aspect of Froebelian practice and to disseminate what we have learned to a world community which has been devastated by the pandemic.

### 3. Project Methodology

This praxeological, action research project (Pascal et al 2012; Formosinho et al 2012) was undertaken in four different Froebelian settings working within less advantaged communities in three different countries, which have experienced COVID-19 at very different levels of intensity, and with different national and local responses to the virus. We hope that this context allowed us to explore how wider societal responses have shaped children's lived experiences. Practitioners in each setting were each operating at a different stage in their experience and adoption of the Froebelian pedagogy but all were trained in a Froebelian approach to storytelling and in action research methodologies. The study children's play narratives were curated by the practitioner and link researcher working collaboratively to select those where COVID-19 experiences are visible and central to the child's attention. These were then subject to thematic analysis (Braun et al 2019), firstly at child level to inform how the child could be further supported, then at setting level to identify any common themes and issues which could be addressed, and then a meta-analysis of all narratives from the four sites was conducted at project level to discover the shared concerns and responses of children to COVID-19 from different cultural contexts. We also documented and critically reflected upon how the Froebelian approach to storytelling in play was implemented in different contexts to support young children's social and emotional health and the impact of this pedagogic process on children's wellbeing.

#### 3.1 Project Partners and Participants

This action research project was coordinated by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, Birmingham, England <http://www.crec.co.uk/> working with a team of practitioner researchers from CREC under the direction of Professor Chris Pascal and Professor Tony Bertram. In this project CREC worked in a collaborative partnership with:

1. Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre, Surrey, England under the leadership of Sally Cave. <https://guildfordnscs.surrey.sch.uk/>
2. Cowgate Under Fives Centre, Edinburgh, Scotland under the leadership of Lynn McNair. <http://www.cowgateunder5scentre.co.uk/>
3. Greengables Nursery School and Family Centre, Edinburgh, Scotland under the leadership of Catriona Gill. <https://www.yell.com/biz/greengables-nursery-school-and-family-centre-edinburgh-662696/>
4. Birdwood Kindergarten and The Auckland Kindergarten Association, Auckland, New Zealand under the leadership of Anne Denham. <https://www.aka.org.nz/birdwood>

Each partner has had a distinct and interconnected role in the project. CREC has led on: the CPD process; the research process; the data analysis; and the national and international dissemination strategy.

Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre, Cowgate Under Fives Centre, Greengables Nursery School and Family Centre and Birdwood Kindergarten each led on: the generation and documentation of the children’s COVID-19 stories; the development and documentation of storytelling within a Froebelian pedagogic approach in their context; and in the knowledge transfer process within their countries. Each of the elements of the project process (detailed below) has been collaboratively executed with each of the partners and their local participants.

The project recruited a minimum of two lead practitioners and one manager from each setting to be trained in the Froebelian Storytelling Approach and its pedagogy and also in action research and documentation techniques. It was also planned that 36 children and their families from across the four settings, (aged 3-4 years of age and a mix of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and COVID-19 experience), would be identified as case studies and their COVID-19 narratives to be carefully documented from August-December 2020 as they returned to their nursery, creating an evidence bank of narrative sequences from the 36 children, drawn from the three different countries. In the event, we had 43 children in the study in total aged between 3-4 years whose COVID-19 narrative sequences have been curated for the analysis, as detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Child Participants: n=43**

|              | <i>Site 1</i> | <i>Site 2</i> | <i>Site 3</i> | <i>Site 4</i> |           |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|
| <i>Boys</i>  | 5             | 3             | 8             | 3             | <b>19</b> |
| <i>Girls</i> | 10            | 4             | 6             | 4             | <b>24</b> |
| <i>SEND</i>  | 3             | 2             | 2             | 2             | <b>9</b>  |
| <i>EAL</i>   | 4             | 3             | 3             | 1             | <b>11</b> |
| <i>BAME</i>  | 2             | 5             | 14            | 4             | <b>25</b> |

Each site was supported by a pedagogic lead and a research lead. Over a period of three months, 22 practitioners from the 4 study sites documented and curated the children’s COVID-19 narratives to create a multi-media narrative sequence for each child. Practitioners also documented their pedagogic strategies to support the expression of the child narratives. The resulting bank of 43 children’s COVID-19 narrative sequences were collated and analysed to provide a mosaic of experience. Regular reflective dialogues within and between the site practitioners were supported by the CREC link research team to encourage critical reflection on what the children’s narratives were revealing and how their practice might respond to their preoccupations, expressions of emotion, and desires for agency and action. The dialogue also explored how the pedagogic storytelling strategies were working to support children’s storytelling through play and how their practice might be further developed to build on these experiences. Dialogues with parents were also a significant element in the documentation which helped the teams to understand more fully the lived reality of family life during the pandemic and to contextualise and authenticate the children’s narratives and the practitioners’ interpretations of these.

Key themes and saliences within and across the three study countries were then explored for practice and policy implications.

All participants in the study were recruited through personal contact and have wider organisational support available to them. Operating under the EECERA ethical code (Bertram et al 2016), we obtained informed consent from all settings, practitioners and parents, and care was taken to ensure children's informed assent was constantly negotiated. The children were all introduced to the study through a practitioner led and child focused explanation of the study intentions and actions. In addition, the practitioners constantly monitored children's responses to the documentation of their play narratives. If there was any indication of the child being uncomfortable or unhappy with any aspect of this then their right to not be included was respected. All play opportunities for the children offered by the practitioners were opted into and the children were not obliged to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality for all participants was guaranteed and we have worked collaboratively to ensure all project protocols and procedures were jointly constructed throughout. We were very conscious of the additional stress all participants were experiencing at this time and we were constantly vigilant to ensure that the project was perceived as a support to those involved rather than as an additional burden.

### **3.2 Project Documentation and Evidence Gathering**

The project work plan was structured into four phases of work, which are set out below:

#### ***Phase 1: Training/CPD***

A minimum of two lead practitioners plus one manager each from three settings were trained in Froebel storytelling and documentation using a range of action research methodologies including: child involvement observation; adult engagement observation; child tracking technique; interviews; focus groups; child and family case study; surveys; graphic elicitation techniques; video and photographic documentation. Training was delivered via online input and offline reading and activities.

#### ***Phase 2: Documentation of children's COVID-19 narratives and exemplary Froebelian storytelling practice***

Informed consent from the participants at the site, including children, parents and practitioners was obtained prior to the study starting. The aim of the action research was to capture the children's COVID-19 narratives AND the essence of a Froebelian approach to storytelling in practice and its impact. The Project encouraged an open response from each child, so the child narratives might take the form of oral narratives, drawings, mind maps, play narratives, photographic storyboards, digital documentation and a range of other expressive methods and media as appropriate to the local culture and context. The evolution of a Froebelian approach to storytelling in each of the study sites was also carefully documented and collated by the practitioners involved using a range of methods such as reflective journals, records of reflective dialogues, focus groups discussions and staff meeting memoirs. The child

and practitioner documentation for each site was collated and stored on a shared, secure google drive project folder.

In addition, there were regular team research discussions, supported by their local site lead and their CREC link support which were documented. The whole project team from all four sites was also met via Zoom fortnightly to share progress, experiences and emerging findings. These dialogues were recorded and stored on the project Google Drive site for analysis.

**Phase 3: Analysis and curation of COVID-19 narratives**

A meta-analysis of the data generated from the action research project was carried out to create a rich, child led narrative of their lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and also an evaluation of a Froebelian approach to storytelling in action, and the outcomes and impact of this approach for children and families. This acted as a test-bed for the generation of practice focused knowledge to inform the dissemination strategy.

Work was also undertaken with a technical advisor to develop a digital bank of children’s COVID-19 narratives and the practitioners’ Froebel pedagogic storytelling strategies which has been made available for open access and hosted on the Guildford Froebel Partnership website.

**Phase 4: Dissemination strategy**

The project findings and outputs have been promoted through a systematic dissemination strategy to reach families, practitioners, policymakers, researchers and members of the general public, including the use of digital platforms (webinars; blogs; use of social media; Facebook groups; YouTube films) as well as more traditional forms of dissemination (conferences; seminars; training events; and publications). We have also offered CREC’s local, national and international conferences and research and practice networks as vehicles to achieve maximum reach in the dissemination strategy. We have targeted government and NGOs to ensure the knowledge transfer of learning from this project.

**4. Project Implementation and Deliverables**

The Project work plan and progress made from August 17<sup>th</sup> 2020 to March 1st 2021 are documented in the table below.

| Project Task  | Timeline  | Outputs  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>1. Training/CPD</b>  | <b>September–November 2020</b>  |  |
| 2 half days of days of online staff training for each site on storytelling approach and action research methodology, documentation and analysis | Day 1: August 17 <sup>th</sup> and 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2020<br><br>Day 2: November 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2020 | Day 1 training completed: <b>43 participants</b> from 4 study sites plus CREC team and Froebel Trust Representative<br><br>Guildford: 1 Lead plus 25 practitioners trained<br>Cowgate: 1 Lead plus 5 practitioners trained<br>Greengables: 1 Lead plus 4 practitioners trained<br>Birdwood: 3 AKA Leads plus 3 practitioners trained |



|   |                             |  |
|---|-----------------------------|--|
|   |                             | Day 2 training completed: This online training took place in November 2020 and was recorded and then accessed subsequently by the project practitioners in all 4 study sites at a time to suit them.   |
| Identification of case study children and permissions granted.  | August-September 2020       | Obtaining consent from parents was hard due to restricted access but in the final event we had we have <b>43 children</b> and <b>22 practitioners</b> who completed the project with signed consent in place as detailed below:<br>Guildford: 15 children and 8 practitioners<br>Cowgate: 7 children and 4 practitioners<br>Greengables: 7 children and 4 practitioners<br>Birdwood: 14 children and 6 practitioners |
| Ongoing and bespoke partner and practitioner support for the project and practice development.  | August – December 2020      | Each study site meeting weekly to discuss progress and share experiences.<br><br>Project leads and CREC meeting fortnightly (Zoom) to discuss progress and share experiences.<br><br>Each study site had minimum of 2 individual on line support meetings with CREC Link Support researcher.   |
| <b>2. Documentation of children’s COVID-19 narratives and exemplary Froebelian Storytelling practice</b>  | <b>August-December 2020</b> |  |
| Create props and places to support children with developing language so that they can build their story and document it using a range of medium.  | August-December 2020        | The four study sites were all open and created a supportive outside and inside environment to support the children’s storytelling.   |
| Establish story scribing and acting out the children’s stories as embedded practice.  | August-December 2020        | Four study sites worked with children as they returned from lockdown and using a range of storytelling strategies to support and capture the children’s COVID-19 narratives.   |
| Capture the pedagogic process of storytelling.  | August-December 2020        | The participating practitioner documented the children’s narratives using a range of multi-media strategies.   |
| Create a digital bank of the children’s developing COVID-19 narratives, documented using a range of medium.                                       | August-December 2020        | The children’s COVID-19 narratives were collated and stored on an online Google Drive.   |
| Using the stories to support parent’s engagement in the storytelling and its role in supporting children’s social-emotional health and wellbeing. | August-December 2020        | The children’s narratives were used in dialogues with parents about the child’s settling in and their social-emotional health and wellbeing.   |
| Practitioners are documenting their pedagogic Storytelling strategies and reflective dialogues about the process.                                 | August-December 2020        | The practitioners’ pedagogic Storytelling strategies and reflective dialogues were documented using a range of methods and media.  |

|  |                                  |   |
|--|----------------------------------|---|
| Create a digital bank of the practitioners' pedagogic Storytelling strategies, documented in a range of medium.              | August-December 2020             | The practitioners' pedagogic Storytelling strategies and reflective dialogues were collated and stored on an online Google Drive.<br><br>After curation these resources to be transferred to dedicated site on Guildford Froebel Partnership website, to be launched Summer Term 2021.  |
| <b>3. Analysis and curation of COVID-19 narratives</b>   | <b>October 2020-January 2021</b> |   |
| Analysis of narrative sequences for individual children and their impact for each child.                                     | October 2020-January 2021        | The curated children's narrative sequences from all four study sites were subjected to rigorous content analysis.   |
| Meta-analysis of 36 narrative sequences and their impact for the children.   | October 2020-January 2021        | The 43 children's narrative sequences were subject to rigorous and systematic thematic analysis.  |
| Analysis of Froebel storytelling pedagogy and creation of practice guidance.   | October 2020-January 2021        | The curated parents' and practitioners' narratives from all four study sites were subjected to rigorous content analysis and systematic thematic analysis.  |
| Creation of digital bank of children's COVID-19 narratives.  | October 2020-January 2021        | The digital bank of curated children's, parents' and practitioners' COVID-19 narratives has been created and made ready for launch on the Guildford Froebel website.  |
| Development of Project website platform (linked with Guildford Nursery School's planned Froebel Website).                    | October 2020-January 2021        | Project material, methods and findings have been collated and made copy ready for launch on the Guildford Froebel website.  |
| <b>4. Dissemination strategy</b>   | <b>October 2020-March 2021</b>   |   |
| Publication of project findings (15 <sup>th</sup> October 2020 Interim Report, 23 <sup>rd</sup> February 2021 Final Report). | October 2020- February 2021      | Interim Report submitted October 7 <sup>th</sup> 2020<br><br>Final Report submitted February 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2021  |
| 3 national and one international Webinar conferences.  | November 2020-March 2021         | 1. EECERA International COVID Convocation on October 27/28 <sup>th</sup> 2020 presenting Froebel Children's Voices project.<br><a href="https://www.eecera.org/eecera-convocation/">https://www.eecera.org/eecera-convocation/</a><br><br>2. Wolverhampton University Observatory Conference on 31 <sup>st</sup> October 2020 presenting Froebel Children's Voices on COVID-19 project.<br><br>3. Bristol ECHO Conference on 21 <sup>st</sup> November 2020 presenting Froebel Children's Voices on COVID-19 project.<br><br>4. BECERA Annual Conference on Feb 16/17 <sup>th</sup> 2021 with the theme "Unity and Plurality: Explorations of Pedagogy and Curricula in Early Childhood" presenting symposium on findings of Froebel Children's Voices project.<br><a href="https://www.becera.org.uk/news-and-resources/becera-2021-programme-overview">https://www.becera.org.uk/news-and-resources/becera-2021-programme-overview</a><br><br>5. Froebel Trust Online Conference: "Growing through Play" on 6 <sup>th</sup> March 2021 presenting Froebel Children's Voices on COVID-19 project.<br><a href="https://www.froebel.org.uk/events">https://www.froebel.org.uk/events</a> |

|   |                         |   |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Publication blitz and ongoing publication/knowledge transfer programme: social media, blog, trade journals, conferences, CPD courses etc  | October 2020-March 2021 | Strong promotion of Froebel Children's Voices on COVID-19 project and its early findings on all partner organization websites, social media, CPD courses, publications, blogs, Nursery World etc.   |
| Academic paper written and submitted for publication.   | October 2020-March 2021 | Paper on Children's Voices on COVID-19 project accepted for publication in a Special issue of the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ) on Plural Narratives about COVID published in January 2021.<br><br><a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872676">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872676</a><br><br>Pascal C and Bertram, T (2021) What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic, <i>European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, EECER Journal Vol 29 Iss 1</i> |
| Submissions to government and NGO working groups.   | October 2020-March 2021 | Project findings are being shared with local government in each partner's regions and with central government through invitations to Prof Pascal to present on the Project at government events, such as:<br><br>-APPG on Social Mobility, 16 <sup>th</sup> July 2020.<br>-APPG on Nursery Education, 14 <sup>th</sup> September 2020<br>-Westminster Policy Forum, 8 <sup>th</sup> February 2021   |
| Submissions to relevant Early Years publications and knowledge transfer platforms e.g. BECERA, EECERA, Early Education (other Scottish and New Zealand specific platforms to be identified by partners) | October 2020-March 2021 | This work is ongoing and utilizes a range of online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, online blogs, and print platforms such as Nursery World, Early Education, EECER Journal, Early Years Journal and so on.   |
| Design and compilation of Froebel Project online practitioner resource to be launched as a live, interactive and dynamic resource to be added to.   | Summer 2021             | Launch of Froebel Project online resources on Guildford Froebel Partnership website   |

The project work plan set out above indicates that we delivered on the planned activity and completed all 4 phases of the study, although the dissemination phase is ongoing and we have further plans in hand for this, working with our partners, utilising the potential of the Guildford Froebel Partnership website, other online platforms and opportunities and the ongoing work of all the partners in training and development, and policy advancement.

## 5. Findings: Plural COVID-19 Narratives

The project has generated a wealth of knowledge and new insights from the children and practitioners. From the onset of the study we engaged in regular cross study site dialogues about practitioners' emerging reflections on the children's narratives about their COVID-19 experiences and the practitioners' pedagogical storytelling strategies. These dialogues have proved rich, reflective and critical, highlighting many shared saliences and the commonality of children's experiences and also some interesting differences. The practitioners documented their creative and inspiring pedagogical strategies which encouraged children's storytelling. These insights are set out below and linked to Froebel's principles. This evidence affirms Froebel's philosophy that suggests young children tell stories through their play, through their use of symbols, through telling their story to an older scribe and through music and dance. Froebel argued that play helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences with the wider world and to see a connection between them; these early narratives are certainly evidencing this connectivity. The child narratives suggest that storytelling is helping the children relate their inner world of feelings, ideas and lived experiences with their wider world and finding an affirming connectivity. They are also displaying children's wisdom, resilience, agency and complex understanding of their own and others needs at this time.

### 5.1 Children's COVID-19 Narratives

In total across the 4 study sites we curated 295 play sequences from the 43 study children. 160 of these were COVID-19 related and 135 non-COVID-19 related. Detailed and systematic analysis of these play sequences provide us with an insight into the children's preoccupations during this time and also reveals the contemporary power of Froebelian philosophy and principles to support and give voice to children who are experiencing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights are set out below and linked to Froebel's principles. The narrative extracts provided below provide only an illustrative snapshot of the rich narrative evidence base from which they have been drawn. The full set of curated children's narrative play sequences and parent and practitioner reflections will be made available online through a dedicated Froebel Young Voices project site, hosted on the Guildford Froebel Partnership website, which will be launched in summer 2021. We have reported the children's preoccupations as evidenced in their observed play sequences under **six themes**, which we have also attempted to link to a Froebelian principle. We hope that this demonstrates the connectivity between the children's self-activity and reflection and the Froebelian pedagogic philosophy which enabled it.

#### **Transitions and Settling (*Froebel Principle - Unity, connectedness and community*)**

Children in all study settings had experienced transitions between lockdown and reconnection, and for some, e.g. in New Zealand, this had been serially repeated. For other children, during lockdown they had experienced multiple transitions as parents had to put in place multiple 'care' situations when the nursery closed. Despite this disruption, all of the study settings reported that most of the children have settled back into the nursery routine very well and appear to be delighted to be back in

the setting. The resilience and adaptability of the children to the new conditions seems to be the dominant picture in all four study sites, meaning the transition has been well managed by the practitioners. As one setting reported:

*The way the children have settled [was] a really surprising positive. Most of the usual settling events could not happen so we had to consider what exactly was crucial that we kept hold of. This boiled down to being able to build positive, trusting relationships with parents and children. So, then it was a case of what could we do to ensure this was possible whilst keeping everyone safe? We are doing a great deal of communicating with parents via phone, email, zoom etc. Every parent and child were offered an initial garden visit as opposed to a home visit, this offer was taken up by every family with far more ease than home visits previously. Settling sessions still involved a parent staying with their child for as long as required but this happened in the garden. Every child has settled easily and happily and noticeably quicker than in previous years including those children with complex SEND, those without any understanding of English and the very youngest.*

However, for some children and parents it is reported that there were added stresses due to the reduced nursery hours meaning that the child had to access multiple care contexts, even across a day. Both parents and children expressed unhappiness about this. One setting reported:

*A notable finding is that due to the setting only offering 1140 funded childcare hours (which equates to 22.50 hours per week over a 52-week period), some parents have expressed anguish and emotional stress at the limitations of childcare, resulting in them needing to make alternative arrangements, e.g., finding private ELC settings. Therefore, children are suffering from several transitions in one weekly period. With some children stating they want to stay at their own nursery now.*

The children's narratives largely expressed their relief and happiness at returning to their 'main' nursery, enjoying their reconnection with their friends and wider community of people and their familiar place, as James's documented story illustrates:

***James's story: The gathering song***

*James's Story (retold by the practitioner): One day in the living room at the nursery, I heard a guitar and when I looked around, I saw James by himself, playing a small guitar and singing, from a high spot, and it was the 'gathering song', naming everyone in the room at that time, with a lovely smile, copying Emma, a practitioner from the Wednesday – Thursday group, who, during the lockdown, was hosting Zoom gatherings every day, and would sing that song to welcome everyone as she used to do also before lockdown at the Centre. The practitioner feels this story reveals the importance for the children of maintaining certain habits and creating their community, which they can go back to any time they want.*

### **Children's Friendships (Froebel Principle – Relationships matter)**

Many of the children expressed a deep sense of loss of their nursery and wider community and family friendships when they were at home during lockdown and their narratives often revealed a delight in the re-establishment of these relationships once they returned. As one parent reported:

*When I asked my child what she had done at nursery recently when she got home she responded "I spent the whole day laughing." She is notably in a more even and joyful disposition now that she is reconnecting physically with her community of friends and the setting she so loves, which is so deeply reassuring for us as parents.*

With the ongoing restrictions in place for many of the children, they also continued to express a longing for reconnection with their extended family and friends within their community whom they still could not see.

*Today I noticed how important those relationships are to children. Every day since we have returned to Kindergarten children are waiting for their friends to return. We sit at mat-time and mealtimes and we look around to see who is missing. A teacher might comment about children not returned and children would call out friend's names. The teacher would ask why children had not come back. Children would answer with different responses such as "They are sick... They have gone to school...The COVID-19."*

### **Children's Silences and Expressions of Resilience (Froebel Principle - Learning through self-activity and reflection)**

All settings reported that most children were quite matter of fact about the pandemic and their experiences, and had adjusted to new nursery conditions well, understanding the need for the changes in the environment and routines. There is evidence that some of the children were happy to return to the nursery world and did not want to dwell on their COVID-19 experiences, or express their feelings about them but preferred to immerse themselves in other, more normal, play e.g. superhero play, domestic play. In fact, 135 of the 295 reported play sequences did not refer to COVID-19 at all. Practitioners felt this immersion in non-COVID-19 play offered a kind of refuge to them. The practitioners felt that the children might be expressing a determination to move on and live in the moment rather than the past: a form of coping and showing their resilience. As one practitioner commented:

*The Story Squares session went well with children involved but needed lots of explaining as it was the first time. I had planned a coronavirus prompt using Lenny and Lilly text, but felt it was too long in the session. I kept stories very short and children wanted to talk about their own experiences but none of these were COVID-related.*

Another practitioner suggested that the children were also slipping more fluidly between home language and host language in their play, and seeking out adults who speak their home language more. Other children actively sought private, contemplative spaces to work through their thoughts and feelings. Practitioners felt that this was a coping mechanism, which helped the child's resilience, and revealed a desire to seek solace in spaces where they felt comfort, peace and familiarity.

*Some staff have reported that children for whom English is an additional language have sought out practitioners who speak in their home language. This is quite a new finding. It is thought this may be due to the home language being the only language spoken during lockdown.*

*Furthermore, on a similar note, when practitioners have taken the children to our nature kindergarten some children have sought out private spaces for contemplative thought, or individual play. Overall, children do not seem to want to speak about their COVID experience, although they seem very informed about it, e.g., they understand why they need to wash their hands more regularly, and why certain areas of the ELC setting are closed to them.*

In a number of play sequences, the child proactively signalled that they did not want to engage with COVID-19-related play activity or dialogue, which staff respected. And another practitioner reported her interaction with a child:

*'It's a mask-that is a pink one, that's got rainbows on it. I like rainbows, Beads!' (looking at the straps on the rainbow mask). Z recognised the mask straight away and she was interested in touching the beads on the straps. I showed her what the beads are for, to tighten and loosen. I chatted with her some more and asked her if she had seen people wearing masks, like mummy and daddy? She just smiled and nodded at me. Z clearly recognised the mask and could tell me what it was, but didn't want to explore it any further on this occasion. I am wondering what her understanding of masks is and whether she has ever worn one herself. .... I asked her this question but she didn't reply.*

However, most of the children did explore their COVID-19 experiences in their play (160 of the 295 play sequences) and are making sense of them, displaying strongly how they are accommodating to their lived reality of COVID-19 and expressing this in many ways during the nursery activities. These narratives reveal that children show a mature understanding of the reasons for the disruptions and the new COVID-19 safe measures and routines and were almost stoical in the way they are dealing with the loss of their previous lives and making the most of the new 'normal'. Although many have been affected by their experiences (OfSTED, 2020), the resilience in these young children is very evident in their narratives, as Jade's story reveals:

***Jade's story: Missed graduation and virtual hugs***

*The practitioners in one nursery have noted that as the children have experienced several bouts of lockdown and then reconnection with the nursery the children have built their resilience. Jade's story demonstrates this resilience building. She had returned to the nursery a second time after missing out on her nursery graduation celebration and new school visit, and her birthday party. When the reasons for this were explained to her, her first response was 'well at least we can still pick flowers!' Whenever someone would say to her it was sad that her birthday party was cancelled she would reply with 'it wasn't cancelled, just postponed to the holidays'. Another adaption Jade has initiated herself at nursery is around physical affection. Jade loves physical touch and is always hugging and giving kisses to her family and friends. During the lockdowns the family explained that she had to keep distance from everyone who isn't in her bubble so Jade made up a new way to do that. She now hugs herself and encourages the other person to do the same. She also moves her hand open and closed to do pretend kisses and gets the other person to do the same. She has found an alternative way to connect and communicate her affection.*

**Changes in Children's Play (Froebel Principle - The central importance of play)**

Children's play is always given prominence in the study nurseries but during the pandemic special attention has been paid to it as the staff saw it as centrally important to supporting children's wellbeing, containing their anxieties and supporting child mental health. A number of the practitioners felt that the nature of play had changed since the children had returned and was deeper, more intense, extended and often happening in smaller groups. As one practitioner reflected:

*I can see the impact of children not being able to play with other children throughout lockdown in the play that the children are engaging in now at nursery. It is frequently more solitary or alongside another child and sometimes with just one other child.*



Staff reported that for some children there may have been little spontaneous play about their lockdown experiences but as a whole they felt that the children were playing with greater intensity and with more extended bouts of focus. As one practitioner reflected:

*Most of the children's play didn't involve much about COVID or the lockdown. I feel that the children want to focus on the here and now, that maybe they have little recollection of what life was like pre-COVID. Perhaps they have got used to our new normal, accepted it.*



Practitioners felt this might also be the result of lower numbers of children in the settings which had encouraged more complex, richer and deeper play even when not COVID-19-related. As one practitioner commented:

*The team have discovered that young children's play has changed, it is deeper somehow, children's knowledge has grown exponentially, this could mean that children's subjective well-being is higher in a setting where there are lower numbers of children. Certainly, the practitioners have found that the one to one time they have with individual children has increased, benefiting both the child and the adult. Additionally, staff members have commented that children seem equally content to play in groups or on their own, this has been raised with some parents who have stressed that due to work commitments they could not give their child the time the child needed at home and the children have had to find ways to play on their own.*

The children appeared to need to have the time and space to wallow in play and also to be very physical in their play, as illustrated in this practitioner's reflections on the play she observed.

*For instance, some are loving role-playing traditional tales but are running outside being chased by the big bad wolf as opposed to playing on a much smaller scale. Many of our children need space to move and play on a large scale and not to be too close to others. Many want an adult involved whilst some definitely do not. Some ask daily for W to be the wolf and to scare the children! She reports that they seem to really need to be scared by a trusted adult. Are they making sense of the fear that is all around them because of the virus or is this a usual need to make sense of being scared in a safe, manageable way? Maybe it is both but the virus has meant that the children need to repeat this play daily for weeks?*

Specifically, COVID-19 related play was clearly evident in all study sites and the themes seen within this play were often deeply reflective of the children's COVID-19 experiences e.g. mask wearing play, not touching games, social distancing games and songs, virus attack and defence play, and loss/bereavement play, as the following group play story reveals:

**Group story: The death game**

*A small group of children in one nursery are repeatedly playing what they call the 'death game'. One child role plays the mum who coughs, and then falls down. The other children then carry out various rituals e.g. bringing blankets, pillows, drinks and then, after some time, the 'mum' dies. If a practitioner comes near the children while they are playing this game the children run away but then repeat the play later. They seem to need to conduct this play away from adults. The practitioner wonders why they don't want to play this game in 'public' – do they feel it is a taboo subject and should they get involved in the play and support it OR is it that it is a private sharing experience with their peers and should they respect this?*

Some staff felt that the children’s play provided what they saw as ‘freedom with guidance’ and they felt children needed autonomy now more than ever before. They wondered if this was because in their home life the children felt less in control than before with all the restrictions in place.

### **Importance of Outdoors (Froebel Principle - Engaging with Nature)**

Practitioners at all settings reported that the children appear to prefer being in outdoor spaces when they are at nursery, with many more choosing to be outdoors now than before COVID-19. The children appeared to be more tuned into the natural world and also to physical activity, which could be a response to lockdown restrictions. Practitioners observed the emergence of an almost ‘Romantic’ notion of nature teaching and healing the children in operation. As one practitioner reported:

*I also wonder whether the garden has a very significant part to play. Maybe engaging with nature offers more comfort and solace to children? When children have become upset it has been easier for staff to distract and to comfort. The noise of crying is dissipated more outside than inside and thus it is less stressful for all and less likely to trigger upset in otherwise happy children. We have always been a nursery offering children the choice to play in or out and the outside is always available. But previously we started indoors and then quickly opened up the garden. In future we will continue as now: starting in the garden and then opening up indoors.*



This deep pleasure and delight in the natural world are revealed in Aline’s story:

### ***Aline’s story: Gathering blackberries***

*Aline had been with her grandmother in Greece during COVID lockdown period and told her key worker that she had gone berry picking with grandma. Back at nursery on their regular visits to a Forest School it was noted that Aline always eagerly put on her waterproofs and welly boots and headed straight to the climbing wall, going up and down. On one visit, she spotted a bramble bush from the wall and climbed down running toward the bramble bush. As soon as she saw the heavy and juicy blackberries she made a happy, giggling noise, reached toward the darkest blackberry, picked it and munched it, then proceeded to keep eating blackberries from the branch, encouraging other children to collect blackberries for their snack. She seemed to get a real delight at being outdoors and to be particularly in tune with nature and the autumnal gifts it offers.*



### **Children's COVID-19 Wisdom (Froebel Principle - Learning through self-activity and reflection)**

It is very evident in the narratives from all the study sites that the children have a good understanding and knowledge about the coronavirus and its impact on daily life. They can describe what the virus is, why it is dangerous, how to reduce risk and what the impact on their lives has been, demonstrating a great deal of detailed knowledge and understanding, as B's narrative shows:

*Coronavirus started because of not very good listening. It's a tiny ball of virus that people have on their hands and you can only see it with a microscope. You have to wash your hands for 20 seconds and that's it done. The Government - they make the choices for this country; stay in the house for three weeks, use masks in shops, use sanitiser and let the air dry it. We need to stay calm and be nice.*

They also reveal the children's desire for authentic and real information and explanation, even taking an interest in the regular televised political announcements by the Government in each country. They are making sense of new experiences – mask wearing, sanitisation, social isolation, social distancing, parent home working and show they understand the seriousness of the situation, the consequences of breaking the rules and the need to protect others. This social awareness is revealed in Akhbar's story:

#### **Akhbar's story: Understanding the coronavirus and infection control**

While doing woodwork Akhbar says 'You know, if there wasn't coronavirus I would be swimming after this.' The practitioner asked if there was anything else he couldn't do and he said 'Gymnastics ... because they've closed it. Because if someone sneezed other people might catch the virus.' Tim adds 'And that's why we have to wash our hands a lot. And when you go to the park you have to take wet wipes..... because of the coronavirus.' Akhbar says 'We've got hand gel at home.' The practitioner asks 'Do you think coronavirus will go away?' And Akhbar says 'Well yes it will sometime.'

## **5.2 Parents' COVID-19 Narratives**

As part of the project process, the study practitioners engaged in dialogic conversations with the children's parents/carers about their COVID-19 experiences, especially during the lockdown periods. We hoped this would provide valuable and contextualising insights into children's home experiences which were being played out in their narratives. However, surprisingly these dialogues also brought us a deeper understanding of parents' own experiences and feelings about the pandemic which they were happy to share with us. Early years services provide a vital function in supporting young children's development and learning; they also support families by providing parenting support and helping them to balance their work and family commitments. The disruption to established patterns of family life and consequent impact of the pandemic on parent wellbeing was clear in our evidence. Yet, it should be noted that the experience of parents and families was clearly nuanced and individual, affected by each country's COVID-19 policies in relation to the stage of the pandemic spread or retreat, and also according to a family's particular circumstances.

All of the families in the study were living within or near to a disadvantaged community, and reflected the broad range of life stages, situations and home situations. Some parents were working out of home, some working at home, some were furloughed, some were not working. We had families with a single child, with multiple siblings, reconstituted families, single parents, two parents, multiple homes and carers, extended families, nuclear families, and a lot of family poverty, inadequate housing, family members with special needs, mental and physical health issues. All of this complexity has shaped the home experiences of children and parents during the pandemic. All parents we talked to had faced challenges in adjusting to the crisis and were happy to share these with us, but many also saw positives in the experiences they were sharing. It is therefore important that we learn from both the positive and negative, and don't convey the impression in this study report that the pandemic has been an unrelenting struggle for families but nor has it been an easy time. We can learn from both of these facets of experience and we have set these out below as the challenges and benefits for families in living through the COVID-19 pandemic. As was typical with the families when they reflected on their experiences of COVID-19, we shall start with their challenges and then end with their positives.

### **COVID-19 Challenges**

**Worries about infection and vaccine:** Most of the parents in the study had a sharp awareness of the dangers of the virus and the threat to health it posed to their family members, including their children and their older members. They were largely respecting the sanitation, distancing and masking advice, and keeping socially distant from their extended families and its older members but expressed worries about them getting infected and ill, and their inability to offer support. Some parents were also worried about getting ill themselves, especially if they were a sole carer. Latterly in the study, the pressures to be vaccinated or to have access to a vaccine shot were also becoming common themes in their dialogues.

*When leaving the house, the family has experienced more stress in doing this as Mum has to make sure she is prepared with a mask and hand sanitiser. The children have been told by Mum not to touch anything, go near anyone or talk to anyone because of their worries about COVID.*

*G told me that A's grandparents had struggled with not being able to see A during lockdown and that her great-grandparents had felt lonely and isolated. She, herself, was worried about the older generations in the family and thinks A was more aware of this than they had given her credit for at the time as she was very reluctant to hug family members when she started to see them again. A had remained in the car when visits were made and had talked to her grandparents using Facetime. She was very conscious of the germs and would ask, 'Are my hands ok?' One family member did have COVID recently. G's main concerns were for A, her parents and grandparents. She said A understands that germs make people ill but not that she couldn't play with other children.*

**Lack of extended family contact, especially with grandparents:** A consistent and dominant theme in the discourse of the study parents (which echoes the children's concern) is their longing to meet up with close family members and friends. Grandparents were often a key element of the family support structure, both emotionally and practically, and the loss of this vital support, added to an increased level of worry about their health during the pandemic, has been a major worry for many of the study parents.

*Since the lockdown began in March 2020, Mum and the children have felt most affected by the restrictions on visiting other people. Mum has particularly missed visiting her Nan, saying "The first thing I'm going to do when this is all over is give my Nan a big cuddle." Although the family have been able to visit her a couple of times, they have sat outside in the garden which was hard because it didn't feel the same as before the lockdown. Mum is worried that not being able to see people properly was hard for her Nan too as she lives alone.*

**Social isolation of selves and child:** Parents expressed a significant sense of social isolation for themselves and their children due to the limited contact possible in all the study countries, especially during periods of lockdown. Even after lockdown was lifted, many expressed a continued reluctance to allow themselves and their children to mix freely, due to continued fears of infection. For some parents, the sense of isolation was a huge factor in their sense of wellbeing and mental good health. They also worried a lot about their children's socialization, acknowledging the importance of mixing with their peers to their healthy development.

*I found lockdown hard, it was difficult to be away from the nursery children and despite our best efforts with zoom, it felt like close relationships suffered. This was not helped by the general air of anxiety and fear in the general population/media, it bred a bit of wariness of other humans and being so relational as people, the lack of connection was very discombobulating.*

**Worries about impact on child progress:** A linked worry was about the loss of time for their children at nursery during these early vital months of life. Parents worried about the halt to activities that supported all aspects of their child's development and progress, including physical, social and language development. Parents really understood the value of their child's nursery attendance to their child, and for those without access to a nursery place and living with adversity, this had been reinforced. It also was a sharp worry for those with children with special needs or disability who had lost their additional support.

*COVID, I feel, will have impacted his development in all areas. Nursery was providing him with structure, social interaction and good quality play. Had this been able to continue through the spring and summer his starting point at school may have been further forward. His physical development will have suffered from the level of*

*confinement he experienced. Physical activity is essential for children's growth and brain development as well as the vital role vitamin D and exposure to the sun plays in that. We may never know how that has affected his long term development. Not all delay can be attributed to his Down's. It's of great delight that he is now in the right provision and attending well and thriving.*

**Pressures of home schooling:** The daily need to support children's home schooling has added pressure to home life, particularly if there are multiple siblings and the parents are working from home themselves. Some did not have physical space to accommodate study, some lacked the technology, those who had multiple children lacked the required attention time and some could not understand the learning the children were doing. Even where parents were enjoying sharing their children's schooling, they expressed pressures as they juggled competing demands on their time and attention. Interestingly, they often felt less pressured by the home-schooling activity of their younger children, tending to prioritise the learning of older siblings.

*Obviously, lockdown was a significant disruption to J's routine. Nursery ceased, church ceased and normally we're a fairly social family spending time with others, so this was a significant difference. Being the younger of two boys, it was a struggle to give J equal and adequate attention during lockdown, with B's activities from school taking priority and often more significant time. I'm sure this caused J to feel a bit overlooked at points, and frustrated that he couldn't participate to the same level as B. Mum and I were both aware that we felt stressed due to having to balance work, childcare and home schooling (to a reception degree) and therefore felt we weren't necessarily giving of our best. Overall the experience would be categorised by surviving and making-do, recognising that it was emotionally taxing for all of us and the reality of being a two working parent family caused the greatest pressures. However, we are very aware that we had access to a lot of outdoor space and we experienced no health issues for close family members or friends, so we had it comparatively easy to others.*

**Home routine transformed:** During the lockdown, and to some extent once the restrictions were listed, it is clear from the family accounts that the COVID-19 pandemic had severely disrupted previous home routines. The need for home working, home schooling, more stringent sanitation regimes, mask wearing, social distancing and families staying at home together indoors has meant that normal home life was radically changed and this loss of familiar routines has affected all family members, causing stresses and uncertainty about how, when and where to conduct basic daily activities such as shopping, cooking, socialising, exercising, sleeping, being entertained and so on.

*R's parents told me that COVID bought changes to the way they lived. It started with a huge concern for all of their wellbeing and similar to a lot of other people like took a tumble. Everything starting from breakfast to the time you go to bed at night changed. R had to change her routine, she had to miss nursery (which she loves). The initial few months of lockdown were truly scary. R had lots of questions such as "Mummy, why*

*can't I go out? Why do we wear masks? Who is Coronavirus? Why can't I touch things?" Explaining to her about the virus and the sudden change of lifestyle, like Mummy and Daddy not going to the office and instead working from home was terribly difficult. R's parents had to plan and design loads of activities to keep her busy but soon they were running out of ideas. They appreciated my ideas of things to do. To keep her spirits up and keep her engaged they started to plan evening family parties at home, a lemonade party and samosa party. They tried to make playtime fun and interesting. Mum and Dad kept fit by doing workout sessions at home and R joined them. It was a fun activity and she looked forward to it every evening.*

**Home relationships:** Many parents suggested that relationships between family members had been negatively affected by the pandemic experiences. Living in closer proximity to each other, often without enough personal space and time, and with limited resources had brought strain on relationships, both within the adults in the household and between siblings. Some relationships had broken down and families were living with the consequences of this.

*The family spent lockdown in a relatively small flat. As to be expected, spending significantly more time together in a small, enclosed space can cause tensions to rise. Mum was processing the breakdown of her relationship with the children's dad and was starting to navigate life as a single parent. Furthermore, during their relationship he had taken control of the finances and so his leaving meant this was left to Mum causing a large amount of stress. Mum became aware and also responsible for the arrears that the family had accrued.*

**Worries about jobs, finance and housing:** Parents in many households in this study had lost their jobs or had been furloughed and expressed increased anxiety about their future job prospects, their ability to make ends meet, put food on the table and pay rent. Some had also lost their rented housing, or were living in inadequate housing for their family needs. All of this has added anxiety, uncertainty about the future and stress for many parents who expressed the impact of this on their daily life and wellbeing.

*Mum was very appreciative of the food box delivery. Finances were very tight. As mum reported, "my husband left his job 2-3 weeks prior to lockdown with the intention of getting a new job. As a result of my income stopping because I am a childminder we had no money. It took ten weeks before we got universal credit. It was a very worrying time".*

*I worry that if I get cut [redundancy] how am I gonna pay for my bills, my rent, feed my babies? All of these what ifs and hows is always on my mind. ...It's the not knowing that I think affects me the most mentally. But it has also taught me many things, live life, live in the now, enjoy each day as it was your last and don't be angry, stop for a second and breathe and last but not least know ITS OK NOT TO BE OK! Be humble, be kind, make love not war, stay safe and have a blessed day. From my family to the World.*

## COVID-19 Benefits

**More family time together:** Although family life became disrupted many parents also expressed a deep pleasure in the additional time families had spent together over the last months. Parents talked a lot about enjoying a slower pace of life; opportunities to get to know their children better; and to do things as a family without daily demands of external or more individualised activity.

*During the first lockdown dad was unable to work and as a result spent a lot of time with the girls in the garden while mum continued to do her tutoring job on line. Mum told me that the girls benefitted from spending so much time with Dad as usually he works Monday to Friday and they only see him for a little while before bedtime. She told me that the girls have missed seeing extended family, especially Dad's family as they are vulnerable and they missed spending time with their friends.*

*One of the biggest positives the family experienced as a result of lockdown was being able to spend more time together as a family. Although this did not last for the entire lockdown as Mum's partner went back to work, her eldest son stated "I like having more cuddles with mummy."*

*It was exhausting and fabulous! I enjoy it and I hate it! E wanted attention all the time but it was good to spend time with her.*

**Slower pace of life:** For many parents being at home more without the pressures of external work and family and friend socialising had allowed more time for simple acts of daily living such as sleeping, cooking, eating together, reading, watching TV, talking and sharing time together. This had led to an appreciation of the small, simple things of life. This slower and less concentrated period of time led to a perceived slower pace of life and more time to do things for pleasure and personal growth. Many parents expressed that this had been a wonderful benefit of the crisis and almost a gift they were reluctant to lose when things normalised.

*I feel that my children learned many new skills: sewing; woodworking; being safe around sharp tools. My youngest was always constructing something with his dad in the garden. I feel that our family gained something from this experience rather than lost. We loved to slow down and spend time together, very fortunate. Honestly, it was amazing. It felt that our family got stuck in our little home world, meaning that in a very positive way. Of course, we had this rush of learning a new way to maintain school work through the technologies and my work. However, this rush still felt relaxing, just bringing a little bit of structure into our lives. But all in all, we had a wonderful time as a family. Every day adventures to the forest or cycling trip around the neighbourhood. Suddenly we had all this "time" to do all the thing that we always wanted or planned to do but very rarely would have any time. So yeah, another lockdown? Yes Please!!*



**Appreciation of nature and seasons:** The restrictions on being out of home along with encouragement to take daily exercise and where possible to be outdoors in the garden, for some parents has led to a deeper appreciation of the importance of the natural world to physical health and also mental wellbeing for them and their children. They suggest it has led to a deeper mindfulness of the seasonal changes and its role in marking the passing of time. Parents expressed this heightened consciousness of the natural world as being a real joy and delight over the last year.

*Despite the difficulties of their small living space, the family appeared to find a positive way of managing this by spending more time outside. We observed that it allowed the children to play together and explore together which was evident in their re-enactment of Forest School activities. "He [eldest son] spent a lot of time doing forest school activities that we would have done a year or so ago, such as making a fire, collecting the sticks, arranging them in the shape of a fire, finding bark for kindling, finding rocks to light the fire.*

**Relationships between parents and siblings strengthened:** Parents in the study often suggested that in many cases family relationships had actually been strengthened as a result of the intense living, with some parents expressing a better understanding of the shared parenting role, having couple time and also that despite superficial tensions, siblings had bonded and supported each other during the crisis.

*As lockdown started back in March 2020, my youngest daughter R, had only started nursery for a couple of months and was still finding it hard settling in, so for her, I think lockdown was a relief. Having her older brother at home all the time was challenging to start with. However, as we started a new routine with school activities in the morning and free play in the afternoon, they've both began to bond in a way that they hadn't before and I am very grateful for that. Their relationship has strengthened each day, learned more together and from each other, became more compassionate and understanding of each other's feelings.*

*One of the positives resulting from lockdown is that they now feel closer as a family. Mum said that the children have "learnt to love each other" despite the fact that they have spent much of lockdown annoying each other according to Mum. In the mornings, Mum's youngest child now gets excited to see her older brother and will run to see him when she knows he's awake. This is something that didn't happen before the lockdown began.*

**Open dialogue about virus risk and crisis:** The pandemic is a shared life experience and it was evident that many families had shared their learning about the causes, consequences and remediation/amelioration of the crisis. Many families had watched the news briefings together and talked seriously as a family about the crisis, what the restrictions were about, and the politics of this, and also how the virus had spread, and what the science has to say about it. They have mostly

included their young children in this dialogue which has led to young children having an authentic and genuine part to play in how the family has responded. Few families expressed the view that they had tried to 'protect' the child from knowledge about the pandemic, seeing them as too young.

*I've been pleasantly surprised with how much J understands and picks up about the virus, but also his resilience and pragmatic approach. He has been very patient and kind throughout and although his routine was heavily affected, he soldiered on without much complaining. He regularly talks about a whole host of things he's looking forward to do and is very aware that the sole reason he can't [do things] is due to the virus.*

*T's family obviously talk to him about everyday things all the time and I suspect that what he knows of Covid-19 has been tackled on a 'need-to-know' basis. Therefore, he doesn't feel like there's something going on that he doesn't know about, which I suspect would worry him more.*

*On return to kindergarten the team reflected that many children were familiar with the daily news broadcasts usually lead by Jacinda Ardern and Dr Ashley Blomfield, the country's Director-General of Health. Many families throughout NZ watched the afternoon announcements to hear the latest details of the spread of Corona Virus and to receive encouragement for 'following the Lockdown conditions' imposed on us all. Jacinda used the 'Be strong, be kind, we will be OK' quote following almost every broadcast and it became a sort of mantra throughout NZ.*

**Optimistic view of the future:** Most families expressed a confidence and optimism in the future and a longing for life to return to some kind of normality once vaccine protection is in place so they could see their extended family and friends, go back to work, shopping, cinema and engaging in all their 'out of home' lives actively again. They were not of the view that this 'strange' life pattern would continue indefinitely but some wanted to hold on to aspects of it. Most felt that even if they might have been affected in the long term by the pandemic, particularly in respect of jobs and prospects, they believed that their youngest children would not suffer too much in the long term and just wanted them to have a normal, social life again.

*The family hope that the new and upcoming vaccines will be available to all those working with young children and vulnerable adults to stop the spread of the virus. They concluded that maybe life will return to normal once again and they can look forward to booking a holiday as a family.*

*Our hope has been to get through the situation, making the best of what we have and trying to keep as positive as we can. Mum is very good about promoting a positive and joyful attitude and tries to instil this in the boys and myself. We're try and plan things to look forward to in the future and have put a number of fun plans / trips in the calendar for 2021, albeit with a caveat to the boys that they are virus dependent.*

### 5.3 Practitioners' COVID-19 Narratives

The study practitioners were trained in Froebelian storytelling approaches and in action research methodologies, including pedagogic documentation and analysis. As part of the project they agreed to firstly, document and curate a sample of their children's play sequences over a period of time; secondly, to implement and document their own pedagogic strategies to support young children's COVID-19 storytelling; thirdly to reflect upon their own learning and professional development from the project. The evidence from the latter two strands of project work are presented below.

#### **Practitioners' Storytelling Strategies (Froebel Principle - Knowledgeable and nurturing educators)**

Practitioners in the study documented and reflected on their pedagogic strategies to support children's storytelling and shared these across the project. Many of these storytelling strategies were not new but were employed specifically or more frequently to encourage the children to explore and externalise their COVID-19 experiences, thoughts and feelings through the introduction of materials and resources. Others were new to the practitioners and the children, as they created and innovated within their practice to extend and deepen their existing pedagogy. Each of these strategies could be employed indoors or outdoors. Some techniques were deemed to be more successful than others but practitioners revealed an openness to experiment and try out new ideas being determined to offer children a rich range of options and opportunities to express and share their own COVID-19 stories. Some of these storytelling strategies are explained below.

**Sustained Shared Conversations:** Throughout the study period practitioners engaged in deep, sustained and reflective conversations with the children about their daily life, interests and preoccupations. Some of these conversations were led by the children's interests and passions, some were instigated by the practitioner, and others just happened as part of the daily life in the nursery. Some conversations were one on one, others were amongst a group. Some were stimulated by, and occurred as part of, an activity, e.g. role play, drawings, model making, singing (as exemplified below). Some conversations were rather fleeting and some were extended and extensive. All those recorded were dialogic and child-led and focussed.

**TV screen and news:** Many of the children, like the practitioners, had been watching and listening to the news about the pandemic with their parents and wanted to share what they had heard at nursery. This was particularly true at the height of the pandemic, where news was dominated by infection levels, daily death rates and changing restrictions on daily life. In particular, many of the children in all three countries displayed an awareness of the Prime/First Minister's briefings on the TV and radio, they recognised these figures and had a view on them. In one nursery, an outdoor wooden TV screen had been hung and the children were recorded giving their daily update of pandemic news. In another, pictures of the leading figures had been printed and laminated as part of a series of COVID-19 related photos for the children to use in their news stories.

*We introduced the 'TV' as a possible COVID vehicle for children to share what they watched or wanted to talk about. Some children became really engaged with this and responded to initial prompts to tell us the news. K was very keen to use the TV and was very sure about the topics/ interests he wanted to talk about.*



**Role play:** Role play narratives were seen as a key means by which children could play out their COVID-19 understandings, experiences and feelings, and practitioners offered a range of different role play scenarios and stimulations in all four study sites. Some of these were stimulated by stories, told by the children, adults or through book stories. Others were spontaneously created by the children themselves, through their imagination and creativity. Others were framed by staff providing resources, props and equipment. In some the children wanted the practitioner to be involved, in others it was made clear this was a peer or sometimes a solitary activity. The child's choice was respected, as illustrated by this practitioner's reflective narrative:

*I developed a role play in the mud kitchen area with A and J. A suggested we have a BBQ, so I swayed this to shopping for ingredients at a pretend supermarket. Getting ready, we made a list and collected a trolley. I mimed putting on a mask and told the children, I need to wear a mask in the shop. A immediately replied, "We don't because we are little!" In my contribution to the role play, I suggested that we would have to queue outside the shop which the children went along with but didn't comment on it or take it further. I wondered if this was because this is normal or I'd taken the role play in a too adult led direction. I also prompted that we couldn't get flour for our shopping, but there was no positive or negative response around this from the children.*



*I noticed you quietly and on your own at the desk tapping and concentrating on the keyboard. I watched as you picked up the keyboard and mouse and walked off purposefully, I followed you and asked what was happening. "Need to put this in the house to do work." You told me. You set up in the home corner. You are now working at home on the laptop – in the background. You are playing with another friend S, you are mum while S is dad. Other children sometimes take roles in this*

*play which continues over several days mostly in the home corner. It would be interesting to know who instigated the play. While S is very imaginative and into role play, his play is often much more active and takes place outside. He tells his mum he has been playing 'working at home' on the laptop.*

**Picture/photo prompts:** One way to encourage the child to create their narratives about the pandemic was through the use of a series of picture or photo prompts which the children could use to illustrate and tell their COVID-19 stories. The pictures were laminated and had sticky backs which would adhere to a storyboard, as explained by two practitioners who used this technique:

*I took a small group to look at some photographs to try and get some talk about the virus. I thought the pictures might promote more conversations if the children had seen these on the television or on a walk. These are the pictures I used: The Prime Minister, a supermarket, COVID notices, a hospital, a closed park. The children commented, "That's the prime minister he is in charge". "The park is closed because you can't go in there because of the virus, you might get it and it will make you ill and you will have to go to hospital."*

*I had made magnetic laminated pictures to help prompt children to share their knowledge and experiences of life in Lockdown. I noticed that several children often chose the pictures depicting the television screen with Jacinda and Ashley at their lecterns and COVID-19 awareness pictures in the background. Also, they favoured the 'kiwi' image with the words – 'Be Kind'.*

**Puppets/Persona dolls:** The use of puppets and Persona dolls were seen as a valuable means through which children could be encouraged to listen to and then tell their own COVID-19 stories. These were seen as particularly helpful in allowing children to explore their feelings and emotions about their COVID-19 experiences, as explained by these practitioners:

*I used large puppets to tell stories about COVID experiences and worries.*

*I used a Persona doll and show photos of her, for example, queuing up to go shopping and looking sad because she couldn't see her friends.*

**Singing and music making:** In all the study sites, singing and music making was utilised as a key means of expression and therapy, bonding the children together in shared music making and singing. The creation of new COVID-19 songs, or adaption of existing songs to relate to this time, was also popular with children, who appeared to find great humour and relief in songs that chased the virus away.

*Children and staff are singing a lot more and creating songs about the virus which the children appear to really enjoy and repeat.*



**Craft work and modelling:** Giving children resources to make and model was seen as an important means by which children could create something that they wanted to explore through 2D and 3D media. The sustained conversations during the process of creation and modelling was seen as special and invaluable for listening to the child's inner thoughts about what they were representing, as illustrated below:

*We were talking about a mask A had made from paper. E- 'I wear some mask in a shop.' 'I wear my mask all the time.' 'Nana made my mask.' A – 'Cos the germs.' I asked what germs? 'In the shop.' 'The germs just got to here. The germs just got to your nursery.' I asked what we have to do to stop the germs. 'We need to put our mask on.' I say that I wash my hands. 'When we come off the road we need to wash our hands to count to five.' Later in the day A spontaneously asked, 'How the germies got to school?' I asked how she thinks they got here. 'They flied.' I ask how they will go away. I 'need some music' she said.*

**Drawing and painting:** The children in the study were offered the opportunity to draw a lot, on paper, in sand, on walls, on chalk boards, on the floor and almost wherever and whenever they wished to. There were plenty of materials and tools provided to do so, both inside and out. These drawings, and the process of creating them, provided a wonderful means by which the child could explore, explain and express what they were thinking about and what they understood about the virus. It was often the process of drawing rather than the product which was where the story lay, as shown below:



*Inside nursery K joined friends drawing next to the home corner with me. We were not talking about COVID. First K drew a germ and then he added an aeroplane next to it. I scribed what he said as he explained his drawing, "I drew a germ. This germ is really big." "This is the aeroplane that flies in the sky. Because the aeroplane flies fast. And I was so happy I see my grandpa and my grandma." K chats as he draws and shows me, he has talked a lot about his summer trip to see grandparents and other family.*

**Mind mapping:** Mind mapping requires prompts/prop such as a collection of range of items. Ideally children would be able to add to items by fetching objects from around the nursery. The children then use strips of paper to connect the items with an explanation of the link. This is intended to encourage the children to make sense of different experiences and how things connect as shown in the practitioner reflection below:

*The props were chosen from a prepared box – various dolls house people, shopping basket, aeroplane, and ambulance. I added plasters and the first aid box. The children are in the early stages of extending their thoughts and making more connections – I think they started to understand the process towards the end of the session. The children in this session were really interested in the strips of paper with their words scribed on – powerful to them? But I am concerned this is not them exploring through play and storytelling but instead far more an adult led agenda.*



*You were drawing at the table, I prompted you by asking if you could draw me the virus. As you drew you told me what was happening in the picture. "My Mummy wear a mask, because naughty bugs going round. They bite us, virus is big, big, big, it black, virus angry coz he naughty. You draw squiggles and lines, circles and other shapes, your picture was very detailed. "Get rid of them that virus" You clap your hands together. "The virus bites us in the arms, those bees. Daddy say the virus go dead, go away virus, I shout wash away, wash away". You continue to mark make, concentrating fully on your drawing.*

**Books:** Having a wide range of books reflecting home and real-life environments were seen as essential in all the nurseries to stimulate the children's own storytelling, as exemplified in the narrative below:

*Reading the story of Goldilocks and the 3 Bears which I initiated by saying we couldn't go to other people's houses (like Goldilocks did) which led to V and E telling their own version of the story and mark making either 'writing' or drawing their story. We have also used baby bear at group time and talked about why he is sad (no porridge, broken chair someone in bed) which developed into him being sad about not being allowed to see friends and family.*

**Story squares:** Story squares is a technique inspired by Vivien Gussey Paley and her helicopter stories where the children tell their own story which is scribed by the adult and then in a group the story is acted out. This technique was explored in a couple of the study sites but without much success, as explained below:

*The reality has been quite different and most of the stories have occurred during play, in the children's drawings and as a result of adult-led discussions. Story square sessions have just not elicited the level of story that they were prior to lockdown. Several reasons may be at play here: children and staff are focusing on returning to or starting at nursery, settling in, exploring their surroundings. The children have shown little interest in sitting down to tell an adult a story. Adults have had little time to lead these sessions with the additional tasks that the COVID-related rules demand.*



#### 5.4 COVID-19 Impact Narratives

This project set out to explore plural narratives on the COVID-19 pandemic experience, and particularly to capture children's voices through their observed storytelling play. It also set out to

develop pedagogic storytelling strategies within a Froebelian inspired pedagogy and to document developments in practitioners' Froebelian pedagogic practice. The reflective dialogues with the study practitioners have also generated some evidence on how they perceive the pandemic experiences to have impacted on children and how the project experiences have impacted on themselves as practitioners. This evidence is presented in this final section of findings.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on children**

**Attendance:** There is some evidence that children's attendance in some of the nurseries may have improved during the pandemic. Interestingly, it is reported from one of the study sites that despite the periods of lockdown, when children were unable to access nursery, for the first time ever, pupil premium, FSM, EAL and SEN children have had better attendance during the pandemic than those without. They reflect that:

*This could be because some families have a greater appreciation of nursery education than previously as we know that some families found lockdown much harder than others. Concerns about COVID and current restrictions do not seem to have affected the overall attendance at the study nursery at all from September 2020 onwards, in fact it is 1-2% higher than prior to lockdown. Both staff and children have had far less illness than in previous Autumn terms which may be a result of spending so much time outside, having windows open at all times, frequent hand washing, adults trying to keep distant from other adults and enforced leisure time at weekends for staff as there is very little else one can do.*

**Children's behaviour:** Practitioners in all study sites have found that children's behaviour has been very different this term from previous Autumn terms, as one nursery reports:

*Generally, the children appear to have found sharing adult time and resources more challenging; more children are more likely to have a meltdown than usual; some are having to learn or re-learn nursery expectations. One can suppose that lockdown has had a significant impact on most children – more screen time, less sharing with peers, less outdoor experience, some will have had more adult interaction, others much less. The stress being experienced by families has also had a direct impact on the children's behaviour. Behaviour and social skills are definitely not at the level they were this time last year. The children missed opportunities to interact with others socially during the lockdowns and still cannot have play dates in their homes. There has been a considerable amount of, mainly boys, who are displaying quite physical behaviour towards each other, generally through hitting, punching and pushing. Several of them have a love-hate relationship; they want to be friends, but they become angry at the slightest provocation and struggle to voice their frustrations. It feels as though this is a lot more emotional than in previous years.*



## Impact of project on practitioners

**Health anxieties:** Nursery practitioners in the study, like parents, shared some deep worries about the risk to their own health and that they could potentially transmit the virus to their own families. However, their professionalism and dedication has meant that they have continued to come to work, unless they have tested positive, and have put the wellbeing of the children and families first: a huge tribute to their strength and deep commitment to their work and the leadership within each of the study sites.

*At the beginning of the term I was worried that I was endangering my partner who has had asthma in the past. Also, that being over 60 might make me more vulnerable but I think those anxieties have lessened a lot.*

*The initial return to nursery in August was hard, fear of the unknown, expectations of high numbers of positive cases. Then we settled into the new routines, only for stress levels to increase hugely towards the end of the Christmas term – worries about becoming sick and passing COVID on to family and friends – lots of guilt! Having a team member self-isolating made everything feel more “real” brought it home how easily the virus could spread and the impact that would have on the setting.*

**Deeper understanding of the Froebelian approach:** There is strong evidence from the practitioner reflections that staff in the project have become much more confident about their implementation of Froebelian philosophy and pedagogic principles which they feel has strengthened their practice. They report that although they were always committed to starting with the child and to the value of outdoors and the natural world this is now much more explicitly part of their daily pedagogic practice. They also feel that the collaborative project work approach as strengthened teams work and made their practice more cohesive and congruent across the nursery.

Significantly, it has also made practitioners realise the need to slow their practice down with the children and trust the children more to lead the agenda.

*This year has been like no other. It has been full of uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and worry. However, it has also been a time to reflect, make changes, grow, and think differently both in our personal and work life. I consider myself so blessed to work within a teaching team that now share a united teaching philosophy that underpins everything we do. We genuinely put the children’s needs first and celebrate their uniqueness.*

**Importance of outdoors and natural world:** Again, this was always a central part of practice in all the study sites but practitioners report that through the project this has been reaffirmed and a central part of their provision. They acknowledge benefits for children, parents and staff. Staff in one nursery also suggest that their practice has been ‘flipped’ as a result of the pandemic and now they start their practice with outside and then look to inside, ensuring also that inside incorporates as much of outside world as possible.

*When children came back after the first lockdown, I noticed that most of the children enjoyed spending the majority of their days playing outside. The housing area around the Kindergarten is very built up and the majority of the houses are small and modest and are on small sections. Not being able to go to local parks and play venues would have been challenging and sorely missed. It would have been a very long 7 weeks for many of the children and their families being confined to home. So, when Kindergarten re opened I think the children, whether it was subconsciously or consciously realised how wonderful it felt to be in open spaces, free to run around with their friends, with the sun and wind on their faces. For me, being in the open spaces around nature, trees, grass, sun, and wind makes me feel strong in mind, body, and soul. Maybe these children were revitalising and energising their souls as well.*

**Deepening and more equitable parent relationships:** There is strong evidence that the different and more intense contact with parents which has been virtual for about a year in England and Scotland, (less so in New Zealand) is now in many ways better than ever. Even though both parents and staff are missing the quick catch up at drop off and pick up, and the ability to home visit, they have found that children are coping really well with the drop off at the garden gate and are much more independent with their self-care than previous cohorts at this time of year. They have also found that children are getting involved in play more quickly than when parents were able to settle them into the nursery. The children seem to be benefitting from not having the parents in first and accept how it is.

The study practitioners also report that the project need to obtain the parent's voice as well as that of the child has meant that they are seeing the child within a family and within a wider community. The increased availability and contact with key people via email and phone calls which differs to how it was before (previously face to face) means parents are able to contact the key person in a range of ways at whatever times they wish and this has benefits as one practitioner states:

*One of positives that have resulted due to the pandemic, is that there has been an increase in parents being part of their child's learning and sharing it with their key person, rather than just nursery informing families about what nursery have been doing. Key people are sharing what they are doing with children via email; sending pages home from Learning Journeys as they can't physically see them within the nursery. The impact of this is that both parties have a holistic view of the child.*

*I found this project so timely as it has made me think deeper about the changes we as teachers have had to adapt to. In particular, using platforms to communicate with our families, children and management. We had always picked up the phone and emailed in the past if we could not speak face to face. When we went into lockdown, we had to learn how to use Team Viewer and Zoom (both new to me and my colleagues.) There was a strong expectation to use digital technology remotely offering educational teaching experiences online.*

The changed but enhanced contact has led to practitioners shifting their perception of parents and obtaining a much better insight into family lives and it is suggested that this has significantly changed their views of parents and how they can work more effectively with them. They particularly state that it has enabled them to see that they must slow things down and listen more to parents rather than being in the driving seat of the relationship.

*Supporting our parents' broader needs became a focus. Many would not directly ask for help but because we had established fairly strong relationships with our families we helped put them in touch with support networks. I personally gave one family a grocery voucher to buy a week's worth of supplies but did so in a way that she did not see it as charity and she gratefully accepted. It was a humbling experience to hear their stories and to know they felt comfortable sharing these with us.*

**Research and practice:** The study practitioners report that being part of the project has strengthened their ability to become an active practitioner researcher and operate as part of a community of practice which is evidence based. They have enjoyed systematically documenting the children's learning and their pedagogic practice, collating and evaluating this evidence to inform and develop their practice further. The rich regular dialogues of each study site team with the CREC research link partner has enhanced this sense of being part of a research community that values their expertise and experience and are committed to developing this aspect of their professional practice further, as stated in these testimonies.

## 6. Legacy Learning and Next Steps

The project work plan set out in section 4 indicates that the project team has now delivered on all the planned activity in this study. The children's narrative sequences of COVID-19 and the practitioners' reflective accounts of how they supported the storytelling will continue to be built and analysed as the study practitioners have now embedded these pedagogic techniques and processes of reflective documentation and action research.

### 6.1 Legacy Learning

The project has had a significant impact on all participants, as evidenced above, and we believe has secured a strong legacy in all four study sites which will feed future development and collaborations. In summary, the project has flagged:

- The need to slow down, listen more to children, parents and each other;
- The benefits of action research for the triad of parent, child, practitioner learning together with no preconceived agenda;
- The shift to more email and phone contact with parents that has strengthened relationships and made them more equitable as all parents get the same offer;

- The value of posting information and news about the nursery activity on social media. Parents have been very appreciative of staff reading stories that they can then share at home and all the practical activities shared with parents;
- The real value of home visiting;
- The value of starting sessions outside and then opening up inside rather than the other way around has had such a positive impact on children. Settling children outside has also been extremely positive;
- Having virtual meetings with professionals such as child protection teams which has meant far less time out of nursery for staff as there is no travel time;
- The slower pace of life and re-prioritising of what is important which has benefited many.

## 6.2 Next Steps

We are aware that the context in which this project has operated remains rather unpredictable as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve and have impact in each study country and site. Despite the challenges, we have formed excellent working relationships across all study partners and we have all learned enormously from this project. The project has generated detailed and very valuable knowledge for all involved which we are already disseminating to other practitioners and to government bodies in each of the three study countries. In particular, disseminating the wisdom from these young children to ensure policy and practice is better informed and more democratically and ethically constructed is a key commitment of this project. The project is ongoing but children in all three countries are expressing a desire to:

- Regain their daily life and routines;
- Be with their friends;
- Have extended time to play;
- Be outdoors;
- Have authentic information.

This evidence generated by the project continues to be carefully considered in the study settings and staff are constantly reflecting on how their provision and practice might be further transformed to meet the expressed needs of their children. All the settings are now fully open to their children, even if the opening times have been reduced, so the children can now meet and interact with their friends as long as they (and their practitioners) remain well. The settings have tried to minimise changes to the children's routines although of course the COVID-19 sanitation and social distancing requirements have necessarily continued to have an impact in England and Scotland, though in New Zealand routines are more or less back to normal. For example, some materials and activities in the English and Scottish have been removed, entry and exit routines remain significantly different and mixing with groups outside their 'bubble' is still not possible. The daily programme in the settings has been relaxed to allow children more time and opportunity to play, and additional spaces, time and resources have been provided to facilitate this. All the settings are using their outdoor space as a

continuous free flow area and children and staff are spending far more time on a daily basis outside. It is also often the place where transition from home to setting is managed with the children's families. Finally, in response to children's curiosity and questions, the practitioners are offering detailed, authentic information and actively supporting the children's exploration of the nature and impact of the virus through the learning activities afforded to the children.

In the New Zealand study site, we can catch a glimpse of a post-pandemic future where we see provision returning to a more normal offer and practitioners, parents and children in many ways, putting the pandemic experiences behind them and now engaged in living life for today without fear of infection. As one practitioner reflected:

*Over the last few weeks, I have not heard any child talking about COVID-19 or seen this being expressed in play or artwork. I believe the children have moved on and COVID-19 no longer has a part in daily life. I was intrigued to find out from one child if being sick and having to stay home triggered any of her original thoughts/ideas/worries about COVID-19. Today I asked her about being away and if she was worried about COVID-19. She replied, "No. I just had the flu and now I am better." She went on to say that the virus is dirty and "It's in the bin!" It made me think that we all put things we have finished or no longer want or need in the bin so I think this child has made a connection that COVID-19 is now 'rubbish' and belongs in the bin with all the other rubbish. Families in our community appear to have moved on and COVID-19 appears to have been a 'glitch in 2020' but they appear to be looking forward to 2021 with hope that New Zealand has practically eliminated community transmission even though some restrictions are still in place.*

### 6.3 Final Reflections

Finally, we feel this project offers a challenge to all of us to respond actively and authentically to what the children are saying (and to their silences) – and echoing Froebel, this will be a test of our judgement and feelings too. We believe that we have met the aims of this project, and the knowledge generated has real value for many stakeholders in the sector. We have already made good progress to realise our mission to better support young children to express their narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and through this to promote their social and emotional health and contain their COVID-19 fears and anxieties. We have also learned a lot about how to use storytelling strategies within a Froebel pedagogic approach to ensure children feel themselves as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives. In short, collectively we are taking great care to value, listen to and nurture these young children well during this devastating time. We hope our experiences can reach out to others to do the same for their children. Our Froebel Partnership will continue to evolve and the dissemination of the project knowledge is ongoing and constantly developing, and we already have plans for the next phase of our collaboration.

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## Appendix 1: Country Contexts and Study Sites

### England

#### Country Context

In England the message from the government throughout late Feb/early March 2020 was that schools and settings would remain open. Schools watched and waited as many European countries locked down. By 16<sup>th</sup> March everyone was being told to work from home if they could and vulnerable adults were to start shielding at home from 23<sup>rd</sup> March for 12 weeks. Still schools were told that we needed to remain open. Parents started to keep their children at home and numbers attending nurseries decreased day by day. At 5pm on 18<sup>th</sup> March the Prime Minister announced that schools and settings would close on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March for all children except those with key worker parents and vulnerable children. At 8pm on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March, schools and early year's settings were told that only vulnerable children and those with key worker parents who could not safely be cared for at home could attend schools and settings. Schools and settings were expected to remain open throughout all school holidays until the school year ended in July.

Wider opening of schools and settings happened from 1<sup>st</sup> June with children in separate bubbles of no more than 15 children. Comprehensive risk assessments had to be written and adhered to. All schools and early years' settings reopened in early September for all children but had to abide by strict COVID guidance and risk assessment compliance which reduced social contact between groups of children but did not require social distancing or mask wearing for young children and their practitioners. Strict sanitation and cleaning regimes have been put into place which has reduced the resources available to children and also in some cases, hours of opening are restricted, there is much reduced visitors and no parents inside. Many schools are seating even 4 and 5 year olds at tables 2m apart from all other children. Cases in England are on the rise again but DfE are stating that schools and settings will only close at tier 4 lockdown, full lockdown.

In June the DfE published the EYFS reforms for early adopter schools and settings with the expectation that these reforms will become statutory for all in Sept 2021. Many in the sector are extremely concerned about these reforms as they appear in many ways to be a step backwards and are certainly putting England on a very different pathway from other countries such as Scotland.

#### Study Site 1: Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre (GNSFC), Guildford

Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre (GNSFC) has three sites all based in the borough of Guildford in Surrey:

- Hazel Avenue (nursery school and family centre)
- York Road (nursery school)
- The Spinney (family centre)

Guildford Nursery School is a maintained nursery school on two sites: one a large ex-primary school with a huge garden sited on Bellfields estate, the other is a Victorian building with a walled garden and is in the town centre. We have three family centres sited in the areas of most need. These areas contain 11 super output areas that are in the 40% most deprived nationally, 7 in the 30% most



deprived and 3 in the 20% most deprived areas nationally. Guildford Nursery School is the lead provider for the family centres in the borough of Guildford. Family Support Workers are currently supporting 90 families at levels 3 and 4. We have seen a significant rise in the number of cases and especially cases involving domestic abuse and parental conflict. Across the nursery school and family centres, there are approximately 56 staff. In Oct 2020 there are: 147 children aged 2-5 years across its two sites:

- 66% of two-year-olds eligible for the two-year-old funding. Eligibility criteria are the same as for pupil premium.
- 34% are 3-4-year-olds in receipt of Free School Meals/EY pupil premium (This figure is 8.4% in Surrey and 15.4% nationally).
- 35% are multilingual learners (This figure is approximately 14.5% in Surrey schools).
- 20% of children are receiving additional support for their special educational needs (SEN). 6.4% of children attending EY provision nationally, have SEND.
- 6 children have an assigned social worker.
- 6 children with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) in place. We anticipate that 16 children will have EHCPs by July.

Cases of COVID-19 in Guildford are currently lower than the national average per 100,000 but are increasing week by week. Guildford is not subject to additional restrictions other than the ones imposed on England as a whole. The staff are finding work and life in general quite hard this term. They are having to rethink everything they do in the light of the restrictions and whilst this has led to some really positive outcomes, it is very time-consuming. Many days there is at least one member of staff absent for COVID-related reasons and this puts extra strain on the remaining staff. Effective communication is always vital but is more challenging currently with all the restrictions.

Lockdown attendance figures were:

*Children in nursery from 23<sup>rd</sup> March:*

- 23 in total
- with an EHCP
- 12 with key worker parents
- 8 with assigned social worker or other vulnerable

*Children in nursery from 8<sup>th</sup> June:*

- 99 in total, 50% of total on roll, 63 at Hazel Avenue, 60% of roll and 36 at York Road, 39% of roll.
- 63 are boys, 26 are girls.
- 25 EYPP which is 69% of all EYPP children.

During lockdown Guildford Nursery School had 20+ vulnerable children and those with key worker parents attending each day, most from 9am till 3pm. Staff who were not isolating or being shielded were on a weekly rota. There was always a qualified paediatric first aider on site. A Designated Safeguarding Lead was either on site or available on the phone. Social distancing with children aged 2-5 years is not possible, so to reduce risks children and staff are spending the vast majority of everyday outside. There were about 170 children on roll who were at home. Together with our neighbouring primary and secondary schools, two local churches and the charity Foodwise, we ran a

meal delivery service from our kitchen for vulnerable families. By the end of August 10,000 meals had been delivered

Many children were being supported with home learning and the nursery applied the same Froebelian principles that guide our work usually to our approach to home learning which are:

- It is important to provide each child with what they need now rather than what they might need next year or at some time in the future.
- Children can only learn when their well-being is high, so this means that we support parents to nurture children's ideas, feelings, physical and mental health.
- Children do not learn in a compartmentalised way. One activity may well teach a child maths, physical development and a great deal of language.
- What children can do (rather than what they cannot do) should be the starting point.
- Children need time, space and the chance to talk and be listened to.
- The people the child is with are of immense importance. Warm, affectionate relationships enable children to learn, to know themselves and to like themselves.
- We do our best work helping children to learn and develop when we know what they find fascinating, what they want to learn, and when we know how they learn best.

The home learning offer included:

**NB:** A key person is a qualified teacher (QTS) or a qualified Early Years Educator.

- Twice weekly zoom group times: Each child, through their parent, is invited to a weekly session with their key person. The groups are kept to about 7 children so the key person does a few each week. These sessions involve much excitement from the children! After the general chat, the key person reads a story and the group sings together.
- Videos and photos on Facebook: These include staff reading books, singing songs with actions, demonstrating activities such as "silly soup," suggesting ideas of activities that can easily be done at home with resources most families will have. Parents also post photos and videos of their children enjoying the activities.
- Pinterest: [www.pinterest.co.uk/](http://www.pinterest.co.uk/) then search for Guildford Nursery School & FC (the photo with ducklings identifies us!). This shows parents an increasing range of ideas of activities to do at home.
- Reports: We have brought the timing of these forward so by 1<sup>st</sup> June every parent of children starting primary school in September will receive their child's end of nursery report. This is a learning story written to the child and includes information on the child's interests, how they learn and what they have learnt. Examples can be shared on request.
- Keeping in contact: Each key person rings each of their children's parents regularly. Regularly means weekly for any parent who is vulnerable and/or showing signs of anxiety, fortnightly for any other parent. These conversations often involve supporting the parent with their child's behaviour.
- Staff are also in contact with parents via email, this involves staff giving ideas to parents about their particular child and the parent sending the key person videos and photos of their child doing the suggested activities.

- Weekly newsletters from the Headteacher to parents sent out via Studybugs and on the website.

In addition, the Nursery:

- Created and delivered bags of resources for children eligible for Pupil Premium. These will contain items such as pencils, crayons, paper, glue stick etc.
- Put all our home learning videos and ideas on our website.

## Scotland

### Country Context

In Scotland the decision to close all Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings happened suddenly, with little warning, on Friday 20 March 2020. There is no doubt this greatly impacted on the lives of the children and their families throughout Scotland. Due to the immediacy of the closures, no child or adult could have been prepared for the hastiness of the closures or the consequences, e.g., sudden termination of wider friendships / relationships. Throughout the lockdown period the Scottish Government (SG) regularly shared updates / guidance. However, the information received frequently changed, which left citizens with feelings of uncertainty. The reopening of ELC settings are schools took place on 12 August 2020. The SG were clearly set on this opening date, unlike other countries in the UK. The SG referred practitioners to the Realising the Ambition (2020) guidance document <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/realising-the-ambition/> which places emphasis on supporting / nurturing children and creating conditions where children should flourish. Unsurprisingly the document was written by a University of Edinburgh Froebelian student. The health and well-being of both children and adults was also made a high priority by the SG. The coronavirus was suppressed to a low level in Scotland. In addition, we now know that young children are less likely to be affected by or transmit the virus. Advice from the advisory sub group for education and children's issues states that children in the age groups accessing early learning and childcare have a low susceptibility to COVID-19 infection, they also have a low likelihood of onward transmission.

This continued suppression of the virus alongside children having low susceptibility inspired the opening of ELC centres and schools on 12 August 2020. However, we have not returned to normal' practice, e.g., regarding numbers of children attending, for example 33 is the total number of children that can be in any one group; additionally, groups of children cannot mix. Furthermore, we have been informed, should the virus increase again further changes to public health measures may be required. Thus, we are on a kind of standby. The SG advises that we continually check the online guidance for accuracy. With an acknowledgement that young children would find it challenging to socially distance the following core public measures need to be in place for all ELC settings:

- enhanced hygiene and cleaning practice
- limiting children's contacts
- maximizing the use of outdoor spaces
- physical distancing between adults in the setting including parents at drop-off and pick-up times
- active engagement with Test and Protect

This non-statutory guidance has been developed for early learning and childcare (ELC) providers in the local authority, private and third sectors to support a safe reopening of these settings, and ongoing delivery of ELC, during phase 3 of the SG's Route Map in line with the Strategic Framework for reopening schools and ELC provision, published on 21 May. Other relevant SG guidance includes:

- Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for Reopening Schools and ELC and the framework document Coronavirus (COVID19): a framework for decision making
- Health Protection Scotland non-healthcare settings guidance - this contains information on health protection and infection prevention and control issues including cleaning, hygiene measures, what to do if someone falls ill, laundry considerations and waste management.
- Realising the ambition: being me - early years national practice guidance for Scotland.
- Setting the table: nutritional guidance and food standards for early year's providers in Scotland.
- Infection Prevention and Control in Childcare Settings (Daycare and Childminding Settings)
- NHS Inform COVID 19
- NHS Inform - COVID:19 Shielding Guidelines
- Health and Social Care Standards
- Test and Protect guidance
- Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020
- Various risk assessments have also been carried out (these can be supplied if thought useful).

### **Study Site 2: Cowgate Under Fives Centre, Edinburgh**

Cowgate Under 5's Centre is an environment where children unfold happily and busily in a carefully arranged environment, surrounded by peace and love. The centre aims to provide the highest possible standard of childcare and education in a safe-as-necessary, caring and organised environment where babies and young children under five years play, learn and grow at an appropriate pace. We support children's holistic development through play, within a secure, caring and loving environment. By providing facilities to meet every child's desires, we support children to grow in self-confidence, gain independence and learn new skills. Our primary concern is always the wellbeing, happiness and holistic development of each individual child in the Centre, providing the support necessary to lead them to care for themselves and each other and to adopt a caring attitude towards the environment that surrounds us.

On Thursday 19 March, the local authority informed us we would be closing, and on Monday 23rd March, we started to offer two daily zoom sessions for the children, which soon increased to three a day. Our head of centre sent out a daily update with details of the zoom sessions, useful links and any information received by the local authority. A few weeks later, the council decided against using zoom as a platform for interacting with our families, but we continued nonetheless, as we felt it would not be right to withdraw an offering so many families were relying on. Staff also offered a daily story for children to listen to, and many practitioners engaged in one-to-one or small group zoom chats with children who expressed an interest. Eventually, we supported the children themselves to run zoom sessions for the other children. These sessions brought daily nursery activities, such as our music gathering and bread making, into the children's homes, and sustained a sense of continuity and community for the children and their families. Older siblings (many of whom

had been to Cowgate) joined in, as did parents. The staff also met on a regular basis to discuss Froebelian principles and practice, the newly released Realizing the Ambition Scottish policy document, and established an anti-racist education reading group, which continues to meet.

### **Study Site 3: Greengables Nursery School and Family Centre, Edinburgh**

Greengables Nursery School & Family Centre is a unique setting, located in the Niddrie area of Craigmillar in East Edinburgh, providing early learning and childcare for children aged 3-5 and a flagship model of partnership working with parents and the wider community. Its practice is based on Froebelian principles. The Nursery School was built in 1975 and the adjacent Family Centre was built in 1993 from Urban Aid funding, in response to the needs of families and the community. Over the years, the work at Greengables has been internationally recognised by the OECD and in a number of publications. The nursery is run by the City of Edinburgh Council and provides 30 hours of funded early learning and childcare for up to 48 children.

## **New Zealand**

### **Country Context**

New Zealand consists of two main land masses, the North Island and the South Island and has around 600 islands. Owing to its remoteness, it was the last large habitable lands to be settled by humans. It was discovered and settled by Polynesians in approximately the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and Britain declared sovereignty in 1840 and representatives of the United Kingdom Māori chiefs signed a treaty known as the Treaty of Waitangi. The Treaty of Waitangi is very much a valid document underpinning all governmental decision-making including education. Our early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki was developed using a partnership approach as envisioned by the Treaty of Waitangi. New Zealand has a population of approximately 5million. Its most populous city is Auckland. The majority of New Zealand's population is of European descent; the indigenous Maori are the largest minority, followed by Asians and Pacific Islanders. The official languages are English, Maori and Sign Language. International tourism is a significant source of revenue however due to the outbreak of COVID-19, our borders are currently closed to all non-New Zealanders.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February, New Zealand had its first confirmed case of COVID-19. On 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the country went into Level 4 lockdown and only essential services remained open. The country remained that way until 28<sup>th</sup> April when it shifted to Level 3. Children of essential workers could return to kindergarten. On 14<sup>th</sup> May the level shifted to Level 2 and it was possible for all those families that felt comfortable to return to kindergarten. The country entered Level 1 on 9<sup>th</sup> June as it was believed at the time that New Zealand was COVID-19 free. However, after weeks of no cases, Auckland returned to Level 3 as COVID-19 community transmission returned. The rest of the country went to Level 2 and police monitored the legitimacy of people leaving or entering Auckland. The kindergartens closed once again and few families sent their children during Level 3 this time. On the 30<sup>th</sup> August, Auckland went to Level 2.5 and re-opened its Auckland borders and children started returning to kindergartens. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September Auckland dropped to Level 2 but many children did not return to kindergarten with their parents citing they would return when the country went back to Level 1.

**Study Site: Birdwood Kindergarten, Auckland**

Birdwood Kindergarten is situated in Ranui, West Auckland. It operates under the Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) which provides a governance and management framework. It is one of 107 kindergartens, 4 early learning centres and 5 playgroups under the auspices of the AKA. The kindergarten opened in 1987. It is licensed for 30 children aged between 2 years and 6 years however most children start the schooling around their fifth birthday. Children generally attend 3 days a week and are not charged any fees. The current child head roll per week is 50 however attendance has decreased due to parent inhibitions to send their child back following the last COVID-19 Level 3 Lockdown. The operating hours are 8.30am to 3.30pm. It sits adjacent to Birdwood Primary School where most of the children transition to. Most children are Māori or Pacific heritage. Ranui is a 'young' suburb of Auckland established around 40 years ago. A third of the population of Ranui is aged under 18. Census statistics give it a deprivation index of 10, meaning it is relatively poor. Its residents are a mix of Maori, European, Pacific and Asian population and the average income is about \$22,000. Low cost housing and rent attracts people to the area.

For most of the day, children are the decision-makers choosing where they want to play both indoors and outdoors. They come together for morning tea and lunch and a 10-minute mat-time. The kindergarten has a well-established outdoor area with a large sandpit, climbing and swinging equipment, gardens and a large grass area. There are 3 full-time qualified teachers, 2 part-time teaching assistants and an Administrator who works 12 hours a week. One of the qualified teachers has worked at the kindergarten for 20 years and has long established relationships within the community.

From March 26<sup>th</sup> the Kindergarten was closed until 28<sup>th</sup> April when the risk level shifted to Level 3 and children of essential workers were allowed to return, however only one parent chose to send her son to kindergarten for two consecutive days. Staff were required to go in to prepare for Level 2 return and support the family by agreeing to the child's attendance. On 14<sup>th</sup> May after Level 2 was announced so more families could attend. Numbers were low initially but gradually increased over the weeks until the country entered Level 1 on 9<sup>th</sup> June. However, community transmission returned and the kindergarten closed once again and there were no families wishing to send their children during Level 3 this time. On the 30<sup>th</sup> August, Auckland went to Level 2.5 and re-opened its Auckland borders and children started returning to kindergarten. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September Auckland dropped to Level 2. Approximately a quarter of our children did not return to kindergarten their parents citing they would return when we went to Level 1.