



A Froebelian practice guidance paper: Transformations

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Introduction

Four research lenses for Froebelian practice

This guidance paper foregrounds the transformations evidenced across three years of study and focuses on Engaging with Nature, Occupations and Play. Ever more commonplace, within early childhood practice, is a focus on measurable outcomes and performativity; through this practice guidance we foreground the breadth of transformations experienced by children, their families, educators and researchers within The Froebel Partnership. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1851) was a pioneer whose educational principles (see Tovey, 2020) sought transformation through a unified and connected early educational experience. These practice guidance notes give a specifically Froebelian lens through which consider the breadth of transformations in practice and to support educators in valuing all aspects of development within the setting, including their own.

"I wanted to educate people to be free, to think, to take action for themselves." Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 41).

"To learn a thing in life and through doing is much more developing, cultivating and strengthening than to learn it merely through the verbal communication of ideas." (Froebel, 1885: 2).

Contextualising transformations

Before considering transformations, it is important to understand the context within which these transformations emerge. The first three lenses of The Froebel Partnership's Reflection with Guidance provide a series of prompts to support the consideration of:

Lens 1. Context: Space/Time/Seasons

The consideration of the context, including the space within the setting, the time within the daily routine and annual rhythm of the calendar provides rich detail on the environmental conditions within which the transformation took place.

Lens 2. Actors: Actions and Relatedness

Understanding the actors within the observed practice provides additional contextualising information to better understand those who have experienced the transformation. In considering what educators and children are doing before and during transformational moments we can understand how relationships have supported transformations.

Lens 3. The network of development and learning

This lens provides contextual information regarding the first-hand experiences that occur within the observation including the play that is observed. This lens considers the symbolic aspects as well as
With the contextual information provided by lenses 1-3, the final lens of transformations documents the holistic nature of development and can be linked to national guidance.

Lens 4. Transformations

This lens considers transformations in the broadest sense of the word, recognising development is holistic. We believe in a lifelong approach to learning that encourages transformation for both children and educators. Flourishing is a key aspect of this lens and includes both emotional wellbeing and the development of positive learning dispositions. Self-reflection, for both educators and children, makes this learning visible.

Transformation for children

Children possess a natural curiosity encouraging them to actively seek to make sense of the world around them. As well as holistic development transformations can also be considered in relation to national educational guidance including [Te Whariki](#) and the [EYFS](#).

Transformations have been a focus from the onset of the research as educators and researchers have worked together to analyse pedagogic documentation using [Reflection with Guidance](#). Children's transformations have been explored and analysed in relation to Engaging with Nature, The Occupations and Play.

In practice paper one, Engaging with Nature, we learn that during [May](#) the younger children became skilled and confident in using the digital camera to document their experiences outdoors, *'their 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... "I see snake" aims camera at the snake and takes photo. He is so confident to go off on his own... Ali quickly learned how to keep his fingers out of the way and to centre the subject of the photograph, as can be seen in his photo of the wooden snake.'* This example illustrates not only the development of practical skills with the digital camera, but it also illustrates the child's developing confidence and wellbeing.

In practice paper two, ['Exploring the tape measure'](#) illustrates how skills are developed over time and children are supported by each other as well as the educators. The occupations prioritise engagement in the creative process rather than a fixed outcome and allow children to revisit and develop their confidence at their own pace, supporting their wellbeing. *'You had remembered how to hold the nail carefully with your right hand so you could use your left hand to hit 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's 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.'* This illustrates the capacity of children to be self-reflective and to persist at difficult tasks demonstrating secure self-regulation.

In practice paper three, the complexity of play, we hear about an anxious child, new to nursery who needs lots of support to settle in her first few weeks, preferring adult company. *'She began to lose some anxiety for short periods of time when engaged with the occupations with an adult... she then began to re-enact her first-hand experiences within her play. For instance, she pretended to cook stir-fry in the mud kitchen having actually prepared, cooked and eaten this earlier in the day.'* This illustrates how her play drew upon first hand experiences of cooking and gave her the [foundations of play supporting her emotional wellbeing](#).

Whilst children's transformations were a natural central focus, the educators were initially less focused on their own transformations. The focus on transformations for all participants, including educators and researchers, emerged through the process of research.

Transformations for educators

The professional development process

The educators and researchers who worked alongside one another for the duration of this three year research project benefitted from:

1. Extended timescales

Having an annual focus for the research and an overall timescale of three years provided time to allow the trusting, compassionate and empathetic relationships to develop that are vital to working in this way and also allowed for

experimentation, innovation and deep level learning. This annual cycle was continuous allowing each stage to learn from the stages that had come before.

2. Shared practice focus

The initial focus on engaging with nature emerged from post-Covid research that had noticed the time spent in outdoor spaces and the comfort this brought to children and educators. Each year the focus of the enquiry emerged from the previous findings, each growing organically from the last, and with a shared fascination for joint investigation.

3. Working as a Froebelian Community of Practice (CoP)

A diverse range of educators, leaders and researchers along with children and their families made up the community of practice. The community was built upon Froebelian principles (Tovey, 2020). In particular:

- *Freedom with guidance:* Educators chose their own research questions within the agreed annual focus, and how they conducted the research and how it was documented. They were respectfully and sensitively guided by each other and the external research team members.
- *Unity, connectedness and community:* The research was rooted in the practice so was linked to the children's and educator's lived nursery experiences.
- *Learning through self-activity and reflection:* Educators were constantly learning through reflecting and professionally discussing what they had observed and what they had done. They sought, with guidance, to better understand both the children and them.

4. Deepening and extending professional knowledge and skills



All those educators, researchers and leaders remained committed to extending our professional knowledge and skills. Several of the team undertook Froebel short courses to deepen knowledge of Froebelian principles and we

shared wider reading and research. There was the opportunity for colleagues in New Zealand to visit colleagues in Guildford following the Māori concept of Tuakana Teina in which the teina (younger sibling) learns from the tuakana (older sibling). There was also the opportunity to attend conferences to begin to articulate and share our emerging project and to learn from the wider Froebelian research community.



5. Regular and reflective professional dialogues

Regular meetings and opportunities for connection were an essential part of our community of practice. Some supportive aspects include:

- Fortnightly leadership meetings (online to facilitate international dialogue)
- Team meetings during working hours and in protected 'time'
- Smaller group dialogue when needed
- The use of an online shared platform for all to access and contribute
- Annual professional development conferences
- Nursery visits
- Regularly documenting our research processes through presentations, blogs etc.

With time and trust, all participants felt able to offer ideas, reflections and analysis to the developing research narrative.

6. Documentation of Practice

Educators and researchers worked together to document the project using an online platform called Trello. The platform allows the collation of documents, images, videos, and observations in a secure but shared space. The advantage of an online flexible platform allowed additional notes and reflections to be added to existing documents and also enabled analysis as documents could be sorted and labelled accordingly. By enabling access for all there was a collective responsibility for both the gathering of evidence and the subsequent analysis.

7. Analysing, Identifying and Creating Practice Transformations

The analysis of the evidence gathered was developed alongside the research focus each year. [Reflection with Guidance](#) considers:

1. **Context: Space/Time/Seasons:** An analysis of what constitutes the chosen place/space/experience (indoors or outdoors) and how this is shaped by time, temporality and seasons.
2. **Actors: Actions and Relatedness:** An analysis of who enters, engages with, leaves and possibly returns to the place/space/experience and what is happening, relationships and interactions between actors and the natural/fabricated world as offered in the place/space/experience:
3. **The Network of Development and Learning:** An analysis of how play makes use of and is part of networks involving the everyday experiences of a child's life;
4. **Transformations:** An analysis of how time spent in the place/space/experience transforms both children and adults and, in particular, child and educator mental and physical health and overall wellbeing, their enjoyment and a sense of flourishing and achievement, their development and learning, their curiosity, imagination and exploratory drive and their persistence, mastery and commitment.

This reflective tool has been reviewed by educators within and beyond the Froebel partnership and adjusted to ensure it has practical application and can be easily used within the early years community.

Documenting transformations for educators

Across the three years educators documented their own professional development journey following the process outlined above. Analysis of educator reflections revealed that these transformations could be categorised into four domains: Professional, Personal, Psychological and Public/Civic impact.

1. Professional Impact

Educators were more reflective and critical about their professional practice and had greater ambitions in terms of their professional career. Educators were guided by Froebelian principles and found they:

- Spent more time every day outside, not letting the weather put them off.
- Let activities and experiences 'unfold' – trusting the children and the natural world to extend and educate.
- Avoided overly directing children's explorations but encouraged supportive interactions.
- Were closer to' but not 'too close' to the children.
- Provided the space and opportunities to be alone or with groups.
- Protected time for critical reflection with colleagues.

Overall in this aspect educators revealed:

- *transformed pedagogy and practice*

'It's made me rethink how to write observations.'

'A little bit of adult intervention (putting water out the night before) provided lots of exploratory opportunities. I do have to admit that I was a little disappointed when the children didn't immediately engage in the 'awe and wonder' of the beautiful patterns of bubbles within the ice, but instead took great delight in smashing it up into smaller and smaller pieces!! But then I thought about all that I have learnt about how children learn and about giving them 'freedom', and they really had so much fun! There were other days and other times when there was the opportunity for focus on the beauty.'

- *embedded reflectiveness*

'Using the reflective lenses generates a great deal of really deep reflection and professional dialogue.'

** enhanced criticality*

'I have learned how to analyse our learning stories. Analysing our practice with lens 4, we could really see how to change practice in the future.'

- *ambition and career development*

'We have become very aware of a huge appetite for professional development that is much deeper and has more impact than training.'

2. Personal Impact

Educators also illustrated how they felt different on an internal, personal level. They had a greater sense of motivation, positive wellbeing and a real sense of belonging within their team.

'Educators speak overwhelmingly of feeling empowered; they love the connection between each other and the researchers-they feel we are a community of learners.'



Overall in this aspect educators revealed:

- *confidence and status*

'I felt empowered to be part of the process analysing data, our view was valued.'

- *motivation and energy*

'The educators also frequently report that they've found the whole process inspiring.'

- *self-actualisation and identity*

'They appreciate that they are encouraged and enabled to fully participate in their own learning. They feel involved.'

- *belonging and values*

'the partnership is an excellent example of equitable working where everyone is valued whoever and whatever they are.' I love the respect the researchers have for the educators and vice versa.'

3. Psychological Impact

As well as impacting on a personal level there was a significant psychological aspect to practitioners' reflections demonstrating a:

- *sense of flourishing and fulfillment*

'I feel professionally happy; the feeling of the children and adults seem to reflect each other.'

- *lowering of stress and enhanced wellbeing*

'I really appreciate that it asks us to consider our own wellbeing as well as the children's.'

- *reconnection with enjoyment, enthusiasm and enchantment*

'I feel calm, focused and protected from the hurley, burley of nursery.'

4. Public/Civic Impact

Educators had a greater realization of their early years purpose and reconnected with the passion and drive that had initially brought them to the sector. This was seen through a deepened sense of mission and an increased pride in civic work and public contribution.

'The growth in each of them in terms of self-worth, confidence, empowerment, liberation, ownership has been phenomenal.'

'The team also appreciate that through this work they come to realise for themselves that they know a great deal and do an amazing job. There is a significant difference between being told this and knowing it within themselves.'

Summary

Transformations are important for both children and educators.

- **The documentation of transformations should recognise the individuality of human development**
- **Transformations should be focused on holistic development including wellbeing and flourishing and can be deeply personal**
- **Reflection with Guidance supports time and space to consider children's transformations and to enable educator transformation.**
- **Strong ethical leadership and a participatory approach that values equity further supports the process.**

Froebelian Practice Prompts when considering educators

- Consider how **strong ethical leadership** supports practice developments in your setting
- Spend time considering your team ethos, shared values and overall vision for your setting. Do Froebelian principles support this?
- Ensure there is **time for reflective professional development.**
- Look beyond your setting, **find a network** and seek additional opportunities.
- Strategically **plan professional development** and support the ambition of the staff team.
- Consider the **civic and community work** your setting undertakes.
- Ensure the wellbeing and flourishing of staff is prioritised.

Froebelian Practice Prompts when considering children

- Allow time for observation **in many contexts and forms** e.g. inside/outside/ guided, independent, video, photographic; observations enable educators to listen to and reflect upon children's engagement and transformations.
- **Ensure time** for children to respond and extend their thinking. Provide flexibility of routine to enable children time and space to deepen their learning. Provide opportunities for sustained activity and allow children to return to their early activity.
- Ask the children questions that **support reflection**. How did you do that? Why did you do it that way? What will you do now or later?
- Through connections **knowledgeable and nurturing educators support** children's transformations. Positive relationships are central to supporting children's growth and development.
- Acknowledge and promote **positive emotional wellbeing** as this will impact on children's development and learning. Do children enjoy what they are doing and have a sense of achievement?
- Children's **developmental milestones** are a helpful guide to support educators when considering physical, cognitive and social development. Educators need this knowledge to appreciate typical development.
- **Learning dispositions**, curiosity, imagination, exploratory drive, precision, persistence, mastery and commitment are important.

Further reading

Tovey, H. (2020) Froebel's Principles and Practice Today. London: Froebel Trust

Pascal et al. 2024 latest article – not yet available online