

An Interview with Lian Higgins

For a student dissertation: ‘How Froebel has been adapted to the Twenty First Century’

Question One:

Can you tell me about the setting?

We are a local authority setting, owned and operated by City Of Edinburgh Council. However, we are quite unique in that we are the only local authority provision to offer extended day care for children from birth to five, 52 weeks a year. Most council nurseries operate during term times only, offering the government funded two and half hours per day. We are situated just off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh’s historic Old Town, in what is a fairly built up urban environment. Our service is used by parents who work or are in full time further education. Our families pay for the service. All children are entitled to the educational discount from the term after their third birthday.

-Where did the inspiration come from to create a pre-school using Froebel’s philosophy?

The Head of Centre, Dr Lynn McNair, is a visionary educator. Lynn has devoted her life to the study of early years, is a Lecturer on the BACP at Moray House, has been awarded an OBE for services to Early Education. Lynn did her Froebel training at the Froebel Institute in Roehampton, under the tutelage of Professor Tina Bruce. Lynn immediately felt that Froebel’s philosophy resonated with her own beliefs about the child and childhood, and subsequently found the theory which underpins our practice.

Question Two:

Can you tell me a bit about your understanding of Froebel’s philosophy?

Froebel, I believe, genuinely liked and respected children. As an educator, his view of the child is one of confident, creative, unique people capable of self- activity and discovery. Froebel believed that the learning arrived at by children through their own discovery was

more valuable than information half understood from someone else. His philosophy acknowledged the importance of play, childhood as a period in its own right, children as members of families and communities, and the importance of taking an ecological view of humankind in the natural world. He advocated holism in childhood practice, encouraging practitioners to understand the uniqueness of each child.

“The mind grows by self revelation. In play the child ascertains what he can do, discovers his possibilities of will and thought by exerting his power spontaneously. In work he follows a task prescribed for him by another, and does not reveal his own proclivities and inclinations — but another’s. In play he reveals his own original power.”

Froebel in The Education of Man

Question Three:

What would a regular day in the setting contain?

How do you quantify regular? While we offer consistent experiences and opportunities each day will be different for each child as they lead their own learning. As part of our ethos we bake bread every morning, provide sequence books and materials for children to mix their own paint and make play dough, (we do not prepare these resources for the children) provide opportunities to work with clay, water, sand, wood and recycled materials in junk modelling. Our children have unrestricted access to the garden, in any weather. We gather twice a day, but this is by invitation and children can choose whether or not to join gathering. We offer twice weekly opportunities to visit Stickland, which is our Nature Kindergarten experience held in Bonaly Woods. We respond spontaneously to children’s ideas and suggestions, and so fortunate are we in our city centre location that any given day could result in a visit to the Museum of Scotland, the Museum of Childhood, Holyrood Park, the Botanics, the Meadows or Princes St Gardens. There are lots of green spaces in and around the Royal Mile, including the Scottish Wildlife Nature Reserve at Johnston Terrace, a mere 10 minutes from the nursery, which is our Forest School site. Froebel believed that the school that was not synonymous with life had no right to the name, so a day in Cowgate is as regular as a day in life, subject to change, unpredictable!

Question Four:

How does the setting incorporate Froebel's philosophy to suit all the age groups of the setting?

-As the setting caters for children from such a young age.

Holism dictates that you know and acknowledge every aspect of each child. In any setting where holism is practiced there should be no need for words like "inclusion" because by its very nature it demands that practitioners see the whole child. It is also important not to classify children as an homogenous group, as each is unique. By that token we would not make assumptions that all two year olds require the same, It is more of question of treating children with equity than equally, as each will require different things at different times. I believe that is the beauty of Froebel's philosophy, he maintained that we should "Begin where the learner is" and "At the stage be the stage". I share with you a lovely quote from de Lissa, who I believe sums it up beautifully with the following:

"The average age of three children who are respectively 1, 3 and 14 years of age, is 6, but what relation has that figure to the three children? There may be appropriate examples of what is deemed an average intelligence or intellect, but where shall we find an average mind, soul or self? If that is our query then we may as well live in wait for the average of nineteen sunsets or seek the average pot of gold at the foot of the average rainbow. The only human being competent to reveal what any child is, is that child himself"

(de Lissa, 1939, P161, Life in the Nursery School)

Question Five:

Does the setting use other philosophers or theorists in the childcare approach and curriculum?

We follow the guidance of ACE (A Curriculum for Excellence) and GIRFEC (Getting it Right for every Child). Both policies contain principles which can be linked to Froebel. There are many who came later who were influenced by Froebel, however I believe it is important in any setting to have a strong ethos and remain true to it. There are often new policies and initiatives introduced which practitioners may feel that they have to follow, but

having a strong ethos enables you to incorporate what fits with your own practice without diluting or confusing it.

Question Six:

Do you believe that the Froebelian philosophy has to be adapted in order to suit the needs of a twenty first century child?

No. Froebel was a protector of childhood, discouraging the need to rush children into formal learning but rather allowing them a childhood. I think in today's society, with many parents fearful of allowing their children outside, it is so important to remember the value of play, particularly in the outdoors. And often very young children lead stressful lives, between nursery or school and a whirlwind round of swimming lessons, junior soccer, gymtots, dance classes and music lessons. We need to allow our children time to be self directed, and this can be achieved simply by playing on the carpet, or in the flower beds in the garden. Froebel's philosophy is beautiful in its simplicity, and our children are as deserving, if not more so, of the simple pleasures of childhood as they ever were.

Question Seven:

How do you adapt the philosophy to ensure it suits all the needs of your children?

-Religion –Cultures –Families

Again I think this is answered by the holistic approach. Knowing the whole child is to know everything about them. Beautifully simple ☺

Question Eight:

Can you tell me about your Forest School?

-Is this an example of how Froebel's philosophy has been adapted to the twenty first century?

We have three trained Forest School leaders, so I am probably not the best placed to talk about this aspect of our provision. I will say it happens for a group of 6 – 8 children at a time, in a small wildlife reserve site 10 minutes walk from the nursery. I do believe that, were Froebel practising today, he would be an advocate of both Forest and Eco School initiatives.

Question Nine:

What role do parents play in the setting?

The role of our families is hugely important to our little community. We operate an open door policy because, quite simply, we have nothing to hide and we wish very much for our parents to feel welcome and wanted in the centre. We hold open mornings regularly for prospective parents, to give them an opportunity to explore the centre but also for us to share our ethos, in order that families can make an informed choice. We are fortunate that we have a lot of families choosing us because existing families have recommended us to them.

Question Ten:

Do you use or adapt Froebel's Gifts and Occupations in the setting?

We place a great deal of importance on open ended play, and one of the most prolific examples of this in our setting are the many opportunities for block play. We are more revisionist than purist in this area, however almost all early years settings will provide experiences based on the occupations, including opportunities for play with clay, sand, water, threading and sewing, small construction and wood working.

Question Eleven:

What age do you think Froebel's philosophy could be used until?

-Do you think your approach could be carried on into a primary school system?

I think it could, and should, be continued into secondary school. The “whole” child approach is not age restricted. We devote a lot of time in early years to understanding brain development, physical development and learning styles of our children through observations of their schematic play. Our interactions are sensitive to all of these elements. Yet our children get to high school, where they undergo further emotional, physical changes and yet more brain development and too often are denied the most basic courtesies of being listened to, consulted with and encouraged to influence policy and practice. For many the high school experience is “sit down and shut up”.

Question Twelve:

Do you have any criticisms of Froebel’s philosophy?

His original writings can be difficult to understand. He was of a different time and was a very spiritual man, so much of his writing can appear dated and may not appeal to the less religious. However the translations of this philosophy are so relevant today, and with the growing awareness of the need to realise children’s rights, Froebel is quite topical at the moment.

Question Thirteen:

What are your opinions on the primary school curriculum in Scotland?

-School readiness: Do children move onto primary school too early?

I really dislike the term “school readiness”. I believe more needs to be done by schools to be ready for our children. I cannot understand why we introduce formal learning so soon. Historically our children went to school at the age of five because we would lose them to the factories or mills by age 8 or 10. Our children are no longer required to work towards the family coffers, in fact it is now illegal to use child labour. However we still insist on sending our children to school at five (four in England) despite the example of our Scandinavian counterparts who enjoy among the highest educational attainment levels in the world, yet delay formal learning until age 7.

Question Fourteen:

Is the school target driven?

-Are the children encouraged to develop in anyway?

-Observations?

In my opinions, teachers are under a lot of pressure to evidence attainment. It is this evidence that inspectors are looking for, and all too often that is what influences parents in their choice of schools. I would like to see more emphasis on citizenship, outdoor learning, global awareness and creativity. There are eight areas of the curriculum for excellence, and one outcome, with Expressive and Aesthetic development, states "I have the freedom to choose and create an image or object using a variety of materials" However it is rather unfortunate that, in many schools, this is interpreted as "I am limited to reproducing an image or object that a grown up has demonstrated to me, using pre-prepared materials". Any curriculum is only as good as those interpreting and delivering it. I really believe that a holistic approach should continue throughout a child's lifetime.

Question Fifteen:

Does the philosophy work well in the setting?

-Why is it so successful?

I believe it does, due to the strong leadership and the whole school approach. It is not possible to achieve the success we have with only one person championing the cause. It has to be a shared ethos. Why is it successful? Who really knows? I'm sure many factors contribute to our success, not least of all the skill and dedication of our team. We are very fortunate that we have a lovely building in a wonderful location. We are blessed with amazing children and families. But I think central to our success is the guidance from our Head, who not only shares her knowledge and inspires us all, she also encourages each and every one of us to develop our own skills and knowledge. We enjoy as much autonomy as our children do.

Question Sixteen:

Froebel's philosophy is rarely heard of in Irish pre-school settings. Is it commonly used throughout Scotland or the U.K?

I think it is enjoying a bit of a resurgence, in Edinburgh in particular. The Froebel Certificate was re-introduced to Moray House in 2011. There are four Head Teachers that I know of who are members of the Froebel Network, which is rapidly growing as more practitioners undertake the training. The UK does enjoy a history of Froebelian practice, which can be explored in the book by Joachim Leibschner, Foundations of Progressive Education, History of the National Froebel Society.

Question Seventeen:

Can Early Year's practitioners study to become Froebel teachers/practitioners in Scotland or the U.K?

-Are there minimum educational requirements for Early Years Practitioners in your setting?

The Froebel Certificate can be studied part time at Moray House, in Edinburgh. The University Of Roehampton also offers Froebel training.

Early Years Practitioners are required to have an HNC in Childhood and Education or equivalent. The SSSC (Scottish Social Services Council) requires any one who is managing an early years centre to have or be working towards the BA in Childhood Practice.

Any other comments or opinions about Froebel's philosophy in the twenty first century are greatly appreciated.

Thank you.