



# A Froebelian practice guidance paper

## Deep Level Engagement with Nature

### Introduction

This guidance paper foregrounds our Froebelian practice-based research on children's **Deep Level Engagement with Nature** using one of the four inter-connected lenses explored across three years by the Froebel Partnership: **Context: Space/Time/Seasons**. The importance of young children's engagement with nature is a core principle of Froebelian philosophy and practice (Tovey, 2020) and our Partnership work foregrounded this in its first year of action. In 2020 we had researched young children's voices on Covid (Pascal et al, 2021) and found that the children appeared to prefer being in outdoor spaces; appeared to be more tuned into the natural world; that parents had a deeper appreciation of the importance of the natural world; that educators felt more at peace and safer outside. This initial study, which was led by the children's experiences and ideas, paved the way for some of the core themes explored in this element of the Froebelian Partnership work, exemplifying the participatory nature of our approach.

These practice guidance notes give a specifically Froebelian perspective through which to explore and understand the value of children's deep Engagement with Nature and how this is supported and enhanced by Froebelian practice.

Before zooming in to explore children's Engagement with Nature using Lens 1 of our Froebelian reflective lenses (**Context: Space/Time/Seasons**), it is important to contextualise this lens within our holistic reflective approach which promotes 4 lenses, as set out in the Froebel Partnership document, **Reflection with Guidance, a Froebelian tool for developing practice and transformation'** (Froebel Partnership, 2024) The Reflection with Guidance tool has been developed by Froebelians and has 4 lenses which guide reflection on practice. Each lens connects to the others to form an holistic approach to reflection on practice and are:

1. Context: Space/Time/Seasons
2. Actions, Actors and Relatedness.
3. The network of development and learning
4. Transformations

### The importance of Engagement with Nature

There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the value of humans' connectedness to the natural world (Barragan-Jason et al, 2023) and its capacity to improve mental and physical health (Mental Health Foundation 2021). Many studies reveal the benefits of children engaging with nature, and the positive impact of being outdoors and feeling the effect of sun, rain, wind and stillness, all helping to regulate emotion, mood and stimulate cognition. Yet, we are in danger of losing that connectivity, as David Attenborough (2020, p125) has noted, *"We have moved from being a part of nature to being apart from nature."*

It is through real life and natural world experiences that children learn about the connectedness of all living things. These experiences deepen their awareness of and thinking about the urgent issues confronting us about the environment, climate change and how to live sustainably into the future. As Tovey (2022) points out, *"We have a crisis in our relationship with nature. Children are increasingly disconnected from the natural world and their access to green and wild spaces is rapidly declining. We are discovering the devastating impact of human activity on our world"*. We agree that addressing this crisis should be an urgent pre-occupation for all who are involved in the education of children.

In a post-Covid world where we have greater numbers of emotionally troubled children and stressed families, we need to ensure our early years settings provide for flourishing and wellbeing as well as fulfilment in children's learning and development (Pascal and Bertram, 2023a; 2023b). Fulfilment and achievement are important but can often lead to hurried and harried lives where performativity and catch up/recovery of children predominates educational discourse. Flourishing is a deeper process of feeling good and functioning to the maximum of our capabilities. It is a vital condition for wellbeing at all stages in life. For children it includes a life in which joy, love and trust are nurtured, and where every child is given time to develop the skills to connect to, and interact with others, experiencing both autonomy and empathy. It is evident that promoting flourishing should be a key mission in our work with young children and our Froebelian work takes this mission seriously.

**Time** is a precious commodity in enabling flourishing and wellbeing but is in short supply and, as Alison Clark reveals in her study exploring slow pedagogies for the Froebel Trust, we need to reconsider how time is experienced by both children and educators in our early childhood settings. Clark asks two important questions that lead her to promote a slow pedagogy supporting an unhurried child (Clark, 2022):

*Are we asking young children and those who work with young children to run ever faster to maintain their place and ours in the world?*

*What alternatives are there to be reclaimed, rooted in early childhood traditions, pedagogies and practices?*

Our Partnership work has also addressed questions about how space, time and seasons are experienced in early childhood settings. We contend that these contextual influences sculpt how children and educators experience and consume their world.

## **Froebel's Philosophy and Thinking**

In our work, the ideas of Friedrich Froebel and creator of the kindergarten, are significant. As Tovey points out, *"He saw the kindergarten as a garden for children, a place where children can develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults"* (Tovey, 2022). **Engagement with Nature** is central to Froebel's philosophy which promotes that children should immerse themselves regularly in the natural world. He believed that playing outdoors daily and exploring the garden and the wild, natural environment was vital for children's wellbeing and understanding of nature. *"The child should experience nature 'in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour."* (Froebel in Lilley, 1967).

In our work to support Engagement with Nature, the role of the interested and engaged educator is key and Tovey's words provide an important reminder that *"Froebel believed that merely spending time in nature is not enough – aspects can just pass us by. What better way to engage with the wonder of nature than in close relationship with someone else, who shares an enthusiasm and curiosity about nature and who can inspire and support children's enquiries."* (Tovey, 2021). As Froebel stated, *"Children feel themselves drawn towards the spiritual in nature, but unless these yearnings be welcomed and strengthened by their elders, either they die away or they lose their confidence in those whom they should respect."* (Froebel 1912, p.101). We note the central role of the educator in Froebel's writing, *"Teachers should regularly take their classes out of doors – not driving them out like a flock of sheep or leading them as if they were a company of soldiers but walking with them...and making them more familiar with whatever Nature or the season offers."* (Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.146)

The deep relationship between children and nature is fundamental to Froebel's philosophy and also to our Partnership work. Our research has shown that this first lens of Space, Time and Seasons allows us to critically reflect on and understand better children's Engagement with Nature, offering a means to interrogate and develop our pedagogic strategies to enhance connectivity between human actions and the wellbeing of ourselves and the natural world.

## Underpinning Concepts

All actions and interactions occur in a context. The **context** in which the learning and teaching occurs has many dimensions. In this Practice Guidance we are focusing particularly on concepts of **Space, Time and Seasons** which help us understand how the context is sculpted. A short definition of these concepts are set out below:

**1. Space/Place:** The space and place of the action we are reflecting on may be inside or outside and will often include human and non-human elements and both natural and manufactured materials which together create a learning environment. Penetito's (2009) theories around place-based education (PBE) also look at connectedness and unity of the education space or place with its local area and community. Place-based education is an approach that takes a setting's geographic location as a context for learning. Place-based education can happen anywhere – wherever your inquiry takes you. Place-based education can help us to localise our curriculum by giving children a sense of responsibility and affiliation for their surrounding environment, community and region. In addition, Penetito (2009) has stated that at a practical level PBE sets out to answer two fundamental questions: *'What is this place?'* and *'What is our relationship with it?'*

**2. Time and Temporality:** Time is the constant unfolding of life and events that progress from the past, through the present into the future. Temporality has a subjective element and refers to the way time is experienced. Temporality is studied acknowledges both the human perception of time and the social organisation of time.

**3. Seasonality:** Seasonality is a characteristic of time and experiences that occur at regular and predictable intervals every calendar year. Any pattern of experience that is predictable and repeats over a one-year period is said to be seasonal. Shorter time intervals can also be seen to have seasonality in that they can have a daily pattern, a weekly pattern, and an annual pattern. As recent research has shown, *"For a deeply meaningful learning experience we need to follow the seasons and understand the way they influence our own rhythms, feelings, thoughts, actions and, more importantly, relationships in the world."* (Cree cited in Casey, Richardson and d'Ascoli 2019, p. 6)

**4. Rhythm and Pace:** The human body is infused with rhythmical processes, such as respiration, heartbeat and circadian cycles. The rhythm of life is a way of living that ensures that our needs, desires, and talents are brought into harmony with each other. Routines are different being regular, repeated patterns within life. Children experience different rhythms in every environment they experience on a daily basis. Pace highlights the speed at which changes and events occur. It can go fast or slow and all actions have phases at which the pace might quicken or slow down. Envelopes of experience benefit from both fast and slow sections.

## Research Fascinations and Interests (Foregrounding Engagement with Nature)

The practice-led research carried out by the Froebel Partnership in 2021-2022 particularly foregrounded Engagement with Nature. Both educators and researchers view their work together as a partnership and this partnership working is built on Froebelian principles. This work has grown organically from what has been learned by the children, families and educators as they lived through their daily encounters with each other and the space they inhabited together. For example, this focus in our work grew from our first joint project of listening to young children's stories during Covid in which we became sharply aware of the need to develop a deeper understanding of, and pedagogy to support, children's Engagement with Nature (Pascal and Bertram, 2023a). We had discovered that children, families and educators gained much solace from being outside during and after the first lockdown. Thus, educators and researchers spent several months exploring, documenting, reflecting on and considering these fascinations and interests.

- What is the season and timing of the experience?
- What are the location and spatial characteristics – shape, size, terrain, layout?
- What are the natural and fabricated elements/resources available (human, non-human, natural, fabricated)?
- What time is available to different actors in the place/space/occupation?

- How do actors (child and adult) use their time?
- What is the rhythm/pace/tempo of actions – slow/fast/sustained/interrupted?
- What temporal/seasonal changes can you identify?
- What transformations in learning and development, including child and adult wellbeing, can be seen?

Some examples of the documentation and analyses of practice supporting children’s Engagement with Nature are offered below as exemplification of our Reflection with Guidance process.

## Practice Narratives and Analysis of Children’s Engagement with Nature in the Nursery Woodland Garden

The following and analyses of children’s Engagement with Nature in the **Nursery Woodland Garden** demonstrate:

- How these experiences are shaped by Space, Time and Seasons.
- What fascinates children, captures their attention and leads them to thinking and action.
- How educators have supported and extended the children’s engagement.
- What educators have learned as a result of observing, documenting, analysing and reflecting on the child’s Engagement with Nature.
- How educators might further support and extend children’s Engagement with Nature.

Our research documented a series of videos and observations of the children exploring the **Woodland Garden** over a year from October 2021-July 2022 and was able to capture seasonal changes in the activities experienced. Over this time the children were free to explore the area, sometimes with an adult, sometimes with other children, sometimes as a group and sometimes alone. Each child narrative provided evidence of how the space was being experienced and explored by the children and the pedagogic possibilities that were in play through the adults’ pedagogic scaffolding. There is also some evidence of the impact of the space on the children and adults. In this Guidance we have summarised the learning from the research and illustrated it with examples of the children’s encounters with Nature. This professional learning is offered to stimulate further thinking and pedagogic action to support children’s Engagement with Nature.

The following narratives and analyses of children’s Engagement with Nature in the nursery **Woodland Garden** demonstrate:

- How these experiences are shaped by Space, Time and Seasons.
- What fascinates children, captures their attention and leads them to thinking and action.
- How educators have supported and extended the children’s engagement.
- What was learned and what transformations happen for the children and the educators.
- How educators might further support and extend children’s Engagement with Nature.

### How Space, Time and Seasons shaped experiences

#### Evidence

The Woodland Garden is a relatively large, wild area on the edge of the nursery campus and situated as part of the nursery garden and outdoor space. It is approached via a curving path through a grassed area leading down from the hard nursery landscaped area, and the path meanders through the outdoor garden area with several features within it, including a shed, a gazebo with a seahorse carved from a tree, and it is accessed through a gate. In the woodland area there are no fabricated or synthetic resources unless they are taken into the area by the children or staff.



As the year changes and seasons evolve the woodland area changes in leaf cover, ground cover and the natural fruits and seeds that are available. The flora and fauna also change. In summer the space is much greener, the trees in full leaf and fruits beginning to form on the apple and horse chestnut trees. The woodland path needs clearing more frequently as the brambles and stinging nettles grow quickly. (Not all brambles and nettles are removed as children are taught what creatures live on them). In summer this space provides shade in the afternoon so when the other gardens are in full sun this space is often used to escape the heat and strength of the sunshine.



The children who enter the area are generally given open access and freedom to explore the area and what is in it at their own pace and according to their own interests. The tempo and pace are dictated by the child and can be slow or fast with stillness and movement. The children are encouraged to take their time with whatever engages and captures their interest. There are usually fewer children there and so it is a quieter area of the outdoor nursery space.

## Analysis

**Spatial characteristics – shape, size, location and terrain:** The Woodland Garden is linked to the outside Nursery Garden by a path and a gate. It is a large, wild area of trees and undergrowth and has a curving path through it, with some features including a shed, a wooden gazebo and an open iron gazebo. The path goes through the trees and is overgrown in places as the undergrowth comes over it in the spring/summer.

**Natural elements/resources:** The Woodland Garden is full of natural elements, is not over-managed and has a wild feel to it. The flora and fauna (insects, birds) thrive in the space and the children have access to all parts of the area.

**Fabricated/synthetic elements/resources:** Apart from the structures and paths, there are no fabricated or synthetic elements, other than what the children and adults bring in e.g. magnifiers, cameras, tablet, pens, paper, books and rugs.

**Layout and design:** The layout is designed around the trees and undergrowth. The path curves around and through the area but the children are free to flow in and out of it all. It is designed to encourage exploration and risk and there are areas for sitting and areas for moving.

**What time is available to different actors in the place/space/occupation:** The adults and children access the area and spend time there in an unhurried way, with the children encouraged to stay until they are ready to leave and



their exploration is finished (other than nursery day routines). The adults accompanying the children stay with the children until they want to leave. The children are able to spend extended periods of time in the area (e.g. over an hour in one observation).

**How actors use their time in the place/space/occupation:** The overarching impression is one of children and educators having deep and extended temporal experiences. The children seem to dictate how long they are in the area, and even whether they enter the area or not when they come and when they leave. Once there they can take their time to explore the area in the way that captures them. There is space made when it is sunny for rugs and books, and time, space and equipment for deep looking and following through individual fascinations as an individual or as a group. The children can be still, or very physically active, but are always exploring and revealing their curiosity, sometimes out of their comfort zone, but helping each other to be in the place and space.

**The pace/tempo of actions – slow/fast/sustained/interrupted:** The pace/tempo is led by the children and the adult follows their leadership on pace and tempo, supporting fast and slow pedagogy and exploration. The children are given time to sustain their interest and explorations and come back over time again and again to repeat or extend their activity and explorations.

**Temporal/seasonal changes:** The Woodland Garden is in an active relationship with the children, and they with it, over the year. As the seasons change the woodland area is transformed and offers different affordances and experiences - the colours change, the flora and fauna change and the weather changes, offering a constant stream of new stimulation but within, what over time becomes, a familiar environment for the children. The experience of time in this space by both children and adults has a daily, monthly and seasonal rhythm to it with different activities happening according to time of day, weather and season.

## What the children and educators did

The Woodland Garden offered and hosted multiple relationships and inter-actions between the children and educators which are summarised in the five child narratives and our analyses of these below.

### Evidence

We present five Woodland Garden narratives which were documented by video, photographs and adult observations recorded in the woodland area over the year with different children and educators.

#### Narrative 1: January

It is raining and very wet and windy, and the trees are bare. Two children in wet weather gear run down the path to the gate where two other children wait and greet them. As they run they jump in the puddles on the path. They reach over to open the gate to go through together.



#### Narrative 2: March

A child with ASD diagnosis who generally prefers to stay indoors and is not interested in the 2-3s garden, took a route through the woodland garden which was mapped by the team. They indicate that he associates the gate to the woodland area to 'going home' as the same gate is used by parents to drop off and pick up. If taken to the woodland space he is generally

happy to explore and will use a 'sing song voice' once there. He doesn't get distressed. Maybe because it is quieter and fewer children. He is a very sensory child who tests things by 'tapping'. On this visit to the area he was taking twigs and tapping trees and branches. He tests the twigs on his teeth, he accessed the same route on the path over and over again, tapping his feet on the path. He took a route all the way round the area stopping to touch leaves and branches. On a subsequent visit in June he got distressed and stayed at the gate – he only stayed for a few minutes as he got distressed. He did not want to be there and showed it!

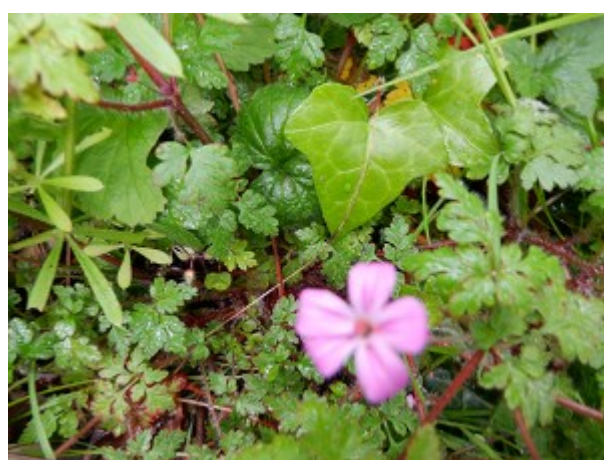
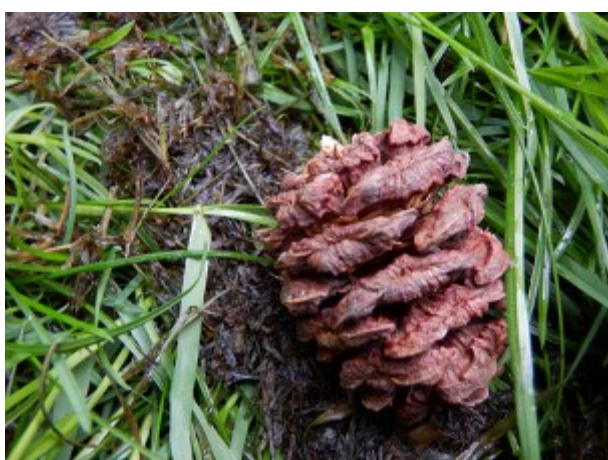


### Narrative 3: May

A series of close up photographs of flowers and pine cones were taken by the children who are very closely observing nature and wanting to record it. Another photo is of Ricky taking the photo of a flower, the flower was tiny and well hidden by the grass. Ricky stoops down low and focuses the camera, he checks what he is taking through the view finder. He patiently waits until he is satisfied and presses the button.



The other photographs reveal that the child who took them clearly knew how to use a camera "Arrh, my mummy's got one'...he looks at all the buttons on the camera. Crouching down he looks at the image and when he appeared to be happy with it he pressed the button. He photographs a pine cone and flower (both entirely his choosing). His little face was beaming as if he was so proud of being given this responsibility and autonomy. Along with being stunning photos it is clear this child is using prior knowledge and experience from observing his mother with a camera. So many links with Froebel: Unity and Connectedness, Engaging with Nature, Freedom with Guidance.



It took a while for the 2-3 year old children to understand how to work the camera, they pressed all the buttons at first and liked to hold it up to their ears and listen to the beeps that it made! Fingers tended to go over the lens but after a few attempts they began to get the idea of moving their finger out of the way. Ali takes a photo of Huw, follows him around the area. He follows Huw through the woodland path and stops at the wooden snake. "I see

snake" aims camera at the snake and takes photo. He is so confident now to go off on his own, still following Huw "Where he gone, what's that noise"? Ali quickly learnt how to keep his fingers out of the way and to centre the subject of the photo as can be seen in his photo of the wooden snake.

#### Narrative 4: June

The space is much greener, the trees are in full leaf and fruits are beginning to form on the apple and horse chestnut trees. The woodland path needs clearing more frequently as the brambles and stinging nettles grow quickly. (Not all brambles and nettles are removed as children are taught what creatures live on them). In summer this space provides shade in the afternoon so when the other gardens are in full sun this space is often used to escape the heat and strength of the sunshine. The children tend to lay on the grass and adults provide rugs to sit on and books are offered so that the children can sit quietly under trees.



#### Narrative 5: July

Three 3 year old children from 3-5's nursery explored the woodland garden one morning in summer. It was a cloudy and humid morning, and it started to rain. They took magnifying glasses and a tablet. The educator offered the tablet instead of the camera this time. She says, *'They were offered a tablet today as I felt they could use it easier and see through the viewfinder without turning anything off. I found the children got frustrated with the camera last time it was used and may have more experience with using a tablet at home. They did indeed know how to operate it with only a brief lesson.'*



They had fun sharing the photographs with others as it had a bigger screen. They were all excited to be able to go to the area with an educator they don't usually spend time with but know. Two children hold hands as they enter (nervous?). The educator asks about the weather.

One child lays on the grass as the rain falls on her face. The educator asks how it feels. She says *'It's cold and going on my eyes and nose'* (first hand sensory experience). The boys have run into the bushes, the girl gets up and follows. They are looking through the magnifiers and notice the rain has made spots on the glass, the boy notices and wipes it off with his sleeve. He continues to look at leaves and encourages other two children to join in (leadership and guidance). Then the boy suddenly runs to the path, the girl hangs back (needs reassurance from educator). The lead child finds a sticky plant and demands they all stop. The girl looks frightened and rigid and says *'I don't like it'*. The educator demonstrates that it sticks to clothing but does not hurt and encourages the children to touch it. They look at it through the magnifier and see the seed heads *'Look at all the claws'* (marvelling and totally immersed). The boy observes it at his own pace and understands they can hold it up and move past it. He holds it up for the other children and educator to move past and shows how to move sideways so it doesn't get you with the spikes. It takes the children and adult time to negotiate the path. The girl appears nervous and pulls at the educator's clothes, she can see something and is frightened. *'Look a flying thing'*. It's a leaf hanging on a spider's web blowing in the wind. She says *'Is it a magic thing? It's a bit of a scary one'*. The educator encourages her to touch it and they do it together while the educator explains it's a leaf hanging on a web. They blow it but don't damage the web. The boys move on and take photographs of leaves, each other's feet (not leaves) and faces –



(humour as holding large magnifiers up to his eyes pretending they are his eyes). The lead boy hits a tree with the magnifier which shocks the other boy who says he shouldn't hurt the tree 'It's not nice.' The lead boy tells him to stop telling him that (self-management). The girl brings a daisy to the educator for a hole (making daisy chains previously). She then throws it down and states she wants to go back to the main nursery. She goes through the gate and heads back. The boys play hide and seek, a popular game in the space till they are ready to return.



The educator reflected, *'Because this area is not always on offer the children appeared excited to be 'chosen'. At first they may have appeared nervous but soon ran off to explore the area. I discovered that the lead boy showed empathy for others, helping them to overcome obstacles and offer encouragement and support. Some of the woodland path was overgrown and I wonder should we get the brambles trimmed all the time to ease access or should we leave some so that the children are challenged to move them themselves and find ways of moving through?'*

## Analysis

**Pedagogues/practitioners who use or interact with the place/space/occupation:** All the child narratives show one adult accompanying a small group of children (max 4/5) or a single child and following the children's lead in interacting with the space appropriately.

**Children who use or interact with the place/space/occupation:** The children from all areas in the nursery have access to the Woodland Area with an adult. They choose to enter or leave the space. Sometimes they come as an individual with the adult and sometimes as a small group.

**Other adults who use or interact with the place/space/occupation:** No other adults appeared to use this space other than the educator accompanying the children. Parents were often at the gate to the area as it is the nursery dropping off and pick up point but did not appear to enter the woodland area with the children in the curated narratives.

**Those actors who choose not to use the place/space/occupation:** Children elected to enter the woodland space and could enter and leave at their own choice. Children who were brought to the area and expressed that they wanted to leave were acknowledged and responded to. Some children liked the space on some days and not on others. No evidence on the children or adults who did not choose to enter the area.

**How the educators spend time in the place/space/occupation:** The educators all adopted a facilitative and supportive pedagogic role, supporting children's emotional responses, intellectual curiosities and helping them with equipment and to execute their intentions. Their actions were led by the children in most instances. The educators very much follow the children's lead in what captures their interest. We observed no example of a pre-planned activity by the adult though they did supply resources e.g. tablet, magnifiers, camera. The educator focuses on reassuring the children, encouraging them and supporting their exploration of the woodland space. There was no formal or direct teaching but we did see intentional pedagogic interactions.

**How the children spend time in the place/space/occupation:** The children interact with each other, the natural world flora and fauna, the weather and the seasons. The children observed have all chosen to enter the woodland space and interact with it in an individual and group way, sometimes deeply immersed in observing and documenting with magnifiers and cameras, and finding things, sometimes relaxing with a book on a rug and

sometimes playing with each other and the materials found in the environment. The children express a range of emotions when in the woodland area, including delight, surprise, fear, courage, anger, and peace.

**How the different actors relate to each other:** The children and educators were interacting with the natural environment and each other in all the observations in a close and engaged relationship. Each actor had an individual response but appeared to be connected to and responsive to the others, and to the environment. A deep sense of connectivity was documented, with close and physical contact between actors and the environment and what was in it.

**How the different actors relate to the place/space/occupation:** The children and educators were interacting with the natural environment and each other in all the observations in a close and engaged relationship. A deep sense of connectivity was documented, with close and physical contact between actors and the environment and what was in it.

**The affordances for learning and development the actors pursue:** There were infinite affordances (Gibson, 1979) for learning and development in the woodland area in all EYFS Areas of Learning. For some children it was the **PSED**, courage, self-management, leadership, social and emotional learning as they coped with exploring the wild and natural area alone and together and which was full of surprises and unexpected experiences as well as familiar paths and areas. **Language and communication** flowed as the space offered much sensory and cognitive stimulation, with vocabulary and expression of feelings language very clear. **Physical development** was also evident with opportunities for the children to climb, balance, run, handle small and large objects etc. Books were available for reading (**Literacy**). **Maths** affordances were everywhere with counting, shape, space etc. Many children were drawn to the wealth of learning available about **Exploring the World** with Science, natural history, and cycles of life in flora and fauna, including the weather. **Technology** was there with cameras and magnifiers and tablets, as was **Creative development** as they composed stories and pictures and photographs.

**The 'connectedness' of previous, current and future fascinations and actions:** The children came to the woodland area as often as they wished and so could repeat and build on and extend their previous learning and develop fascinations over extended periods of time. There was evidence of children connecting their woodland experiences with other nursery experiences and experiences at home.

## What transformations happened

### Evidence

**Mental and physical health and wellbeing/Fulfilment:** We have documented both children and adults being calm, immersed, deeply involved and active, indicating mental and physical wellbeing.

**Child learning and development (EYFS areas):** The narratives reveal that all 7 areas of learning (and more) are being experienced and assimilated by the children and reveal deep levels of involvement and so we can surmise deep level learning occurring.

**Characteristics of effective teaching and learning (CoETL):** All the narratives display examples of children displaying some or all of the three categories of CoETL.

**Practitioner learning and development:** The practitioners active in these narratives are learning from, and with, the children and we can see their professional learning developing over the year, along with their reflections on their own pedagogic approach and the possibilities the woodland area has to offer.

**Developments of child and adults over time:** The sequencing of observations and visual images over the year reveal both children and adults developing in what they do in the woodland area, how the experience unfolds and how enriched the interactions become once the children and adult understand the need to benefits of slowing down and looking more carefully and handling, feeling and experiencing the natural environment and the rich resources, both flora and fauna, that are within it. The summer experiences seem more relaxed and intense than the winter and spring ones, which are more physically exploratory, while we often get slowed down, engrossed, reflective immersion in the summer narratives.

## Analysis

An analysis of how time spent in the outdoor place/space/occupation impacts on both children and adults reveals some important transformations that are occurring in the Woodland Garden space.

**Mental and physical health and wellbeing/fulfilment:** These narratives capture high levels of wellbeing amongst the children. The Woodland Garden drew the children in during all weathers and seasons. Children who didn't like other outdoor areas in the nursery enjoyed the woodland area and calmed when they were there suggesting a therapeutic process enhancing child and adult wellbeing. Children enjoyed the freedom to explore at their own pace and according to their own interests and fascinations and enjoyed the attentiveness of the adult or the freedom to be away from scrutiny.

**Child learning and development (EYFS areas):** The Woodland Garden offered holistic and unified opportunities to experience, learn and develop capacity in all areas of learning (see above), plus much more, such as enhanced awareness of sustainability challenges, heightened spiritual development, and especially development in the Prime areas of EYFS. However, it is important to note that it is the broad and unified learning and development opportunities that characterise the learning opportunities in the Woodland Garden and the fact that there is continual dynamic change and stimulation in the area – it is never the same twice!

**Characteristics of effective teaching and learning:** Overall, the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning focus on the processes of learning, the thinking that is applied and the attitudes that are being displayed. The characteristics are split into three categories:

- Playing and Exploring – engagement
- Active Learning – motivation
- Creating and Thinking Critically – thinking

**Playing and Exploring:** Playing and Exploring is all about how the child engages in learning. It can be broken down into three further areas: Finding out and exploring; Playing with what they know; Being willing to 'have a go'.

**Active Learning:** The characteristic Active Learning should not be mistaken for physical activity. Active learning centres on how the child is motivated in their learning. It covers three main areas: Being involved and concentrating; Keeping on trying; Enjoying achieving what they set out to do.

**Creating and Thinking Critically:** This characteristic is all about children thinking, making choices, seeing connections between different skills and making sense of their experiences and interactions. It looks at how children are able to adapt their approaches when they cross stumbling blocks and how they link ideas and previous experiences. It covers the following three areas: Having their own ideas; Using what they know to learn new things; Choosing ways to do things and finding new ways.

All three categories are evidenced in the way the children are engaging in the affordances offered in the Woodland Garden, demonstrating that children are developing the attributes to become effective learners, especially being able to develop their capacity to play and explore; becoming an active learner and thinking creatively and critically.

The pedagogic approach is geared to encourage the development of these capacities in the children, especially supporting child agency, curiosity, experimentation, exploration, risk taking and concentration.

**Adult educator learning and development:** Some children are engrossed and appear to largely ignore the adult educator, who often demonstrates a capacity to learn with and from the children, allowing them self to be the child's companion, to be 'led' by them and fully engaged in their deep fascinations and preoccupations. The educators also seem to develop their confidence in trusting the children to lead the learning and activity as the year progressed and the children's confidence and competence developed, seeing more possibilities in the affordances the space offers.

**Developments of child and adult educators over time:** The main transformation we can see in both the children and the adult educators is a growing confidence to allow the environment to guide them and teach them, and let the learning flow from the interaction between human and non-human resources. We can also see both adult educators and children becoming aware of the affordances and how they change in the Woodland Garden. The activities documented develop over the year to become more focused and this leads to a deeper immersion and more intimate relationship with the natural world. The growth in confidence to take more risks, become more exploratory, both individually and in a group, and to lead self (educator and child) and other children, is exemplified in the narratives.

## **What was learned** (with reference to the Froebel principles: Tovey, 2020)

**Freedom with guidance:** The evidence reveals lots of freedom for the children to explore using agency and with encouragement for independence. The adult was present as a support and to ensure they were operating within the boundaries required to keep them safe and emotionally secure. They were encouraged to explore the space but within a supportive group, and helped to do challenging things for themselves, such as going down an overgrown path, looking at scary insects and plants, climbing trees and balancing on tree trunks, splashing in wet puddles. Children could make their own choices within the area from an infinite range of options. The materials were by their essence open-ended and natural and adults listened to and respected children's voices, choices and thinking. The children were also encouraged to respond to the feelings and desires of individuals and others in the group.

**Unity, connectedness and community:** This principle suggests that learning should be connected to the children's own lives and experienced as a meaningful whole so can connect ideas to what they already know. This means beginning with the child's own interests, experiences and understandings and build on these. In the woodland garden the children were free to use their agency and to connect with what had gone on before and afterwards. The children built on their experiences of previous visits and experiences both at home and in nursery and of previous use of technology and magnifiers. They were also encouraged to feel a part of the natural world and engage deeply with it and also part of the community of children who were together there in joint adventures (exploring overgrown paths) and joint games (hide and seek).

**Engaging with nature:** This principle suggests that children should experience nature in all its aspects, form, energy, substance, sound and colour. Each vignette displays the children engaging with nature in this way. We see them observing nature closely and marvelling at it, with adults supporting this, we see them having opportunities to care for the living things in the woodland area and learn about life cycles. They collect seeds and explore them, they build dens, and explore the nature of the natural materials in the woodland, and have unlimited opportunities to visit the woodland area.

**Learning through self-activity and reflection:** This principle suggests that learning through real life and agentic doing is much stronger and deeper than through verbal communication. In the woodland area everything is first hand and hands on, with the children touching, smelling, feeling, hearing and seeing their real world and in time

experiences in the woodland area. The power of this is evident in their immersion and deep engagement in each vignette and the extended time they are given to explore and experiment. The material is almost exclusively natural and open-ended and adults are partners in the exploration, valuing what the children do. The children can revisit previous experiences and are encouraged to reflect by sensitive dialogue with each other and the adults. We can also see the children working together to solve a problem and helping each other when there are struggles.

**The central importance of play:** This principle suggests that play is the highest level of child development and is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling. It is not trivial but deeply significant. The activity in the Woodland Garden meets some of Bruce's 12 features (1991; 2023) for childhood play (Froebel Partnership, 2024, Bruce et al, 2023) in that the experiences are:

1. First hand
2. No external pressure
3. Process without end product
4. Intrinsically motivated, self-propelling
5. Possible, imaginative worlds from literal to abstract
6. Function in advance of what they can actually do
7. Not adult led always
8. Can be solitary
9. In partnership with adult or other children
10. Wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships
11. Showing technical prowess, mastery and competence
12. Providing an integrating mechanism

In the narratives of children exploring the area we can see many of these features in action but it is useful to reflect on what layers of play we can see (Froebel Partnership, 2024).

**Creativity and the power of symbols:** This principle is about children representing their own ideas in their own way. Not about copying or assembling adult-designed artefacts or outlines. The woodland area offers many first hand experiences to stimulate children to talk, document, collect and represent. The children have access to magnifiers to help them closely observe, record through technology (tablet, camera) and are free to create representations of what they see, hear and experience. They are free to play, imagine and take risks. They appear to like to collect and record for later reflection and immediate consideration.

**Knowledgeable and nurturing educators:** This principle suggests that the educators with the children should nurture and support children's growing potential as autonomous, agentic, thinking, creative learners. In every vignette the adults listened to and respected children's voices and choices and thinking. The relationships were warm, respectful and attentive, encouraging interaction with the environment and each other, and not interfering or dominant. They also shared the awe and wonder with the children.

## Our Research Findings

There is a wealth of learning within this study of children's and educators' Engagement in Nature which are offered to stimulate thinking and future practice development.

### 1. The transformational power of outdoor spaces in different cultural and geospatial locations and viewed through a lens of temporality and seasonality

There is a wonderful overarching narrative in the sequence of individual narratives of how the Woodland Garden space changes over the seasons and how time is slowed and speeded up by the children and adults as they spend time in the area. The children seem capable of spending long extended periods of time in the Woodland Garden and to repeat these experiences and extend and build on them when they return. The weather is also a clear factor

in changing the nature of experience and contributes to the dynamic of what occurs. The Woodland Garden is constantly in a state of change, growth, life and decay and over the year it provides the children with a real experience of time and change in the natural world, and also of continuity and return.

## **2. The unlimited and unlimiting 'affordances' available in the outdoor spaces and how these continually evolve and change**

The ever-changing nature of the Woodland Garden provides a myriad of affordances for all who enter it and the children clearly are enraptured by the possibilities it offers them. They do not appear overwhelmed by these options but rather to relish finding their own way and aspects that they wish to take an interest in and explore further. The Woodland Garden also offers new and different opportunities for the children to interact with each other and themselves. There is a unity and richness in the learning opportunities, with all areas of learning and CoETL amply supported through the experiences the children gain.

## **3. The varied pattern of who accesses the outdoor spaces and how it is experienced**

The Woodland Garden is accessed by all children at different times and in different groupings, generally small groups or individuals with an adult educator who is led by them and operates to support and facilitate rather than direct and lead the children, encouraging child led and spontaneous actions and interactions within the space. Children of all ages and developmental stages from 2-4 years of age access the area at different times of the day and year. The experience seems to be one of pace, rhythm and harmony, with few conflicts and much expression of capacity and strength from the children. The experience seems to enable high levels of concentration, persistence, creativity, curiosity and problem-solving in real world, natural, outdoor spaces where surprises and affordances happen continually.

## **4. The complexity and range of skilful and sustained learning actions and interactions occurring in the outdoor spaces between adults and children**

The adult educators display high levels of professional confidence when in this outdoor space and a capacity to scaffold, support, model, respond and demonstrate knowledge, understanding and confidence to encourage the children to be agentic, confident and active learners. They scaffold and support/facilitate rather than directly teach, using language and modelling to lead the children's learning when it is appropriate. The encouragement of language, sustained dialogues, reflection and silences in the children is demonstrated in the narratives. The 'being with' and 'extending in and outwardly' are clearly helping the child make their inner world outer.

## **5. The depth of learning and development transformations, including child and educator wellbeing**

We can see the children developing over the year in all areas of learning, and especially the prime areas, in their exploration of the Woodland Garden. Both staff and children demonstrate states of wellbeing in the most part, and where there is distress it is supported and expressed appropriately and responded to. Lots of joy and wonder and awe with children experiencing the power of the natural world to teach, sooth and stimulate offers much to reflect on when we consider the power of regular Engagement in Nature.

## **6. The deep potential of Engaging with Nature over time and seasons**

The Woodland Garden is revealed to be astonishingly rich in opportunity for deep level learning and also helping children and educator mental and physical health and wellbeing. It is a dynamic and inspiring place to spend time and seems to enable children to experience freedom and agency in their lives, and the power of nature to teach and reach the inner self and extend the child's world in a way that fabricated, synthetic environments cannot. All Froebelian principles are evident as children and adults enter, experience and leave the space. There is a different experience offered through a more temporal and seasonal experience which changes the sense of time and timing and offers models of thriving in the natural world which the children absorb and come back to again and again. The educators seem also to be able to offer the children

more freedoms and less boundaries in this space, encouraging the children to be more exploratory, creative and autonomous and to take more risks, both physically and cognitively. The impact of this space on the nursery experience for both adults and children is deep and profound, as displayed by the desire to return again and again, and the children's complete immersion and involvement in their activity in the space. Relationships between the children, the adults and the natural world are deepened and extended by the time spent in the Woodland Garden.

## 7. Looking back and then ahead

The central place of accessing outdoor and natural space in every child's nursery experience could be further reflected upon. Conserving the child's freedoms in this space are really important and the urge to over-structure and direct the experience should be resisted. The power of experiencing the elements and accessing the space in all weathers is clear and perhaps child sized and height shelters where children could sit and watch and reflect within the area could be introduced, like the cosy places in the indoor nursery.

## Summary of Research Findings

- The natural world is richer and more dynamic encouraging exploratory, sensory and deep level affordances for children.
- Outdoors provides more opportunity for slow, paced, and so transformative experiences.
- Adults give more children more time (languor) and a slower and more intense pace of experience when outdoors.
- Outdoor experiences throughout the year provide seasonal experiences which embed a sense of longer time.
- First-hand, real-life, practical experiences in the natural world and through the seasons are vital for both children and adults to flourish and have wellbeing.
- Children experience greater freedoms when outdoors.
- Learning is more 'holistic' and integrated across all areas of learning.
- Adult and child wellbeing are enhanced through daily outdoor experiences.
- Language and vocabulary of child and adult is more expressive and emotive when children are outdoors.
- Adults are more 'companionable' when outdoors, guiding and 'being with' rather than directing.
- Children's involvement and engagement is longer and deeper (more connected) when outdoors.
- Children enjoy being in their own company as well as being with others.
- There is more joy expressed when adults and children are outdoors.

## Froebelian Practice Prompts

### Engaging with Nature requires educators and children to:

- Spend time every day outside- don't let the weather put you off but let it act as a 'magnet' to pull you outside.
- Let activities and experiences 'unfold' – trust the children and the natural world to work magic!
- Guard against over planning or over directing explorations but encourage supportive and facilitative interactions.
- Be 'close to' but not 'too close'.
- Encourage emotion and expressive action.
- Have the space and opportunities for both solitude and interaction.

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