



A Froebelian practice guidance paper: Gifts and Occupations

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Introduction

This guidance paper foregrounds the development of Froebel's Occupations within our settings in England and New Zealand in collaboration with researchers at CREC. The Occupations were developed by individuals and smaller groups within the wider community of practice and this collective wisdom evolved as children's learning stories were analysed through *Reflection with Guidance*. In considering the **context** of the learning story, the **actors** and actions, as well as the **development of learning**, researchers and educators were able to focus on **transformations**.

Contextualising Occupations

Froebel's Gifts and Occupations were central to his educational philosophy. This series of practical resources and activities, along with printed practice guidance, supported educators in their work with the children much like the curriculum materials of today. Originally Froebel outlined a developmental progression through these purposefully designed Gifts and subsequent Occupations that provided investigative and creative opportunities. Gifts started as simple cloth balls on string and progressed through wooden 3d shapes to sets of blocks; the gifts support children's developing understanding of unity as they could be taken apart and then put back together again, for example the blocks are presented whole within a box, they are taken out and used as parts before being put back in the box: whole, part, whole. As well as supporting children's understanding of unity, the gifts provided freedom with guidance and the opportunity for self-activity; when used by knowledgeable educators that do not constrain or overly prescribe, the possibilities for children become apparent.

"When Froebel focused on the education of pre-school age children, he realized that children at this age, because they could only progress into intelligent human beings by their own actions, needed to be supplied with materials which would encourage self-activity. This is not merely an exercise in providing toys, but a matter of making available mathematically structured material from which and with which children could learn: materials with which to externalise whatever occupied their minds most and with which to demonstrate those areas in which they were supremely confident and able."

(Liebschner, A Child's Work, 1992, p.71)

The Occupations were then developed to follow the Gifts and include sewing, weaving, clay, woodwork and cooking (all illustrated in this practice guidance) as well as activity such as paper folding or pricking and parquetry (not considered here). There are clear links between the lines and forms of the gifts and the possibilities of the Occupations, but Froebel did not provide the same level of guidance in his writing about these aspects rather leaving educators to encourage self-activity and promote freedom with guidance within these tasks.

Froebel's focus on Occupations sits within a historical time and rural context, but there is a continuing relevance in enabling children to explore the connections within the Occupations. Encouraging children to engage in the Occupations such as woodwork, clay, cooking, and sewing provides opportunities to better understand the land on which they are living (SDG15) as well as sustainable consumption (SDG12).

This focus on the Occupations for The Froebel Partnership might better be described as *in the spirit of Froebel* and perhaps more reflective of their contemporary use. Children's engagement in these Occupations results from their own interests and from the possibilities prepared by their knowledgeable educators.

In engaging with the Occupations, the children experience practical activity and engage in a process involving the

development of their skills. The practical nature of such activity provides important opportunities and makes provision of this type especially appropriate for meeting the needs of a diverse range of children. Typically, the Occupations utilise natural or recycled objects and children engage using authentic tools and materials. The development of projects through the Occupations can take time and the focus can provide protected space for educators to guide:

'the human being is always in relationships and every association is formative.' (Froebel in Lilley, 1967 p. 23).

The Te Whariki framework for early education states that Kaiako (teachers) are the key resource in any ECE service, and in England, the Early Years Foundation Stage acknowledges the role of positive relationships in supporting learning and development. Educators' primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy. In refining our Froebelian practice, we were reminded of the explicit and intentional nature of the Occupations as expressed through Froebel's concept of Freedom with Guidance.

The following Occupations were selected by educators for development and then embedded within continuous provision at our sites in New Zealand and England. Educators documented their own progress through reflections as well as that of the children.

Woodwork and carpentry

Woodwork provides children with the opportunity to develop across a range of physical, cognitive and socio-emotional areas; Pete Moorhouse (Froebel pamphlets) has outlined for educators the range of ways woodwork can support children from personal development to mathematical thinking and his resource provided guidance for educators within the Froebel Partnership.

Woodwork stations were developed in outdoor areas and furnished with recycled materials and real, but appropriately sized, tools such as hammers and saws. Educators were keen to develop their own skills in this area and undertook additional professional development that supported both the practicalities of safety considerations and the underpinning Froebelian philosophy. The significant consideration given to health and safety was shared with the children and their families; ratios of children to educators were kept low and children understood the need for safety goggles etc.

The children's time in the woodwork area was often self-selected and open ended focusing on the development of skills and following their own imaginative impulses. Some children rehearsed hammering whilst others focused on measuring; all children able to return to their creations later if they so wished. High levels of sustained engagement and concentration were seen when children accessed this area of continuous provision and there was rarely the need for a finished item or artefact. The practitioners valued the opportunity for sustained time with the children in this area.

Practitioner reflections:

'As well as providing opportunities to extend the children's learning, woodwork also allows you to share in children's pride and sense of achievement in what they have done. The fact that you are right there alongside them through their struggles and successes makes you feel more involved in their journey.

I had some lovely conversations with families about them doing DIY at home and their children being interested in using tools. Two families told me that the child's grandfather was a carpenter and couldn't wait to share photos and stories about doing woodwork with them.'

'The Occupations have helped me to really understand the importance of quality time spent together with a child or small group of children. Because of the need for safety in woodwork, we are in a protected area which means there

are less distractions from other children or feeling that I should be 'doing' something. I can just focus on the Occupation and focus on the child. I have particularly noticed the benefit of this with some of the quieter children and also some of our children who have English as an additional language – children who may sometimes get a bit lost in the hurly burly of busy nursery life.'

'The Occupation of woodwork gives lots of opportunities for children, especially those with language delay and communication targets.'

Woodwork is exemplified through the following learning story from an educator in the England:

Exploring the tape measure



You visited the woodwork area a few times during the Spring Term, and you have been keen to come and have more turns this term. Today, you came along with your friend. Initially you began nailing some bottle lids to your wood. You had remembered how to hold the nail carefully with your right hand so you could use your left hand to hit it with the hammer. You got a bit frustrated trying to get the nail in far enough so that it would stay there, every time you turned your piece of wood over, the nails would fall out.

"It's so tricky...it's not in...it's wobbly" "I cannot do it, it is so hard!"

Your friend was hitting her nails very hard and getting them right into the wood, she kindly encouraged you, demonstrating how she was doing it and even offering to help you with yours. She was making a lot of noise with her hammer and you didn't seem to want to hit it that hard yourself, maybe you didn't like the very loud noise?

Then you spotted the tape measure and you began to experiment with that.

"I'm just checking" you said, lining it up carefully against the edge of the wood. You soon realised that if you let go, it would wind back in really quickly. This made you laugh and you repeated this lots and lots of times "Look! It has go in quick!"

You enjoyed looking at the numbers on the tape measure, sometimes saying different number names as you stretched the tape measure out against your piece of wood. "Oh it's 8!" "1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10" "7...6...8"

Perhaps next time you come over to the woodwork area you might like to try some of the other tools, such as the drill or screwdriver?

Sewing and Weaving

Like woodwork, sewing provides the children with first-hand experience and is embedded within our heritage and linked to broader sustainability. A recent Froebel Trust pamphlet by Sharon Imray, Tracy Thomson and Jane Whinnett shows sewing to support children across the range of physical, cognitive and socio-emotional aspects as

well as providing practical support to educators wishing to develop sewing within their setting. For settings within The Froebel Partnership the opportunity to engage in sewing and weaving was provided within continuous provision and a range of materials provided, often recycled or repurposed. Consideration was given to children's developmental needs and materials were selected to match, for example using larger and less flexible options such as pipe cleaners for weaving. The core skills of sewing were considered, and progression was planned for. Initially children would need to understand the concepts of in and out and action songs were used to support this such as 'In and out the dusty bluebells'. General fine motor development helps the children to build up the muscle and dexterity in their hands and this then supports early sewing. Using thinner materials or natural resources like leaves provides less resistance to the 'needle' as children begin to learn to sew. The skills of threading and cutting are also important and knowledgeable educators supported children in developing these skills and opportunities for rehearsal were provided within continuous provision. In sewing and weaving sessions extended opportunity was important; time was needed, and children were able to sustain their concentration.

There is an appreciation, in undertaking weaving and sewing, that children are developing a life skill, one that supports the sustainability of the planet. Practitioners were also keen to develop their own repertoire with this Occupation.

Practitioner reflection: *'As a teacher, I have always provided threading experiences for children but have not often thought about extending it to sewing. Since becoming a Froebelian Practitioner, I have thought more about the experiences I provide for children and sewing has been an Occupation I have wanted to embed.'*

Sewing is exemplified through the following learning story from an educator in New Zealand: **finger puppet.**

Today, H asked me if she could do some sewing. Sewing is an activity she loves and has been developing her skills in for a while now. I was thinking about making a finger puppet and I said maybe she would like to make one too. I didn't have to ask twice – she was very keen! I explained that it was going to take some time to make, and we had to start by making a pattern. H asked, "What's a pattern?" And I explained it was the plan of what you were making and would be the shape of it... And then H pinned her pattern to the piece of felt she had chosen. Time to cut around the pattern - H did an awesome job with this - she needed very little help.



Next steps - pinning the felt pieces together and sewing along the edges. H listened carefully to my instructions and began sewing her puppet together. I told her that the pins and needle were sharp, and they would hurt if they pricked her. This didn't put H off; she was determined to finish her puppet. Once it was all sewn, and it did take a little while, it was time to find things for the puppet's features. We found some eyes, a bead for the nose and we used some felt for the mouth. I asked H if her puppet needed hair and she said, "Of course it does - it's a girl puppet". She then selected some rainbow wool from the basket, and this became the hair - more sewing, just as well she's good at it!

We then moved to the kitchen area where the hot glue gun was set up and H again did an amazing job using the glue gun - with caution, it was hot, to glue on the eyes, mouth, and nose. She was surprised at how quickly the glue dried, and her puppet was finished and ready to play with. It looks very like the pattern she made.



Documenting the experience to share with her family her educator also wrote:

H, I hope you have lots of fun with your finger puppet this weekend. You worked so hard on it and I'm proud of you taking the time to make it. You are AWESOME my friend. Sewing is such a great learning activity but also a time to develop relationships. Sitting sewing next to each other is a companionable Occupation. Part of Froebel's principles is the central importance of play - Play is fundamental to children's learning but they do not learn everything through play. When children are sewing, the skills they learn support them to create props and costumes for play. H's prop led to some great creative and imaginative play with the little puppet shows that she and L put on for her friends. I loved that they incorporated their pattern into their play too.

I wonder what's next...

Kaiako - P

Practitioner reflections:

'Through the Occupations, teachers are realising that the process of making/creating is far more important than the product and much more learning goes into the process. We still celebrate the product if that is what the child is excited about but really emphasise the process when writing learning stories about it.'

Clay

Like woodwork and sewing, clay also provides an open-ended material that children can explore and create 2D and 3D form. As with the other Occupations there is a historical element to clay, as a universal building material, and a connection with the earth. It is a natural building material that allows children to develop physical skills, extend their creativity and represent their ideas. The Froebel trust pamphlet by Lucy Parker outlines ideas to support educators in embedding clay within their environment and provides exemplification as to how clay supports a range of developmental aspects.

In providing clay as part of continuous provision in the Froebel Partnership setting in New Zealand, the children have the opportunity to connect with this natural resource over time. Initially getting to know the resource, children are given time to explore the textures and response of the clay. Tools were then added later as it is important the children have the opportunity to feel this resource with their bare hands and experience how this material can change.

Clay is exemplified through the following learning story from one of our New Zealand educators:

Concentration

I remember one time I suggested some clay from our clay table for you to try play with. Though it doesn't spin like your locker tag, I'm aware at times, you like to look closely into the small toys you bring to kindy and clay might just

do that job. With that in mind, I gave you a lump of clay. No, you preferred two, grabbing it yourself, then squeezing them together while looking closely at it until they were one. You placed it on your chin next. I wonder how that felt for you, buddy? Your friend then arrived to show you how to cut it with a slicing tool. Loving your attentive gaze during this! Instead, you chose to push holes on the clay with your thumbs and repeat this for a long time. During the experience, you also experimented by poking the clay so much, it pulled it apart to small pieces. To which, you persevered to mould it together and stretch it again.



My friend, you have fully captured what interacting with our kindergarten's Froebelian philosophy; appreciating the resource for itself and making meaning from it for yourself. I commend you on this newfound skill and of course, your sustained focus throughout. Ka pai, big boy!

Kaiko

The journey with clay is ongoing as educators and children continue to experiment.

Practitioner reflection: *'The clay set up still requires supervision from a teacher as some children enjoy rolling small balls of clay, only to be placed in the "clay glue" container or the water trough outside. It seems that they become intrigued of the clay's and water's properties when both are mixed together.'*

Cooking

Like woodwork, sewing and clay, cooking makes use of natural materials and supports children in a range of physical, cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Cooking provides a first-hand experience for the children and provides the opportunity to link directly to nature and their community. Growing their own food from seed provides a connection to the natural world and supports children in understanding the importance of caring for nature.

The Froebel Trust pamphlet by Anna Denton and Lucy Parker provides support for those wanting to cook with young children and offers practical advice on where to begin. They also illustrate how cooking can support all areas of learning as it embodies all Froebelian principles.

At Froebel Partnership settings in England and New Zealand cooking became a regular activity and educators planned for the development of the required skills by embedding opportunities within continuous provision. Both settings provided mud-kitchens as a space for children to engage in their own self-directed activity using some of those same real tools as they would find within their cooking activity. Unlike the other Occupations, cooking within the daily routine works towards an end product, often times enjoyed by everyone and sometimes sent home with children.

The range of recipes tried over the year developed as educators became more confident and educators tried to ensure that the children were able to make use of their own harvest in the cooking activities presented.

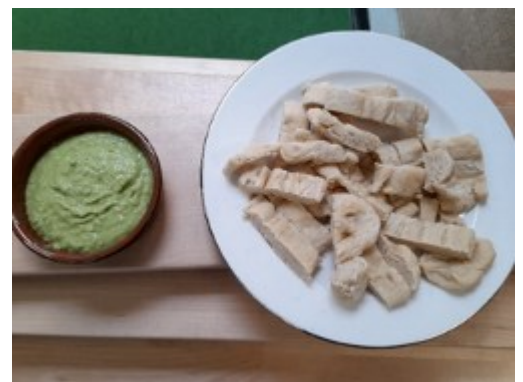
Cooking is exemplified through the following learning story from an educator in England:

Broad Bean Dip

You have previously been very keen to get involved with cooking. Therefore, when I asked if you would like to help make a broad bean dip you were very happy. We went into the kitchen garden and you listened carefully as we talked about just picking the bigger pods.

While we were picking the broad beans you stopped to tell me that “Mummy and Daddy get their broad beans from the supermarket, they didn’t grow them.” You then made the connection to what we were doing as you told me “...at Nursery we have grown the beans”.

Back in Nursery we had great fun getting the beans out of the pod. You were aware that you needed to pick the pods that were still closed and had bumps in them. You concentrated so hard to make sure you got all the beans out of each pod. You used your fingers to snap the end of the pod. You then carefully peeled the pod apart and starting pulling the beans out. You turned to me with a big smile on your face and said “Popping the beans is so funny”. I noticed you turn your head towards your friend when she said, “they smell of peas” and then put the pod to your nose.



Your focus and attention were amazing. I love the way you made connections between what we were doing and what you know from home. I also enjoyed watching you play co-operatively with others and respond to what they were saying. You definitely seemed happy.

Practitioner reflections:

‘We ensure that children have opportunities to learn and strengthen their skills in each Occupation before being given opportunities to guide themselves through them. An example of this is children using materials and resources that are freely available such as nuts and bolts, measuring tapes, screwdrivers and screws to encourage and strengthen woodworking skills, scales and mixing equipment for encouraging skills for baking. Therefore, children are ready to participate when invited by teachers, and they have the specific skills already needed so they can then build on their creativity and independence when they are engaging with each of the different Occupations.’

‘The strand of Contribution, mana tangata (Te Whariki) is evident within our cooking and baking experiences and opportunities. Kaiako (teachers) ensure that the children are actively immersed in an environment where they are affirmed as individuals, encouraged to learn with and alongside each other and are provided equitable opportunities for learning regardless of their gender, ability, age, and ethnic background.’

What did we learn about Froebelian practice through our exploration of these Occupations?

Freedom with guidance: Guidance and modelling were central aspects of the Occupations explored in this research. With the exception of clay, the Occupations were set up to be accessed daily but with close educator supervision. Providing children with access to real tools required risk management and smaller ratios were a sensible way to manage such risk. The smaller groups also ensured the educators could provide the guidance to all children participating. Clay was an exception within our New Zealand setting but our documentation suggests that even though this resource was left accessible to children in continuous provision, it was utilised most when an adult was there to guide the activity. The element of freedom was exemplified in the focus on process over product; children were encouraged to develop their skills in woodwork, sewing and clay rather than complete a specific outcome-based task.

Unity, connectedness and community: The Occupations provided real life experiences to the children and our documentation shows how the children connected these activities to their lives at home. There is evidence of some children being able to bring expertise from home to share with their friends whilst others are able to take their newly learned skills back into their home environment. Parental support for activities is vital and should be communicated clearly to parents.

Engaging with nature: The Occupations explored encouraged consideration of sustainability, initially for educators and then for the children in settings. In both settings educators sought to repurpose materials and encourage recycling of artefacts for woodwork and sewing particularly. All Occupations were evidenced in the garden area and incorporated some aspects of nature from picking a harvest of beans to threading leaves onto twine.

Learning through self-activity and reflection: There is overwhelming evidence of sustained self-activity throughout all Occupations and educators have used learning stories to evidence this. Sequences of images alongside educator's stories show just how engaging the Occupations are and small snippets of dialogue provides insight into children's own reflections. The Occupations involve mastering new skills with potentially novel tools; the children know these tools to be real and reflect the adult world and this gives their activity purpose and importance.

The central importance of play: Whilst play illustrates the highest form of development, much of the activity documented within the Occupations fell short of this title. The children were not playing, they were developing very specific skills, designing and creating for purpose. There was evidence that their creations or their developing skills would later be used for play; the Occupations supported play in this way. Educators reflected deeply in this aspect of the research; they felt that the Occupations offered a different space, one in which play was not a requirement.

Creativity and the power of symbols: Through the Occupations there was evidence of children designing and creating for themselves. The design process, along with skill development, is particularly evident in the woodwork and sewing stories whilst reflections of educators working with clay evidenced children's symbolic thinking in their creation of meaningful artefacts.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators: The Occupations provided dedicated time and space that was valued by educators; this time enabled educators to share sustained focus with children around the activity. Educator's reflections show how they used this time to get to know children at a deeper level and how this time also afforded extended communication and language opportunities.

Additional findings

Alongside very clear links to Froebelian philosophy, there were additional themes that emerged from our New Zealand and England learning stories:

Process over outcome: Throughout all Occupations in the project there was a greater focus on children engaging with the process of skill enhancement and knowledge development rather than a focus on an intended outcome. In woodwork, sewing and clay particularly the children would rehearse skills, such as hammering, measuring, cutting and educators were noticing how skills developed during periods of engagement. Where there was a specific outcome, this was celebrated and valued by the children and educators, this is especially noticeable in the cooking learning stories.

Supporting children with additional learning needs (SEND): The Occupations provide the opportunity for smaller groups as well as effective prompts for 1:1. In this space children with additional needs were seen to flourish. The Occupations, in providing a foundation of play, did not require all children to be skilful communicators with their peers or to have developed social skills. The sensory nature of the Occupations meant many children with additional needs were drawn to these experiences. They offered a calming and predictable experience but also provided opportunities to develop many skills including communication and social skills. Many of the learning stories illustrate children with SEND engaging in purposeful activity towards the development of a skill.

The environment: All educators working within Te Whariki and the EYFS acknowledged the different aspects of the educator role in scaffolding the Occupations AND in providing children with opportunities to develop independence with their skill and perhaps to use it in play, Te Whariki states, *'Kaiako are the key resource in any ECE service. Their primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy.'* In focusing on the Occupations educators considered how the broader environment could support specific skills development .

Froebelian Practice Prompts

- The **process is so much more important than the product** and educators should guide children to revisit their developing skills. This intentional guidance is supported through modelling, extending and suggesting.
- Discuss safety and set up rules and guidance to ensure children can use resources safely.
- What children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Observing children informs the support children need, freedom with guidance and equity rather than equality
- Support connections to family and communities and encourage children's expertise in the skills developed within the home – illustrate unity
- Involve parents in all aspects of the process of developing the Occupations and seek their support in terms of expertise and resources.
- **Consider the skills that children need to support them into the Occupations and support autonomy**
- **Sensory opportunities** are embedded in all Occupations and children of all abilities need to focus on this.
- **First-hand, real-life, practical experiences are vital.** We cannot assume all children cook, garden, sew etc. at home. It is important to provide such experiences which children will then draw on as they play.
- **The knowledgeable educator can make the learning clear to children by pointing out what they have done**
- Small groups for effective and meaningful practice
- Put them out in continuous provision and allow children to revisit their work
- **Reflection with Guidance.** Reflective discussions support the continuous development and transformation of practice.

References/ additional reading

<https://www.froebel.org.uk/news/new-pamphlet-the-wonder-of-woodwork>

<https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Sewing-with-Young-Children-%E2%80%93-interactive-pamphlet.pdf>