

The

*first*years

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Ngā Tau Tuatahi

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Waiata / Song

Hutia Te Rito

Hutia te rito

Hutia te rito o te harakeke

Kei hea te kōmako e kō

Kī mai ki ahau

He aha te mea nui

He aha te mea nui o te ao

Māku e kī atu

He Tangata, He Tangata

He Tangata Hi

Pluck the Baby (of a flax bush)

Pluck the baby

Pluck the baby of the flaxbush

Where will the bellbird sing

You ask me

What is the greatest thing

What is the greatest thing in the
world I will tell you

Tis People! Tis People

Tis People

Adapted by Rose Pere





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"Why does Froebel matter in the 21st century?": A response inspired by 1-year-olds in four countries

By Dr Maria Cooper



Why does Froebel matter in the 21st century? This was the provocation a panel of eight international researchers, including myself, were invited to respond to, for a webinar organised by the Froebel Trust, London. Each speaker had previously contributed to a special issue of Global Education Review on "Finding Froebel: National and cross-national pedagogical paths in Froebelian early childhood education".

Since 2018, I have been involved in a cross-national research project exploring pedagogies of care with 1-year-olds from a Froebelian perspective in four countries: Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), the USA, Hong Kong, and England. Although I was aware of Froebel, and his enduring legacy of kindergartens in NZ before the project, I admit I had not given the same level of thought to the potential relevance of his principled ideas to pedagogy with infants and toddlers. It was, therefore, a humbling experience to be sitting amongst other researchers inspired by Froebelian philosophy to share my newfound thoughts. I did not, however, enter the dialogue as an individual. The collective wisdom of our research team including Jean Rockel (NZ), Dr Mary Benson McMullen (USA), Dr Carrey Siu (Hong Kong) and Dr Sacha Powell (England), had influenced my developing understandings of Froebel's philosophy of education over the last four years. Their thinking was very much woven into the ideas that I shared.

Who was Friederich Froebel?

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel, the founder of kindergartens, was born 21 April 1782 in Germany as the youngest of six children. His mother died when he was just 10 months old. His father, a strict Lutheran pastor, remarried. His new wife was loving towards Froebel until the birth of her first child, at which point she rejected him. The rejection from his father and step-mother led Froebel to spend much of his time in the garden and attic. Then at age 10, he went to live with his uncle in the countryside, who was more loving than his father had been and had recently lost his own wife and son. This arrangement provided a warm and loving home for

Froebel, which contrasted with the unfortunate family life he had come from.

After five years living with his Uncle, Froebel had developed a deep love of nature and also enjoyed mathematics. He pursued an education in botany and maths, choosing to see these subjects as integrated rather than separate and unconnected. He later became a teacher and visited Pestalozzi's training school in Switzerland. Froebel came to admire the work of Pestalozzi.

However, he realised his ideas about children were not the same. As Bruce (2021) explains: "Froebel focused on the potential that he saw in children, especially the young children. Pestalozzi, he felt, saw them as they were at the time, rather than seeing what they might become. [...] This led him to see life (with education being a part of life) as a process of becoming, so that change was embedded in living" (p. 4). These experiences and insights formed the beginnings of Froebel's philosophy of education.

Note: This brief historical overview is informed by Tina Bruce's (2021) book *Friedrich Froebel: A critical introduction to key themes and debates*, which I highly recommend for a succinct, critical exploration of Froebel's life and work.

Why does Froebel Matter in the 21st Century

The two ideas of Froebel's that I shared during the webinar focused on the period of infancy. They were inspired by what our research team had learned from the 1-year-olds in our international project:

First, at a time when infants were seen as innocent blank slates, Froebel's ideas about very young children were radical, daring, and transformational. Froebelian philosophy positions infants not as passive bystanders but as active, relational, and connected beings who can contribute to their own lives and the lives of others. This strengths-based image of the infant reveals Froebel's moral commitment to infancy and the first years, which suggested to us an honouring of "babyhood" in its own right.

This strengths-based image also aligns with the early childhood curriculum of NZ, *Te Whāriki*, and its Māori indigenous view that all children are born with *mana*, a sense of spiritual power and prestige. The teacher's role here is to nurture and protect this *mana* by prioritising each child's connections with people, places, and things *from birth* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Froebel's "following and guiding" teacher takes on a similar role in nurturing children's spirituality and connectedness in their lives from birth. We believe that infants can be more autonomous, agentic, and valued when the teachers they become connected with learn to slow down, reflect on and think with others about the significance of Froebelian philosophy for their localised pedagogies of care. This potential gain for infants is reason enough for why Froebel matters.

Second, Froebel's ideas underpin what it means to be human. Likely driven by his own unfortunate childhood experiences, Froebel's work encourages a closeness and reciprocity between adult and child. This idea needs to be enduring in this constantly changing world. A return to his ideas reminds us of what makes us human, our relationality—the idea that who we are and what we do is always in relation to another. So, in caring for the infant, Froebelian philosophy motivates us to care for and about them while looking out for and taking care of their relationships with others.

Moreover, Froebel's holistic view of the child as one part of a much bigger whole, reflective of unity, reminds us to pay attention to the child-in-context. Honouring the whole child in this way means recognising the social and cultural conditions in which children are immersed from birth. It also requires us to trust that with gentle guidance, even infants can garner the support they need from those around them. The 1-year-olds in our project showed us this developing competence in the outdoors, in the playroom, and even on the nappy change table. In essence, Froebelian philosophy prompts us to think about what binds us together as a human race and to never take our relationships for granted. These ideas, for us, are why Froebel matters.

The Froebel Trust, London

The opportunity to share our international project's responses with 300+ webinar attendees came from the Froebel Trust, London. Led by Dr Sacha Powell, chief executive officer, and a dedicated team of trustees and committee members, the Froebel Trust is a grant-making charity that aims to ensure Froebel's philosophy of education is "recognised, understood, valued and practised across the early childhood sector for the benefit of young children" (Froebel Trust, 2022). The Trust funds research and practice development focused on early childhood education and care. It uses the outcomes of the projects to advance knowledge and understanding of Froebelian education and learning. The resources, growing webinar library, Froebelian principles, and other relevant information housed on their website reflect ways the Froebel Trust, researchers, and educators are working collectively to reclaim and revitalise Froebel's ideas for contemporary practice.

In NZ, we are fortunate to have the work of Froebelian scholars such as Professor Helen May, Dr Kerry Bethell, and others illuminate our kindergarten legacy. For

one example of this work, the sample chapter at [this NZCER link](#) explores the influence of Froebel's work on the growth of the kindergarten movement abroad and in New Zealand (May & Bethell, 2017). As a cross-national team, we hope to contribute new and exciting insights about ways Froebel's ideas can inspire education and care with infants and toddlers through a lens of pedagogy and culture.

For more information about the Froebel Trust, London and/or to access the webinar recording where these ideas were shared, see their webinar library under the Training and Resources tab at www.froebel.org.uk/

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