



Froebel Trust Podcast Transcript : Episode 2 Feb 2023

00:00:06:21 - 00:00:30:12

Colin

Hello. Welcome to episode two of the Froebel Trust podcast. I'm Colin Kelly. I'm a journalist and I'm a dad of two young children and I'm really interested in exploring this Froebelian approach to early years education. I'm joined by a terrific panel of expert guests. Dr. Stella Louis Leeds tutor for the Froebel Trust Short Courses and an independent early use consultant.

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Colin

Sally Cave headteacher at Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre and co-director of the Froebel Partnership. Professor Chris Pascal, Director of the Center for Research and Early Childhood. Dr. Lynn McNair, head of Cowgate under five Center in Edinburgh and programme director of Froebelian Futures, and Simon Bateson, co-director of Froebelian Futures and a senior practitioner at Cowgate under five Centre.

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Colin

Now, in our last episode, we were talking about what it means to be a Froebelian nursery. How do you become one? What kind of training and support is involved in that journey? And in this episode, we're going to look more closely at the learning environment. What actually goes on inside a Froebelian nursery or early years centre?

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Colin

What does it look like? What do you see in the walls? What are the sights and sounds that make it such a special place? But I also want to test some of my panel because one of my concerns is that, well, what if this is all nice in theory? Or if you live a beautiful part of the country with resources?

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Colin

But would it actually work anywhere? And if I look at the area around me, I see nurseries in areas where children are living in poverty, where they're in a built up, maybe rundown urban environment. Could the Froebel approach work there? And that's the first question I put to Dr. Stella Louis.

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Stella

Yes, is the a straightforward answer to that. Because I could give you another circumstance. South African Soweto in the middle of a squatter camp where you've got those problems and more. And we've been able to use the universal Frobelian approach in those contexts. Obviously, environments matter. But I think it's about the attitude of the educators. I think it's possible to have a Frobelian approach anywhere, but it is about the knowledgeable educator.

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Stella

And I think one of the secrets about the Frobelian approach isn't necessarily where it's located. Although if you're in a really lovely, lush green space, then that's wonderful in comparison to an urban space that's lacking. It's about how you organise your environment. You know, Froebel really advocates that play without structure, particularly outside is what he advocated for children.

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Stella

So they don't need to have fancy equipment. However, he's also talking about children, learning about the law of opposites and learning about difference. So it's about the quality of the resources that you have. It's not about having loads of money. There are ways that you can adopt and adapt. So I don't think it's about location. I think it's about the attitude of the provider.

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Chris

Chris. Two quick points. One is that learning is a social process. We learn with and through other people, and the Frobelian approach is very relational and it isn't just the physical environment, it's the socio-emotional environments and the climate that you create together and how an individual child or educator feels about themselves within that environment and their capacity. So that is a universal

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Chris

as somebody said, that is is about inclusion and respect and unity and connectedness. So that's the first point. This is socio-emotional, which we can get hung up on the physical. Then to me, the most important environment is what they're bathed in, which is the social and emotional environment that allows them to fly or not. And the second point I was going to make as a Birmingham urban girl and growing up, the urban environment is full is the natural world.

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Chris

The whole issue about sustainability is being critical and reflective and taking action within that urban environment. And the natural environment. So there is always the natural world, whether you're in a high-rise flat, the air is the natural world. The sky is. In Birmingham

there's a lot of trees around, there's a lot of there's always a natural environment out there, whatever context your in.

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Chris

If you go out into it. And so the big thing is, is about getting the children from indoors to outdoors and then helping the child to ask those and be aware and engage with whatever that outdoor environment is.

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Colin

Lynn I think on my on my trips to Edinburgh, I think have probably seen people, kids from your from your nursery around the up the grass market.

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Lynn

Yeah, well I would like to echo what everybody's saying, but one of the things that I know personally as an adult, the physical environment is actually really important to me and I think that if anybody on this podcast is thinking, how do we start? I kind of feel strip it all back, you know, because I kind of feel that all those days of garish colors and everything are all gone now.

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Lynn

I think that people are people know that they just upset children. They're not they don't add to support in children's learning in any way. And, you know, organising the environment in a way where children can choose what they're going to do. It's not selected by adults is really, really key and really important. And, you know, it's been mentioned a few times about children who are living in poverty, which is a horrible condition, of course.

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Lynn

But actually, isn't it wonderful that we can get over to people that you don't need huge amounts of money? It's open ended materials that can be bricks and sticks and stones. And the learning that can come from that is immense. We always pay great attention to what our children are interested in, how they're using the environment. People walk into our environments all the times and

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Lynn

think, why have we not got loads of things on the walls? We do not. We do. If the children decide they want them on the walls, but we don't, we don't do it to impress regulators or parents or anybody else. The walls are completely stripped back. A child can't see much higher than three feet sometimes, so why would we have all these things away up high?

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Colin

So what would I see then if I walked in?

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Lynn

Yeah, you would see things that are very chilled. You would see a very kind of calming atmosphere, probably very bare walls, probably a lot of natural wood and sensory things around maybe lamp light, maybe a little lights around of thing to not have big overhead lights on because, you know, these aren't conducive to children learning. The temperature would be I mean, in certainly in Cowgate, the doors are open all the time.

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Lynn

So it's not a warm place because the children are in and out and this is what Froebel wanted, a home like environment. He didn't ask us to create an institution. He didn't want tables set by, say, with puzzles laid out on them. He didn't want that. He wanted children to be able to select what they wanted to do rather than adults.

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Lynn

Having those thoughts for them.

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Colin

So Stella, it sounds like every Froebel center is going to look different. Is it?

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Stella

That's what makes Froebel so engaging because no two settings will look the same. And I think I just wanted to really add on something that Lynn was saying. It is about the environment being a really rich environment, supporting children's choice, their freedom and their autonomy, and that will depend on what children are interested in. And it would require adults or practitioners that are observant and and tuned in.

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Stella

I think ultimately it's about adults' trust in children's intentions. And I think sometimes in some places we don't often do that. We don't trust children's intentions. We apply our preconceptions to what we've seen them do. And one of the wonderful things about being Frobelian is it does open you up to just trusting children's good intentions, which makes you think about why they're doing this.

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Stella

It makes you question what you're seeing. So it's not straightforward. Education should cause thinking. And that's what observation should do, I think, to

Chris.

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Chris

Another feature of the environment that I would just like us to kind of have a little time to think about is the the concept of time or temporality. And we've been very inspired recently by the Froebel Trust's funded work that Alison Clark is leading about a slow pedagogy. And I think if you say, how would you recognise Froeble way? To me one of those things is that everything is done at a gentler pace.

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Chris

We don't hurry the child through things. We give them time, in Tina Bruces words, to wallow and linger and to repeat and return to things in their own time. And so the notion of temporality of time and I'm going to link it to nature, the seasons we've become trying to kind of pay attention to how how we as human beings respond to and are affected by the seasons, which is another aspect of time.

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Chris

So thinking carefully about time and as I say, not rushing children through their childhood to the next stage all the time, but letting them wallow and be where they are now and immerse themselves in that. You get much deeper learning, we feel. And I think the Frobelian approach really acknowledges that. And you would see that slower, more gentle, and because of that, a deeper pace and a deeper response from the children and staff in nurseries that adopt that framework.

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Colin

And let's hear from Sally now.

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Sally

Just to sort of sum that bit up really. I think what might set us apart as a Frobelian setting is the staff actually. And I think I would say you don't need anything in particular to call yourself Frobelian except to invest in your staff so that when you would come in to here, you would see all the adults engaged with the children.

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Sally

And that's, I think, really, really important. If you've got, you know, budgets are really tight, your staff are the most valuable resource you'll ever have.

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Colin

I just wondered Sally as well, like, you know, some nurseries, I know there's limits on class sizes and so on, but does this work in a crowded setting? How can the staff get involved and

engage and be, you know, be led by the child and give them all this level of support if there's 25 of them screaming at each other?

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Sally

One hopes they won't be screaming at one another, because they'd be so engaged in what they're doing, because that's been really thought carefully thought out. And any resources is the worthwhileness that you look at. And you would need to look at your space. Say 25 children in the space that I've got here would be it would be very small, would be a very small number of children, actually, because it's a very large space that is broken into smaller spaces, more homely, cozier spaces.

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Sally

But if you were in a very small room, then maybe 25 would be far too many.

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Colin

So what would be what would be a good ratio then?

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Sally

Well, in England we comply with the statutory ratios, so there isn't any any choice in that one. And it's 4 two year olds to one adult for very obvious reasons.

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Colin

So if one of your if one of your two year olds is having some difficulties, maybe being disruptive, causing some trouble, does that not take up more of the staff member's time? And then that means the others don't get that?

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Sally

No, because we all work at self-help. But again, it goes back to Stella's point. You're looking for the good intent. So what is this child trying to tell us if they are upset or they just throwing something and hurt somebody? What is it that they know? Because all too often it is a mean all behavior as a means of communication.

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Sally

So it's beholden on the adult to work out why and then to go from that.

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Colin

I'm just thinking of my own children and they're experience at nursery. And you know, you're all academics. You seem very committed to personal, you know, professional development. You seem to live and breathe this. I'm just thinking of some of the nursery

staff that I've encountered, they certainly weren't living and breathing academia. And I'm just wondering at that kind of very that that front line of this and I know you are also on that frontline, but some of those staff less experienced, maybe less interested in practice.

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Colin

Are they really upholding these values every day?

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Sally

I don't think the Frobelian approach is necessarily an academic one. You just happen to have a group of people that like to talk about Froebel. So it is perfectly accessible to all nursery staff or staff in schools. So I wouldn't say that is excluding them. And I think it is that desire to hold the child at the centre, Froebel talked about living alongside our children.

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Sally

If you do that, you are looking for staff, that are educated and nurturing, knowledgeable and nurturing educators. And that's partly our leaders, very much a leaders role, but also finding people that are sympathetic and open to a Frobelian approach.

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Colin

I'd imagine that's the challenge with the explosion in early years education and more, more people. And how do you get the good staff? But maybe Simon can tell us a little bit about that.

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Simon

Gosh, how do you get the good staff? Can I take a step back? I'll come back. I'll try and answer that, I think in the back of my mind. But I think one of the key kind of axioms for us as Frobelian practitioners is this idea that the child is the curriculum. The children are the curriculum.

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Simon

That is what dictates and where the learning happens and where the learning should be led from. And it's the same with environment that our children create the environment, and that's how it should be. I mean, obviously we have experience and we are we're resourceful and we've got a wealth of learning from Froebel on some really great provocations. But the key thing for me is how do we strip back our environments so that children have that space and the time to build into the environment, the resources, the materials, the play that they want and that is coming from them?

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Simon

So it Cowgate we at Cowgate under-fives nursery it's not the space isn't broken up by age and stage. It's we have different spaces for different kinds of experiences, but they're all very spacious. We have one whole room for block play. So it starts the day as a completely empty room and all kinds of things can be transported into that room.

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Simon

But it really learns from the centrality that Froebel gave to block play. And this is a kind of really illustrative, I think, that with blocks, children can create all manner of worlds, of resources, of play experiences, of relational experiences. Another thing about not dividing art nursery into age and stage, which is relatively new, it's only a few years old for Cowgate is precisely what you were talking about, Colin around how we support each other, around difficult emotions, different, different times of the day.

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Simon

We see amazing learning that goes on between children of different ages and their different needs and how we accommodate each other, how we support each other. And this goes to the idea of dialogic pedagogy that we have a practice and an approach to learning which is really built on responding in the here and now to what is what is happening, what is coming up, what are our needs, what are our feelings?

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Simon

How do we create community and environment together?

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Colin

Stella can see you're looking to come in on that as well.

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Stella

Yeah, I was. I was just thinking about what you said about the environment that you go into. I think as I have alluded to earlier, I think child development has really been watered down for lots of reasons. And I think adults sometimes don't understand what role they have working with children. But what's really wonderful about the Froebelian approach is that it's really clear.

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Stella

It's about adults being an observer. I mean, sometimes that's, you know, you're playing alongside, sometimes you're supporting, sometimes you extending. Adults also working in partnerships with parents and the wider community, then respecting children, respecting their first hand experiences, following their lead, and always looking for those good intentions, but ultimately seeing themselves helping children to connect to their family and and the wider world.

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Stella

So the Frobelian adult wouldn't do what you've just described because they would be quite clear, because everything seems to link together. And I think being a Frobelian is much deeper than any academic course I've ever done, because it isn't just about one thing. The deeper you go, the deeper there is still to go. And that's what makes, I think, it so fulfilling and powerful.

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Stella

It isn't just and this is what you do and you can become a Frobelian. It's I think for me a way is a way of being a way of living now that I wouldn't change.

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Colin

Yeah, it's a way of being and a way of living for you. But what about maybe those less experienced members of staff? Dare I see it maybe even less engaged. It sounds from what you're saying, like this requires maybe a certain level of commitment. Do you want to come in on that Dr. Chris Pascale?

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Chris

We've got a very diverse early years workforce and we've got a bit of a recruitment crisis. We all know that and we have a lot of less trained and untrained people in there. But like with children, we believe they all have capacity and they all have the potential. If they're putting a nurturing, developmental, inspiring context, we can grow them and develop them and take them on.

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Chris

But to me, there is a bottom line that I don't think you can be rebellious if you come into work and your eyes don't light up when you see the sight of a child, it's a bottom line thing. Do you actually enjoy children's company? Do they inspire you? Do you have a good day when you've engaged with children? Does that feed something in you? And as a leader, selecting staff or growing staff,

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Chris

if you've got somebody who really doesn't enjoy the company of children, then your job is to is to counsel them, to go and do something else. Because our children need people whose eyes light up when they walk in the door in the morning and enjoy their company and enjoy engaging with others whose eyes light up as well. But I think you can grow that with making people aware of the the magic of being being given the gift of a child that you're going to help become something can and the educator really can make a difference to a child's life.

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Chris

And that's an amazing thing to be given the opportunity to do. And if you can inspire people with that, then I think you will get those younger people on board and enjoying their professional life a bit more.

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Colin

Stella. Just as we sort of round off this this particular episode, I wondered if you could talk a little about, you know, just the variety of centres that you visit, what you see when you go in, how you feel, you know, what makes, what makes a good Frobelian centre. And just give me an idea of the kind of diverse, different areas that you're going into and what they look like, what they sound like, how they make you feel when you walk in the door.

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Stella

I go to a whole heap of different places and more recently where we doing a huge amount of work in Wales. I've worked in Australia, in Perth, I've worked in South Africa. But I want to start by just saying the work that I did in Australia. What was really interesting was that we were looking at Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing and we were reflecting on the Frobelian approach.

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Stella

There are many chimes there and it is it's about that wonderful engagement with nature, the, you know, socialisation from community and family. Working in a really poor community in South Africa. It's not where you work. It is about the attitude of staff, because I believe that the Frobelian approach and it is an approach. It enables you to articulate your practice, whether you're that 21 year old or whether you're a 27 year old academic.

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Stella

I don't really think it matters. It makes it gives sense to the nonsense. Quite often practitioners are told, do this, do that, do the other. However, if you explore a Frobelian approach, let's just say you're doing the family songs and finger play and you understand that the bones aren't yet ossified so therefore it's difficult for children to do particular things.

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Stella

Then children's development becomes really, really important and you have that understanding. So you can say you're going to do something and you've got understanding about why you're doing it. I think you can use the Frobelian approach anywhere. It is a universal approach, but it really is about attitudes and it's about bringing in the whole staff team and starting with where they're at.

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Stella

Because the minute you decide this is what I want to do and this is what my outcome's going to be, you've lost them. So if you want that unity and that connectivity and I can see everybody nodding, you've got to start with where your team is at and it really doesn't matter about location. And I think also there will be cultures and traditions that they have naturally a Froebelian approach.

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Stella

It's just not called that.

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Colin

Well, that's Dr. Stella Louis rounding things off for episode two of this Froebel Trust podcast. I'll be back soon with episode three, where our theme will be community and we'll be exploring how a Froebel inspired early years setting could interact with parents, primary schools and everything else that's going on around it. So thank you very much once again to all my guests and thank you for listening.

00:23:22:16 - 00:23:59:21

Colin

If you check the podcast description, you'll be able to find out more about all the participants in this podcast and you'll be able to access the Froebel Trust website and some of the training and resources and further information that you'll find on there. That website is at www.froebel.org.uk.

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