



# Growing a Nursery School from Seed The First 75 Years

Stephanie Harding and Felicity Thomas



*“The format of the book is its strength: the narrative/story approach, interspersed with history, reflections and also practical ideas that a current practitioner could take away and use. It is a timely reminder of the rich history of nursery schools and their continuing importance. The authors demonstrate what is possible through hard work and passion, and they show that change doesn’t happen overnight, but through a ‘slow cook’ approach.”*

**Dr Lucy Parker**

**Deputy Headteacher, Ludwick Nursery School**

*“Anyone involved in early education and implementing change will find this book useful, particularly headteachers of maintained nursery schools and leaders of other early childhood settings. The juxtaposition of theory with real life practice is excellent. The authors start with the practice and relate it to theory, which is refreshing, and connections throughout to the past are both fascinating and thought provoking.”*

**Sally Cave**

**Headteacher, Guildford Nursery School and Children’s Centre**

*“The book will help readers to locate themselves in the state of today’s early childhood work and to understand the context and backcloth of their work today. The authors convey several significant messages, not least showing the importance of leadership that is guided by an educational framework through which to practice the vision for the setting; and a dedication to the highest possible levels of professional training. Links to Froebelian education are woven through the book by the authors, who are now Froebel Travelling Tutors. This is the journey of one nursery school but it chimes with so many others.”*

**Professor Tina Bruce**

**Honorary Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Roehampton**

# **Growing a Nursery School from Seed The First 75 Years**

by  
**Stephanie Harding**  
and  
**Felicity Thomas**

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# Foreword

This case study of Earlham Nursery School is an inspiring story about growing a nursery school and creating an Early Years curriculum that is relevant to its unique setting and still able to run alongside the government-prescribed model of what to teach young children. As such, it explores an unusual achievement that has implications and inspiration for creative ways forward in Early Years care and education. This is not just another book about a nursery school – it is a challenge to administrators, educators and families to really go back to basics and be brave and innovative. The authors demonstrate an all too rare understanding that a strong sense of the history and traditions of Early Years education can support current practice and transform the curriculum, the lives of children and their families, and communities.

Felicity Thomas and Stephanie Harding are experienced educators and head teachers who led Earlham Nursery School for 20 years. They come from a Froebel tradition that emphasises the rhythms of child development, the significance of family and community, and the central role of children's experiences of the natural world. These insights came to shape the developments that were such a remarkable feature of this Early Years setting. This philosophy underpinned the radical curriculum that developed at Earlham. It was a 'dispositional' curriculum that liberated children, educators and families from an imposed target-driven approach. The other remarkable feature of life at Earlham was the gradual creation of a large garden that became central to the children's learning and social lives and also revitalised the community.

For many years I was privileged to be involved in the life of the nursery and the Early Years Centre that it became. My role as Critical Friend to Earlham meant that I was a small part player in the radical changes and developments that Felicity and Steph nurtured. Following the ups and downs of the writing of this book has been another way in which I have been fortunate to observe the work of these exceptional practitioners. They understood that their historic building and its remarkable garden was in itself the solid realisation of a philosophy of Early Years education. So, I invite you to enjoy this glimpse of early 20th century nursery design and lose yourself in the garden with its many surprises and delights!

Finally, I am drawn back again and again to a phrase used as one of the chapter titles – Thoughtful Educators and Learners. This is an idea and a practice that works both ways. We must all, adults as well as children, be learners, but the children and the communities we work with also educate us. This book shows us how to be both educators and learners as it challenges, informs and delights.

Thank you for my Earlham years!  
**Marian Whitehead**, *March 2020*

# Preface

Children's earliest years are crucial as they set a pattern for learning and engagement with education for the rest of their lives. The time is right for a book that demonstrates how practitioners in a Norwich nursery school evolved a principled approach to supporting young children and their learning. This allowed for continuity of practice not swayed by short-term political agendas.

Earlham Nursery School and its garden was an example of innovation and creative approaches to education based on research evidence. For example, it developed a curriculum rooted in an understanding of its local community. It was recognised under the Early Excellence programme (2002) as a showcase for promoting education in a natural environment.

The authors were both teachers and head teachers for 20 years from 1995 at Earlham Nursery School and are committed to the importance of nursery schools being at the centre of early education. They believe that good Early Years education and care must be based on a knowledge of theory that is applied to reflective practice. This is not new; there is a historic legacy of many great philosophers and educators who have been fascinated by the development of thinking in early childhood. We were particularly influenced by Friedrich Froebel. Felicity Thomas trained at the Froebel Institute and both authors have trained to become Froebel Travelling Tutors.

They also believe that nursery schools are well placed to provide innovation and training across the Early Years sector and that this approach should inform primary education. It is particularly important at this time when the education system has become more fragmented and in flux. There is a real threat to maintained nursery schools as their government funding is only guaranteed until 2021, even though they are considered world leaders at providing early education and care and 96% of them have been rated by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) as good or outstanding (State of Play Report, 2015). Nursery schools provide high-quality education in many deprived areas and are recognised for their role in closing the gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers.

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# Part One

Once upon a time...



# Chapter One

## Introducing the Authors, Personal Perspectives

*“Don’t limit a child to your own learning, for she was born in another time”*  
(*Rabindranath Tagore, n.d. )*

The authors, Stephanie Harding and Felicity Thomas, worked at Earlham Nursery School for 20 years from 1995. We felt that we would like to share with others the challenges and achievements made during that period and have set this in the context of the history of nursery education. Here is an introduction to our individual stories.

### Stephanie Harding

I am the oldest of four children. In my childhood I was the oldest of the posse of about ten children in our small 1950s close. This meant I was often given the role of adult/organiser in role play i.e. “the mum” or “the teacher”. I remember I used to lead a small group of children from our close a mile along the road and through a wooded lane to our infants and junior schools. These experiences resonate for me with Froebel’s emphasis on the importance of family and community contexts for learning.

We lived in a housing development on the edge of suburbia. Our estate was bordered by farmland and woodland on two sides. I used to walk up the road with my brother and sisters to play in the woods on our own and buy eggs from a lady who lived around the corner. I learned to ride at the stables at the end of the street. In the spring and summer, I helped my mum pick spring onions and strawberries at the farm across the road. I always enjoyed playing in the outdoors and was curious about the natural world as a child. I remember regular weekly nature walks at school and in the fourth year (Year 6), how much I enjoyed an extended project on trees which found me spending many hours drawing the silhouettes of trees in the woods nearby and trawling through encyclopaedias for information on their commonalities and individual differences. I loved engaging with the natural world so that when I encountered Froebel’s emphasis on the importance of nature in learning and development this had echoes of my own childhood experience.

My parents were Christians and I attended the Baptist Church Sunday School and the Girls' Brigade until I was a teenager. But once exposed to the ideas of socialism, my views took a more humanistic and atheistic approach to life and death. I am drawn to the idea of a unifying organisational structure to the universe and how this links to spirituality. My interpretation of spirituality is of an overriding structure that operates throughout the universe and is expressed on many different levels from the nano to the cosmic. It is akin to James Lovelock's idea of Gaia, the self-regulating universe.

I loved outdoor pursuits and sporting activities and particularly enjoyed the tactile and sensory experiences associated with cross country running (in which I represented my school and later my university). As a child I spent the majority of my holidays camping and still love the smells of sleeping outdoors and the sensation of being so close to the weather and to nature. One of my favourite experiences is being inside a tent during a rainstorm, hearing the rain hitting the tent surface and the wind whisper and blow around me. As an adult I love cycling and have enjoyed completing long distance walks in Britain and the Grand Randonnées in France. I feel energised and excited by the opportunity to observe the natural world in all of its difference and diversity while simultaneously pushing myself physically to walk over the next hill.

I trained as a teacher in 1995. I had chosen archaeology as a profession after graduating and worked on archaeological sites in the north east and in East Anglia. I loved working in field archaeology because of the mixture of outdoor physical work and the more cerebral work of problem solving and decoding historical and archaeological clues. After I had had my first child, I accompanied my husband to Papua New Guinea for three years during which time I had my second child. In PNG I continued links with archaeology by volunteering at the National Museum and also became involved in several child and parent groups including an international playgroup and a Steiner group. The knowledge I gained from these started me thinking about how sharing theories on children's development and learning can help parents observe, enjoy and educate themselves and their families.

I was lucky as I had the time to observe and enjoy my children during my stay in PNG and I found it fascinating and intriguing to watch them grow and develop in different and unique ways. On returning to the UK I became a volunteer and then a committee member of a local playgroup. Nine months after we returned home my first son started school and I volunteered in his reception class on Friday afternoons helping children to read. I enjoyed the play, the company of the children and watching their individual responses to the social world. I also loved to see the magic of children learning to read and write. I soon decided that it would be a good idea to train and qualify as a teacher in order to embark more formally on a career with young children. I applied and got a place on a PGCE. My placements confirmed for me that working with the youngest children is a most stimulating and thought-provoking experience.

I was fortunate to have an interview on the last day of term and was accepted as a Newly Qualified Teacher at Earlham Nursery School, where I started on the same day as Felicity Thomas, the deputy head teacher and co-author. Once engaged professionally with children I became even more interested in understanding them in the context of the school. I became the co-ordinator for the Effective Early Learning Project (a self-evaluation tool supported by Worcester College) and this introduced me to research and gathering information using qualitative and quantitative tools. I also took part in a European Comenius project and was lucky to visit nurseries in Barcelona. These experiences confirmed my interest in research and the theoretical approaches to early childhood and how these might inform my practice.

Influences that led to my exploring Froebelian ideas came from two sources. First, under the leadership of my friend and colleague Felicity, Earlham Nursery School was developing its approach to different areas of the curriculum and this was justified with reference to Froebelian philosophy. Alongside this, I had decided to study for a master's degree developed and led by Tina Bruce, who situated current practice in a theoretical frame informed by her own Froebelian training and research.

Aspects of Froebel's ideas that influence current practice which interest me are block play, songs and finger plays, and the importance of nature and the natural world as a context for learning and as a space for experiencing the spiritual and understanding the unity of the living world.

## Felicity Thomas

Outdoor learning has always been a passion of mine, stemming back as far as I can remember. As a young child of the 1950s I was outdoors most of the time. Sometimes I played with my sister and cousins, playing imaginary games and using the outdoors as our props and context, or I was on my own, exploring. My earliest memories are of messing around in a stream or running through the woods or climbing trees and being in 'Robin Hood's' camp. These were happy times full of adventure, negotiation, exploring and helping each other. We had scrapes but only ever minor injuries and we learned to pick ourselves up and carry on. This type of freedom from adult supervision and using the outdoors as 'our world' enabled us to develop resilience and social and emotional intelligence. We also had to cope with change, such as the weather and terrain. We learned to cope with unforeseen crises such as being chased by a bull. We learned which trees were good to climb, not to sit in ants' nests and not to disturb wasps and bees, and many other natural indicators of danger or delight, such as sucking the sweetness out of dead nettle flowers. I don't remember adults being part of this – they were safely at home.

At eight years old I went to a boarding school where most of the teachers were Froebel-trained and the pedagogy and environment were based on Froebel's principles. This school experience had a huge influence on me as we spent a lot of time learning outdoors. However, indoor learning was experiential and based around the children becoming immersed in their learning. For example, we read *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien as a whole class experience. We were asked to negotiate and agree our character from the book with the class. We made a puppet of our character and then presented the book as a puppet show in our own words. My character was Bilbo Baggins and I remember spending a lot of time finding the right materials for his clothes as I felt he was a very important character in the book. He wore a green and red tartan silk jerkin, brown velvet baggy trousers and a beautiful bottle-green cloak with a gold clasp all made by me!

At this junior boarding school, we spent time doing crafts and these were valued as a learning activity as much as English, maths, history, science and geography. In fact, the core subjects were woven into these craft activities where possible. We learned to weave, understanding pattern and the connection of the warp and the weft in the development of the wholeness of the cloth. We made raffia mats, understanding how the spiral formations made circular mats. We did basket work and clay modelling. It is more than 55 years since I was at this school, but I still spin wool and love the creative experience of weaving and making my own cloth.

I believe it was these early experiences that inspired me to become a Froebel teacher. I did not want to go to any other teacher training institution and was delighted when I was accepted after a very rigorous two-day interview process.

My teacher training experience at the Froebel Institute was experiential and highly discursive. We had to study the theory of education, philosophy, sociology and child development. We could also choose a subject which became known as our main subject and another which became known as our secondary subject. I chose printing as my main subject and I learned about lino cutting, etching and wood block printing and created many pictures with my newly learned skills. My secondary subject was natural science and I spent many happy hours pond dipping and going on nature walks! Key principles from Froebel's approach to education were embedded in the course. The three key principles which were forever engraved on my mind, and have therefore become the cornerstone of my teaching, are:

- **Know your child: observe and learn from the child and always start from where the learner is at.**

This became very pertinent in my experiences as a teacher and then principal of a day nursery in Devon which transformed into a multi-agency family centre in the 1980s. Practitioners had been actively discouraged to engage with children and had no understanding of individual children's needs. All the children were treated as a homogeneous mass with no individuality and no thought or understanding of how they processed learning. Modelling observations and supporting colleagues to observe became crucial. Having regular discussion meetings helped colleagues to see the importance of observations and how these could be analysed to develop individual learning plans for children. This was a multi-agency setting and reflection became important in helping us to describe to health visitors, psychologists and social workers the developmental needs and achievements of the children (Barnett, 1987).

- **Everything can be learned in nature. Understanding nature and how human beings are implicitly linked to the natural world. Humankind can therefore be in sympathy with the universe and work in harmony or can work against it.**

This principle resonated strongly with my early childhood experiences and again with my boarding school experience. More examples and discussion about this principle can be read in Chapter Ten, The Garden and Beyond.

- **Parents are children's first and enduring educators – they know more and understand more about their child than the teacher ever can. It is therefore imperative that teachers and parents work together to educate the child.**

As a child I was lucky to have my parents constantly around – my father was the vicar and my mother was at home. However, I later became aware of the need to have not only physical consistency, but also emotional consistency. When I first started teaching in an area of Greater London, the importance of engagement with parents became very clear to me. Over the course of my first three years of teaching in this area the demographic changed completely from all white working class to families of colour. The majority were Asian families but also Afro/Caribbean families. To understand their expectations of the nursery when we all spoke different languages was hard and we engaged with older siblings to help us understand and build relationships with the whole family.

Finally, I have always been interested in people and I think this has sparked my interest in leadership. I am a 'people watcher', and I spent a lot of time as a very young child when we moved watching people through the windows of the vicarage. I still do this on the Tube, much to my daughter's concern.

I began my teaching career in a 30-place nursery class and had two experienced nursery nurses to support me. I used to get to work really early to get everything ready and make sure we were prepared for the day. After a few weeks of this my support staff sat me down and said, “You are the teacher, but this doesn’t mean you have to do everything. We are here to support and help you, so talk to us!” After this we met every day to discuss ideas and talk about strategies with the children. I learned a great lesson from them. Working together with an agreed understanding meant that our strength was far more than threefold. This echoed with me again when I did my MA in Early Years Leadership and I came across the native American saying, “My strength is not mine alone, but that of many.” (unknown source).

Later in my career I found myself propelled at 27 into the post of principal and leader of a family centre which was transforming from a traditional day nursery. This was very challenging. A year earlier I had been appointed as the Scale 2 teacher to support the newly appointed principal to transform the 1940s day nursery into an innovative multi-agency family centre. The principal was visionary, dynamic and extremely knowledgeable and experienced. However, after a year of challenging change she moved on and I was asked to take on her role. I was young and naive but full of enthusiasm. The original matron of the day nursery was still in post and I found myself witnessing the negative impact of a powerful, autocratic and controlling person. This, for me, was an example of how not to lead – having no regard for others, no understanding of theory or how to embrace change. This was my first experience of leading a team which had worked under a very formal, inflexible structure which had been punitive and worked against building positive relationships between all people involved in the day nursery. I was determined to build a democratic, flexible, multi-agency provision which valued all of its stakeholders and was reflective in practice. I was delighted to find that my efforts were written up in a research book called *Beyond Individual Risk Assessment: Community Wide Approaches to Promoting the Health and Development of Families and Children* by Robert W. Chamberlin, who was kind enough to give me a copy with a message on the fly cover, “For Felicity Thomas, with many thanks for providing me with one of the best examples of community-wide approaches I saw” (Chamberlin,1988:193).

It is from these experiences that I have developed a great curiosity about leadership and how to value all. I have learned that everyone has experience, knowledge of life and individual strengths that they can bring to the table. They can use this to create a rounded and democratic learning community informed by an agreed vision based on sound principles. These three Froebelian principles, and my curiosity about people, have motivated me and become the drivers for change and innovation at Earlham.

# Chapter Two

## Arriving at Earlham

*“First time I understood, it’s got to be the going not the getting there that’s good”  
(Chapin, 1972)*

### My first days at Earlham

In 1995, Earlham Nursery School had been operating quietly for 56 years. The nursery was well thought of within the community but was not used by all local families because, in some people’s eyes, it was too formal too early and smacked of the ‘educational system’. Many had been to the nursery as little children and again this was a reason to choose the nursery, but equally a reason to reject it as a choice. Many of the families who came back with their own children made comments like, “it smells the same”, “I remember those windows” and “I used to make a run for it through those windows across the fields”.

One dark March night, when I was running a parent group for families to discuss how their children were learning, a dad arrived. His son came to the nursery and he had attended when he was a little boy. He had not been back and never dropped off or picked up his son. I was surprised that he had wanted to attend the group. He phoned to say he would be late because it was snowing and said to leave the door open which I did. He entered the room and said, “I feel like a kid of four again, this place hasn’t changed at all”.

When I arrived at Earlham, I knew the community a little as I had been working in the First School in the clinic, which was being used as a base for the Conservative government’s pilot project called the Family Literacy Programme. Interestingly, during this time I had no contact with the nursery – I was hardly aware it was there, even though the school and nursery shared a site. I think we can say that communication between the two establishments was minimal. At the same time as I started at the nursery, my co-author, Steph Harding, was employed as a newly qualified teacher (NQT). At this time the nursery had three classes called yellow, blue and green rooms. Each class was led by a teacher who was supported by a nursery nurse and a special needs support assistant. This was because the nursery had a high percentage of children with additional needs, which included a unit for profoundly deaf children. These children were taxied into the nursery from across the county – many of them had a long journey to manage, as well as being outside their community and other

support systems. This was common practice in Norfolk in the 1990s. The children in the unit were not integrated into the classes in the nursery but did have small opportunities to 'play' in one room.

Each class operated as a 'mini' nursery. The structure allowed for autonomy of practice in each room and the head was the administrative lead. The children were given a rich learning environment with lots of table top opportunities. Each table could seat up to six children and was spread with a colourful cloth. On this cloth was sometimes poured haphazardly the Lego or small building blocks. Other tables may have had puzzles on a theme of autumn or a doll's house with the figures carefully placed by the adult. Language development and talking to children was a priority. These activities gave a rich opportunity for 'talk' if the adults were skilled in this area.

Having a clear structure and routine to follow was also a priority. Outdoor play was seen as part of this routine and only available for a short period to allow the children to 'let off steam' and the teachers to have a coffee or tea break. Outdoor equipment was hauled out of a large shed every morning, taking a staff member away from the children for up to 20 minutes, and again in the afternoon when it was put away. This was clearly wasted time and effort but the 'garden' at this time was just pink slabs of concrete with a slope to a gate. Either side of this slope was a terraced grass area, at the top of which were three beautiful and very large sycamore trees. Near the mobile, which housed the children who were profoundly deaf, was a small copse of woodland trees such as birch, larch and Mirabella plum. I was told very clearly that "we do not go on the grass when it is wet" by a nursery assistant. The children already knew this.

In 1996, I became the sixth head of the nursery school. There was no deputy for the first term. However, there was plenty to do in terms of setting priorities for change. It was decided we needed to discuss and agree a vision for the purpose of the nursery and also have a collective understanding of how we all felt young children learn and the environment needed for this learning to thrive. All staff needed to feel valued for their knowledge and understanding and contribution to the agreed vision. They needed to feel connected with the purpose and know the reason they came to the nursery every day. We also wanted staff to value learning themselves and be enthusiastic to develop their knowledge. This was a hard nut to crack, but this is how Froebel saw learning as a continual reflection on what we know and what we still need to know. It was important that everyone had a deeper understanding of the value of outdoor learning and why this should be available all the time for children. We wanted everyone to feel the emotional response to learning in nature and how we as human beings are intrinsically attached to the natural world, again, a key Froebelian concept. Finally, we felt that everyone needed to understand that children are part of a family and a community and therefore both the family and the community had a role to play within the nursery, the vision of the nursery and most of all in the children's learning. These are big areas of development and they were born from my Froebelian teacher training, even though I don't feel I was explicit about expressing them in that way.

## Priorities

The first priority was to bring people together initially to talk and share ideas about the function of the nursery and the role of all the practitioners. We did this by initiating weekly staff meetings. These were held outside contracted working hours, so all the support staff were given an hour off during the working week. This had to be managed so the hours did not fall together. To begin with, practitioners, particularly the support staff, did not see why they had to attend, or indeed what they had to offer at these meetings. Agendas had to be structured to allow everyone a chance to talk. This was difficult as people were not used to stating their views and were very negative at first.



It was initially seen as a forum for voicing discontents that often went back some time. The discussion often had to be brought back to the needs of the children and how we were going to promote their learning and emotional development. There was a multiplicity of views from quite progressive in attitude to extremely formal and didactic. However, it became evident that all the practitioners were at Earlham because they valued and enjoyed the children. Some had worked at the nursery for 20 years and had an in-depth knowledge of families and the community dynamic.

The governing body was also well established but had an arm's length approach to governance, leaving all direction and innovation to the head teacher. They saw their role as a 'rubber stamp'. We sought for the connection of all concerned to develop a collective vision which would put children and families at the heart of its development. It was a challenge to bring this disparate structure together: governance, practice, children and families. However, this was achieved and will be outlined in detail in Chapter Eight, Developing a United Vision.

Through our staff meeting discussions, we agreed to carry on with a classroom structure I had piloted in my classroom when deputy. I had set the classroom up as a workshop environment with fewer table top activities and radically reduced numbers of chairs. This caused consternation as "all children needed to sit at a table on a chair". We soon discovered that they did not – though I have to say chairs kept creeping back into the rooms apparently unaided! This structure was informed by the High Scope programme (1970) in America which I had used before in my nursery in Devon. Working in this way gave children some control over their learning by offering choice within a clear framework. It helped children to develop their independence and for the adults to support their learning choices.

We introduced the children to this process by using a Plan-Do-Review structure which also invited parents in to help their children plan their session's activity. To do this constructively we needed to develop workshop areas for children to explore.

The nursery already had a complete set of Community Playthings hollow blocks which were only used in the long corridor on wet days when the children had traditionally not gone outdoors at all. Steph and I ordered a set of Unit Blocks for each room to be the main resource in the construction areas. This was done to provide a natural open-ended quality resource for all children.

To support creativity, we invited back the previous head teacher, who painted beautifully with water colours, to be our 'artist in residence'. She set up her water colours and easel and painted as if in a studio. This inspired the children in the painting area. We introduced colour mixing with water powder paints and children could choose whether they painted at an easel, or table, or on the floor – sometimes outside when the artist wanted to paint a landscape. The children copied her stance and the way she held her brush. They watched her observation skills and her use of colour and paper. The children began to produce some wonderful insightful paintings and portraits. Children are indeed brilliant observers of the human condition. Froebel (1826) would have understood this strategy as freedom with guidance. The children were free to mix their colours but with clear guidance on how to do this so that they did not always achieve brown. They could choose their subject and paint freely, but the process was modelled by an experienced adult painter. Vygotsky (1978) would also see this as an exposition of his Zone of Proximal Development – the more advanced practitioner modelling, showing and encouraging the less advanced in the pursuit of a new goal.

We developed role play areas, inviting book areas, mark making and mathematics areas. The equipment was presented in an open-ended way, ready for exploration by the children. All of our resources were categorised as 'core' or 'enhanced' provision, the 'core' provision being available and

accessible to children every day, and the 'enhanced' provision added after close observation of the children to enrich and guide their learning. Care needed to be taken to ensure the environment did not become cluttered and remained appropriate to the children's learning needs.

The outside became available as another workshop area, with practitioners taking it in turns to support learning outside. Steph (class teacher) and Peter (our new deputy) and I would get the outdoor resources ready before the children arrived, meaning no loss of adult support when the children were with us. Coffee and tea breaks for the teachers no longer happened.

This environment and structure allowed the children more autonomy and choice and emulated some of the features of 'free flow play' as described by Bruce (1991).

In the autumn of 1997, the nursery school had its first Ofsted inspection. I was able to use the head teacher's report (section four of the documentation) to highlight areas which I was finding hard to improve and develop. There were two extremely challenging areas:

- Seeing and using the outdoors as a unique and all-encompassing learning environment
- Engaging practitioners in observing and planning for individual children's learning and development

The issue here was that practitioners felt very strongly that they were not paid to take on this responsibility – it was definitely the 'teacher's role'. This debate around roles and responsibilities went on in various forms for many years but this was our first encounter with it. The role of the practitioner, or nursery nurse, had been seen in a traditional way as the person who did what the teacher asked. They often tidied up and cleaned paint pots as well as following prescribed tasks set by the teacher for children. The role of the teacher was seen as the 'qualified professional', the responsible adult who set the agenda for teaching and learning in the classroom and was also the interface between the class structure and the home. The teacher spoke to and engaged with the parents.

## New Projects

At this time the local authority was asking for volunteers to pilot a project run from the University of Worcester by Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram. The advisory team for Early Years put on a training day to introduce interested parties to the Effective Early Learning Programme (EEL, 1996). This was a programme based on close observation of children and adults in Early Years settings. It was devised as a self-evaluation kit and as part of this there was a range of tools to help practitioners develop their observation skills and to analyse them in terms of sensitivity, stimulus and autonomy. This gave a framework for practitioners to develop their next steps, both for children and the adults working with them.

The senior management team got excited about this as we saw it as a way to address the second challenge mentioned above. Steph and I went to the information day and decided to put the nursery's name down to be part of this project. Steph agreed to lead on this. To both of us it seemed like an ideal structure to explore with the staff how we observe children and how we observe each other as a way of developing our practice. In retrospect, it was a lot to take on just after our first experience of an Ofsted inspection. However, we were young and enthusiastic, and it turned out to be a very successful, if exhausting, strategy. As head teacher, I felt I needed to lead the practice and so I found myself being observed by nearly all of the staff team.

There was a structure to follow and adult practice was assessed using the three areas mentioned above – but I will outline further and link them to my Froebelian principles.

**Stimulation:** How well did the practitioner stimulate learning based on what they know of the child and the child's motivations?

**Froebel link:** Know your child, what they already know and what they are motivated to want to learn. Use this as a basis for providing a rich playful environment and find ways to use the child's interest to build new knowledge and understanding (link, always link).

**Sensitivity:** How sensitive was the practitioner to the child's needs? How well did they use prior learning and family knowledge of the child?

**Froebel link:** Again, this is about knowing your child and the context in which they live, their family and community, and have the ability to make meaningful connections.

**Autonomy:** How did the practitioner enable children to be in control of their learning but also know when to step in and guide their learning?

**Froebel link:** Freedom with guidance. This is one of Froebel's principles. He said that the adult with the child needed to be outwardly passive but inwardly active (Froebel, 1826). Froebel believed in following a child's fascinations and being led by this but having the capacity to understand when to intervene or engage in a way that would take the child to new learning.

The huge benefit of this project for me was that it allowed me to have one-to-one time with all the staff team. They talked about what they had observed me doing and were able to ask me why I did things in a certain way. Being playful and entering into the child's game as a partner rather than a leader was a huge revelation. One member of staff said she would feel "silly" doing this but she could clearly see how much the children were enjoying it and how their play was positively sustained. Another member of staff said she thought she would lose "control" and "respect" from the children and she would not be able to modify their behaviour. These comments resonate with me now. When I visited the school which Froebel started at Keilhau, Germany, in 1817, the historian who was our guide gave a description of Froebel squatting down on all fours and being animals with the children. The people in Keilhau thought him a silly old fool with no authority – they could not understand that in this way Froebel was able to inspire children to want to learn.

The additional benefit to this project was that it got all the practitioners talking about the children and seeing the value of this dialogue. It provided us with a structure and process to initiate our own observations, which were the forerunner of our learning journeys and the development of our dispositional curriculum. The final benefit was the collaborative relationship which the project demanded from the local authority. We had our own EEL adviser who spent a lot of time at the nursery. Her role was that of moderator, so everyone had the experience of observing both children and practitioners (me) alongside her and discussing their joint observations. This gave practitioners huge confidence in a new and initially frightening process. It also paved the way for practitioners to want more training or continuous professional development. Two untrained members of staff who had worked for many years at the nursery, and had both started as parent volunteers, took their NVQ3 in Early Childhood Development because of the success of the EEL project. Froebel was a passionate advocate for highly qualified and appropriately-trained educators for all children. He started his own teacher training institute for women teachers in 1849.

It was from this positive EEL experience that we collectively discussed the way forward to develop our own observation structure for children and adults. The debate was around doing regular short

observations of achievement on Post-It notes or to be engaged with in-depth, long observations of a child across the course of a session. We had varying views on this. The EEL experience had introduced us to short observations (two minutes) but doing a number of these across the session (time sampling). This had worked well and we had all mastered the process, including a coded approach to engagement with others and the social context.

We had also been introduced to narrative observations through our reading and research. At this time the nursery's senior leadership team, comprising the head (myself), the deputy head and two other teachers, were under a lot of pressure from the local authority's Inspection and Development Adviser (IDA) to provide hard outcomes and targets for each child to reach. These outcomes were very narrow and based on skills and knowledge. They did not address the development of the whole child. This was the era of the Desirable Learning Outcomes (DLOs, 1996). These were the government's expectations of the learning outcomes that children should achieve before they reached the reception class in school. This was a big concern for us at Earlham. Our unifying pedagogy was child-centred and we saw a child's learning as holistic, taking in all aspects of a child's development in equal measure. This of course included skill development and knowledge acquisition, but this had to be in the context of the child's social and emotional development and their own motivations and enthusiasms to learn. We all saw our role as providers of a rich and exploratory environment which was connected to children's prior knowledge but gave exciting and open-ended ways to develop their learning in terms of their skills, knowledge, emotions, and natural enthusiasms. These ideas informed how we later developed the curriculum (see Chapter Nine).

We often used themes to hang learning on. An example of this was when the deputy head developed in his room the theme of summer holidays. One of his children had been talking a lot about going on an aeroplane. He set up a 'travel agent' in the home corner with the help of a BBC B computer. He explained to the children that holidays had to be booked and paid for and that there were different ways to travel to places. This led to a discussion on travel and how these different modes of travel could be implemented in the classroom. The children made the carpet area into a sea using blue material and then built a boat out of Community Playthings blocks. With trial and error, they constructed a mast and a sail. Other children used the bikes in the garden to make a train by connecting them all with skipping ropes, each bike becoming a carriage. There was a station and a track drawn on the pink concrete with chalks.

The most challenging mode of transport discussed was the aeroplane! The deputy was not deterred. Using the Big Builder and a pulley system with ropes, the children helped him make a plane which actually flew, and they could be transported (one at a time) across the room above all their friends. There was a big map put on the wall and the children had to decide where they wanted to go on holiday, when they wanted to go and for how long, and how they wanted to travel. These decisions were put in the computer and their tickets were printed. This activity lasted for weeks and the children were very engaged. Their learning was about developing skills of writing, typing, constructing, and making choices. Their knowledge was expanded greatly about how things work, what travel agents are for, other places to go to around the world, and how maps can be used. However, their relationships, problem solving, and critical thinking developed massively. They were all active learners and had amazing fun which they were very keen to share with others and their families, which they could do well with their new vocabulary, so language development was also achieved. This activity may not have improved their skill at writing their names, but this was a key target for the IDA, and we found ourselves at an impasse with her expectations and our own.

We all felt we needed high-quality, well-respected and independent advice. I researched and found

that Marian Whitehead – an internationally-respected writer and consultant on children’s learning and development, with a particular emphasis and understanding of language acquisition, mark making and literacy for young children – lived not far from the nursery.

I wrote to her asking if she would be prepared to be the ‘Critical Friend’ to the nursery. To our delight she agreed. Marian has since written an excellent description of her role as Critical Friend at the nursery in the journal *Early Childhood Practice* (2000). It was through Marian’s understanding and sensitive guidance that we as a complete staff group worked towards developing a disposition-based curriculum set in the context and understanding of the nursery community. This exploration of ideas also led us to develop long, narrative learning stories. Both gave us data to discuss and present the progress of the nursery children to the IDA in ways that satisfied her remit and expectations. A full description of our disposition and learning story journey is outlined in Chapter Nine, *Thoughtful Educators and Learners*.

Earlier in this chapter I wrote about our imminent Ofsted inspection, which I used as a vehicle to help with the first challenge I mentioned, that of using the outdoors as a unique and all-encompassing learning environment. My own personal background and my professional training as a Froebel teacher meant that learning in a natural, exploratory, exciting, accessible outdoor environment was essential to high-quality Early Years provision. As previously mentioned, ‘the garden’ at Earlham did not have all of these qualities. However, it was directly accessed from each of the three classrooms and therefore ready for improvement. The inspectors agreed with me and put outdoor learning as our area for development, a challenge therefore that had to be addressed.

## **The first steps to developing the garden**

Let me try and describe the garden as it was in 1997. In terms of some outdoor areas it was of an adequate or even good size, approximately 200 feet wide and 70 feet deep. The majority of the space leading directly from the three classrooms was dirty pink concrete, cracked and uninviting, but level. In the middle of this concrete were two curved walls facing each other about 20 feet apart with planters at either end.



**Photo 1. Planters**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, c.2000)



**Photo 2. Terrace overlooking field**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, c.2000)

A wooden seat was placed between each planter. As described previously there was a terraced grass area leading up to a gate. Either side of the gate was a sharp barberry hedge. Just in front of the hedge were the three magnificent sycamores and the small copse. At the western edge of the garden was a high wire fence with the school playground on the other side. On the east side of the garden was the mobile and behind this, a hidden grassed area.



**Photo 3. Hidden garden behind the building**

*(Private Collection, Norwich, c.2000)*

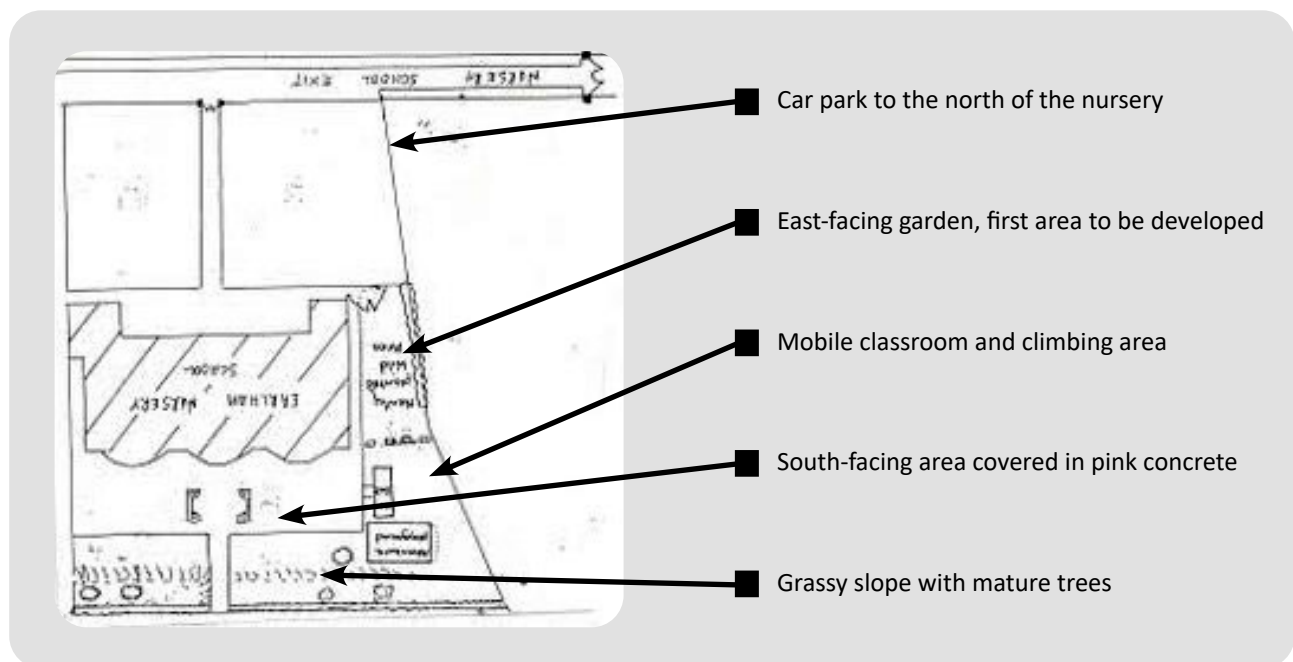


**Photo 4. Garden on the east side of the building.**

*(Private Collection, Norwich, c.2000)*

To the south through the gate was part of the school field, which was unused and something of a rubbish tip for the houses behind. To the north was the nursery building which had a small side garden to the east. This was largely unused and overgrown with an enormous laurel hedge – laurel being a very poisonous shrub! There were metal 'A' frames stuck on the grass and never used as the children did not enter this part of the garden.

The garden was accessible, yes, with some natural features, but not very exciting and with few areas for real exploration (*Figure 1*).



**Figure 1. Plan of garden**

*(Private Collection, Norwich, 2000)*

The concrete area became covered with construction frames and wheeled vehicles during the session. This area was big enough for children to get up to quite a speed on the bikes and this became the challenge. It was, as I am sure you can imagine, the same few boys who always got to the bikes first and then refused to share them.

They would spend all their time outdoors causing havoc by crashing into each other and scaring others who were unable to access the bikes. We had accidents and scared children who really did not want to be outdoors with nowhere to escape the racetrack. This, we agreed, was a problem.

Steph at this time was doing her MA in Early Childhood Education and Care at Pen Green. She included all of us in her action research which was on bike play and boys. Steph encouraged us to all observe these boys, taking us back to the Froebelian principle of 'know your child'. We all needed to gain an understanding of what motivated them and what they were learning. We soon realised that their motivation was speed, control of their environment and perhaps a need to show their skills at bike riding, giving them a sense of self-worth. What they were learning, we decided, was very limited and repetitive. They undoubtedly had skills in pedalling but not necessarily in steering and direction or control, as there were a number of accidents. They were engaged in solitary play, so no language or communication skills were developing. Neither were there any personal, social and emotional skills involved. At a staff meeting we decided to get rid of most of the bikes and gradually fundraise to get more. We agreed that each new wheeled toy would require the child to develop new skills and emotional learning.

A friend of mine asked if she could be involved and gave a generous donation for three good bikes. These were:

- A pillion tricycle for two
- A small tricycle with a platform for a passenger
- A wheeled toy which you pedalled with your hands. This required a lot of concentration as the steering was linked to the pedals.

We gradually added to these with:

- A Pedal Go
- Two-wheeler bikes
- A taxi tricycle
- A rickshaw
- A two-wheeler scooter

We agreed to encourage the children to always carry a passenger if their vehicle was designed for two.

We developed role play around bike play adding baskets to the bikes. The deputy head painted a road on the concrete with a pedestrian crossing, roundabout and junctions with lights. This enabled us to talk about the rules of the road and traffic safety. Children needed to pass their driving test and were given a 'driving licence' when they had achieved the appropriate skill. We extended this by going in groups to the main road and doing a survey of traffic on this busy route into Norwich. We also made car and bike washes and petrol stations. We had great fun washing my car with sponges and buckets of water. By observing, discussing, analysing and agreeing learning outcomes we were able to change the attitude to bikes for all the children and all were able to get involved in this play, relating it to real tasks and experiences.

We continued to develop the garden. We wanted to make it more natural with other areas to study and find out about nature. We had a small garden to the east side of the nursery building with a gate. We never used this space because of the enormous laurel hedge as the boundary, and it was also out of our sightline. It was agreed to develop this as a pond and nature area. It had some small but mature trees in the space.

Volunteers from the Probation Service came and dug up the laurel hedge –this was a mammoth task which we could not have achieved without them.

Parents were involved; we gathered their ideas and some were willing to give time to help dig the pond. It was the digging of the pond that expanded this project into a rich learning experience for the children. A little girl was digging with her mother when she found a very white stick. “What is this?” she asked me. I said I wasn’t sure, but it could be the bone of a dead animal. She was immediately interested and we started speculating about what animal it could have been. I said, “Let’s ask Steph, because she used to be an archaeologist.” “What’s an archaeologist?” – and so the conversation developed as I explained about ‘digs’ and cleaning ‘finds’ and categorising each find and putting them into labelled plastic bags. I explained how this could build a picture of what happened a long time ago. She went over to find Steph to ask about her bone. When she came back, she said with some glee, “You are wrong, Steph says it is part of a clay pipe that men used to smoke. Can I wash it and put it in a plastic bag?”

So we started our very own archaeology project, with many children getting involved with digging, washing, sorting, categorising, bagging and labelling. The bank very kindly donated the small transparent bags. We found many interesting things, a few examples of which are:

- Old pairs of children’s metal but round-ended scissors (very rusty)
- A bus conductor’s badge with numbers on
- Beautiful fragments of pottery, all different colours but a lot of blue
- Many clay pipes

The children discussed their finds with each other and the adults. The sorting and categorising had a real purpose and was done by the children with great attention to detail. All the bags with the labelled and dated artefacts were displayed in the corridor for parents to see and discuss. It brought up memories of life on the estate and the nursery up to 50 years ago. This was a real and meaningful activity which deepened and enriched the children’s language, observation skills, mathematical concepts, a feeling of history, and of what had happened at this place before they played in the garden. It developed their personal and social awareness and gave them a sense of belonging and history. In today’s world this would be acknowledged as building on their understanding of their community.

We continued to observe children in the garden and developed the garden through their motivations and interests. The expansion of the garden through the Early Excellence Centre Programme (DfSFC, 1997) will be described and discussed in Chapter Ten, The Garden and Beyond. These initial projects set us on the road of reflection and working together to improve our practice. The full extent of how we developed this action learning is outlined in Chapter Eight, Developing a United Vision.



# Reflection

- Memories are powerful when they connect to emotions, both good and bad. We need to positively engage with children and parents so that memories can be replaced, if needed, by new, powerful, positive messages about community and learning. The connectedness between children, parents and community and learning was a central Froebelian message.
- Data is only relevant if it improves practice.
- Continual reflection on practice guards against mindless routines and stagnation of ideas.
- The importance of involving all in the development of a collective vision cannot be overstated. It takes time and is a continuous mission as personnel change.
- A thorough knowledge and understanding of pedagogical theories is needed as this allows everyone to articulate why they do things the way they do with children.
- Staffing structures must provide the opportunity for all to shine. Empowering your colleagues by nurturing their knowledge and their practice is a key Froebel principle.
- Being in tune with children's many and varied learning processes opens up their learning potential.
- Neuroscience confirms the ideas of Early Years theorists of how a systematic, observational approach helps adults to understand how children learn. Froebel said "Let us learn from our children" (Froebel in Hailmann, 1909:89). By this, he was advocating close observation and engagement to gain a deeper understanding of how individual children live and learn.
- Always seek more knowledge and discussion from people with no political agenda.
- Exercise your right to question.

# Chapter Three

## A Closer Look at Froebel (1782–1852)

*“If three hundred years after my death my method of education shall be completely established according to its idea, I shall rejoice in heaven”*  
(Froebel, 1826).

### Who was Froebel and why is he important in this book?

Froebel was a forester, crystallographer and a keen observer of people and life. His ideas about education and children’s learning were the product of a lifetime of experience, observation and deep reflection. He is probably best known for the development of the Kindergarten movement throughout Europe, America and beyond. So why is Froebel important today and why do we want to take a closer look at him and his work?

In this chapter Froebel’s approach to education will be described and linked to contemporary ideas about children and learning. We will also try and give a sense of the importance of early childhood as a time in its own right to be celebrated and not a preparation for the next stage. Froebel was clear about parents as educators and the role of the community as a significant influence on the child and family. Froebel had a great influence on nursery education in this country throughout the 20th century through the Froebelian teaching colleges. Most of the early teaching staff at Earlham had been trained in Froebel colleges, as indeed many nursery and infant school teachers had throughout the country.

Froebel lived in challenging times, as we do today. At the beginning of the 19th century there was a political struggle between the ‘privileged’ classes and the ‘Enlightenment movement’. This movement believed in pursuing knowledge through discussion and reflection. They debated the morality of having a privileged ruling class, who ruled through divine right rather than knowledge and understanding.

There was a debate across Europe around the meaning of democracy. The French were emerging from their devastating revolution and had started to put in place their view of democracy, which we continue to discuss today.

The German principalities felt threatened by these discussions. Froebel became involved when he joined the Lutzow Free Corps – an elite corps of freedom fighters. However, he was ambivalent about the struggle. In this corps he met his two lifelong friends and colleagues who worked together to “educate children to be free spirited, creative and independent individuals...” (Community Playthings, 2016). It was with these two friends that Froebel established his first school at Keilhau in 1817, and it was from Keilhau that Froebel wrote his ideas on education in 1826. It was his experience as director of an orphanage in Switzerland that started him thinking about education for the very young. For Froebel education and life were entwined and should not be seen as separate. Education had to start with the youngest children and mothers needed to be involved and trained to educate them – this inspired him to set up training colleges for women, which was very forward-thinking. He started his first institution for early childhood and in 1840 named this a kindergarten to reflect his passion for children, play and nature (Weston, 2000). However, these kindergartens were later closed by the authorities. Froebel did not believe in a facts and knowledge-based curriculum, where all children learned the same information. He saw children as individuals with individual motivations and strengths. Froebel was a thinker; he wanted life for all children, whatever their circumstances, to provide opportunity. There is still this ongoing tension between the two different models of education where children are seen as empty vessels to be filled or sentient beings in charge of their own learning.

“Children are like tiny flowers; they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers” (Froebel, cited in Community Playthings, 2016: 62)

We have explained the challenges that Froebel experienced in developing his educational principles to illustrate that even great pioneers in Early Years education had challenges. They may have doubted themselves or felt overwhelmed with external and irrelevant requirements but kept going with what they knew to be right in terms of children’s holistic learning. We have also found that having a clear vision anchors your philosophy and enables you to articulate your ideas. Froebel based his education on a set of principles which were informed by nature, observation of children and reflection. They are:

- Respect for the child – or child-centred learning.
- Understanding of the child through engagement and observation as outlined in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS 2008).
- Adults offering freedom for the child to explore within a secure boundary of guidance, opening up the child’s thinking to opportunities and connections.
- Play as the engine of learning – the Characteristics of Effective Learning as described in the EYFS (2012) link well with this principle.
- The interconnectedness of all learning and knowledge; the concept of Unity – or transference of ideas and knowledge in different contexts.
- Humans as creative beings – again this links with the Characteristics of Effective Learning.
- Learning in nature and from nature to make micro and macro connections. (Froebel put nature at the centre of learning and used this as a conduit for understanding play and creativity. He saw nature as exemplifying his principles of unity and connectivity.) Learning is powerful when applied through observation, exploration, investigation and hypothesising about the natural world we live in.
- The child as part of the Community – this links with the agenda for home school learning and also the previous development of Sure Start Local Programmes (1999) and Children’s Centres (2005), sadly now diminishing.

Froebel developed a way to help children to explore concepts and to understand these in concrete terms through play using blocks, point, line and flat surfaces. He called these resources the Gifts and the Occupations. Today the Gifts translate as blocks with specific mathematical relationships to each other. The Occupations are a vehicle to apply these concepts in meaningful activities. In today's environments, the Occupations are evident in workshop activities such as clay, modelling with recycled objects, painting, cooking and gardening – these activities would be dependent on the needs and culture of the children you support.

I experienced an example of being aware of the cultural context when recently working in India with street children. I saw girls and boys absorbed in making symmetrical and intricate patterns with parquetry shapes. I asked them if they had seen patterns like this before and they said, “Yes, we are making Rangoli patterns” – these are all based on flower symmetry and link beautifully into Froebel’s principle of connectivity and learning through nature.



**Photo 5. Making Rangoli patterns**  
(Private Collection, 2017, India)

The children were able to engage with these patterns as they are part of their everyday life (Photo 5). In Early Years settings in Britain I have not observed a great deal of pattern making and this may be a resource we have lost. At Earlham we used to do pattern making with found objects (natural materials) and with buttons. Children love the feel of buttons and today there are many interesting shapes and textures to be found. These connect with a child’s existing experience as the Rangoli patterns do in India.



**Photo 6. Pattern making with buttons in Norwich**  
(Private Collection, 2017, Norwich)

Froebel developed the Gifts as tools or toys to help children develop symbolic ideas and learning, encouraging children to play with and use them to represent the familiar experiences in their lives, but also to expand their knowledge and understanding and to support their creativity. I used a box of buttons as a regular resource for children at Earlham, where we could explore pattern, shape, colour and space using familiar resources to learn about mathematical concepts (division and fractions) or they could be used to make artwork (Photo 6).

Froebel was interested in Unity and how all learning must be connected – this was why he always wanted children to modify their designs rather than destroy and start again. This helps children to assess their learning and build on what they already know. We can support this by encouraging children to engage in exploration, to use their imagination, to hypothesise and to speculate. These are all useful skills in developing critical thinking.

The contemporary expression of the Gifts is block play or construction, which has long been a tradition in English nurseries and Early Years settings. However, the adults need to reflect on the learning potential of this area to ensure it is situated in a good place in the setting and not used as a walkway, with children and adults passing through. Thought needs to be given to the number and location of resources. We also have to think clearly about the language we use and the modelling we do in the block play area. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are we posing hypotheses and are we reminding and building on past knowledge and experience?
- Do we link new ideas and experience to known facts and knowledge?
- Do we extend thinking by adding or taking away some resources?
- Do we encourage storytelling and sequencing of events?

Froebel felt it was important to link the learning and knowledge gained from the Gifts to the creativity of the Occupations. For example, if children had been exploring and playing with blocks then the Occupation that might extend this learning could be clay. If the children had been exploring making patterns with flat shapes, then paper folding might be the Occupation to further their understanding and creativity. Finally, if children had been working with sticks to make lines, then sewing, threading or weaving might be a relevant Occupation to extend their understanding.

We would not call these types of activity Occupations today. However, all quality Early Years settings have workshop areas where the children are free to paint or print (one-dimensional line), construct with recycled materials (working with flat planes and boxes), collage experiences (flat planes/sides), clay or play dough (making solid shapes and moulding), threading and possibly sewing (line and point), cooking (changing states), sand and water (natural materials), to name a few. The workshop areas today reflect the life and times we live in and also our cultural context.

Froebel believed passionately about all children learning in nature. All his principles could be supported through outdoor learning. The concept of the kindergarten was just that, a garden of and for children.

Children have a natural impulse for physical activity, but this activity needs to be linked to real tasks or occupations that have meaning for the child and allow their creative spirit to flourish. Froebel saw that young children are full of natural curiosity and they spend time observing, examining and comparing what is all around them.



**Photo 7. Children from the Little Brown Hare Pre-school in Norfolk**  
*(Private collection, 2019, Norwich)*

Have you ever seen a child closely study a dandelion clock or a bee taking pollen from a foxglove or as the children above studying slugs on a log. Froebel also understood that children loved to care for living things and to cultivate food through gardening. This connection to the natural environment fosters a deep sense of belonging to something much bigger than oneself and this in turn encourages children to find reason behind all things they discover.

“Plants are the centre piece of nature because of their similar yet detailed life cycle. They show men and the child their very own nature by standing in the centre and pointing downwards to matter and particles and upwards to animals and man”  
 (Froebel in Liebschner, 2001:37)

Today, the outdoors continues to provide a space for physical movement, to explore and develop dexterity, to do real tasks in the maintenance of the garden. Experience in planting and caring for small creatures and other living things creates understanding and empathy for others. A natural environment provides scope for exploration and curiosity and a context in which to develop observation and categorisation skills. It also offers opportunities for social play, to co-operate and solve problems together, devising games and activities and developing language for description, orientation, feelings and direction. The outdoor environment provides stimulus to develop creative language for storytelling and imagination. It is an area where we can collectively respect and look after each other and the garden and to have space to be together or alone to find a sense of self. It also encourages children to experience awe and wonder and the sense of being part of, and responsible for, a larger world. Some children at Earlham lived in chaotic homes, with very little space for themselves. The garden was their salvation, where they would actively seek out solitude. They had a desire for quiet and a sense of control which the natural environment gave them.

I worked with a boy who was fascinated by the flow of water. Through experimentation and thought-provoking guidance from an adult, he learned that water flowed downhill but through his intervention he could change the direction and rate of flow.



The adult did not show him or tell him how to do this but asked open-ended questions such as, “I wonder why the water doesn’t flow down the pipe anyway?”, “I wonder how we could stop the water flowing down the hill?” and “What do you think we could do?” By responding to these provocative questions, he was developing his knowledge about flow and water (Thomas & Harding, 2012). Froebel did not see the outdoors as a separate environment to be visited for some activities; he saw it as integral in children’s learning. In recent years this idea has also been reflected in curriculum documents.

“Being outdoors has a positive impact on children’s sense of well-being and helps all aspects of children’s development” (EYFS, 2008, Enabling Environments 3.3).

Singing and movement were extremely important at Earlham. We sang with the children every day and had a range of percussion instruments to play. We sang indoors and outdoors and used music and song as another communication method. We used traditional songs and modern songs to relate to the children’s experiences and to help them understand about their bodies so that they could develop their proprioceptive and vestibular senses. We used movement games to support working well together and also to develop individual performance. A favourite game was ‘Sandy Girl/Boy’, where individual children could be in the centre of the circle and then choose a friend to dance with them. Another great favourite of mine was ‘Mr. Bear’s Honey Pot’. This game helped children develop their questioning skills to find who had got the honey pot. We also enjoyed traditional movement games such as ‘The Farmer’s In His Den’ and ‘What’s the Time, Mr Wolf?’. Froebel believed that

“these games cultivate, as the expression of a healthy inner life, a beautiful bearing of the whole body as well as individual parts. They educate towards language and song, awaken attention, a sense of law and order, decency and beauty”  
(Froebel, cited in Liebschner, 2001:99).

This quote shows how important Froebel thought movement games were and how much they contributed to what we would call the well-being of the child. Froebel believed humans have to feel and by this we mean engage their emotions to learn. If a child has an emotional response to finding out, then that discovery will stay with them forever. Many games unfold as a story such as ‘In and Out the Dusty Bluebells’, which was a great favourite in India as the children loved forming a spiralling line. The idea of the individual and community is reflected in these games. Children start in a circle then travel apart and return to the unifying circle. This reflects the Froebelian principle of Unity.

The children at Earlham loved story games and took great delight every midsummer’s day in dressing up as elves or fairies or characters in their favourite traditional tale. We spent the day outdoors acting out and retelling these stories. Froebel understood that children enter into the make-believe world wholeheartedly if they have been sung to and told stories. They in turn become story makers, creating their own characters and narratives (Bruce, 2017). By encouraging children to enact stories through games, movement, singing and rhymes, we are enriching their capacity to articulate their emotions and allow their imaginations to take them from the tangible to the abstract.

## Reflection

- Early childhood is a phase in itself, NOT a preparation for what is to come.
- It is important for educators to have a clear, principled vision to underpin their practice.
- The most effective Early Years pedagogy is holistic, not purely based on a didactic approach to facts and knowledge.
- It is important to include the community in the school or setting culture.
- Learning must be real and make sense in today's world. We need to use creativity to build knowledge and understanding of the benefits and the risks of the ever-changing environment. Froebel used meaningful tasks to expand children's learning.
- By supporting empathy and understanding of nature we are encouraging future generations of children to reflect on the fragility of the planet and be aware of the challenges of climate change. We are helping children make connections between their actions and the effect these have on their environment. This links to Froebel's belief in the unity of all things.
- In today's increasingly sedentary world we need to support and encourage physical activity in diverse ways throughout the day.
- At Earlham we felt it was important to understand why we did things the way we did and who had influenced us. Froebel has influenced philosophical history and educational practices over the past 200 years, including the authors of this book. We were using historical theories to enable us to articulate and enrich our practice.



# Chapter Four

## Other Historical Influences on Earlham Nursery School

*“I assume in the start that the Nursery School will, if successful, change and modify every other order of school, influencing it powerfully from below”*  
(McMillan, 1919:24)

There is a need to reassert the historical context of the English nursery school in the current educational climate as it is described in the preface. At a time when financial pressures on local authorities necessitate paring services back to the statutory minimum, nursery schools are under threat. They have to restructure to provide services not envisioned when they were initially developed. In the light of these changes it might be helpful to consider why and how they modified over time.

It is important to be aware of the theory underpinning pedagogical decisions as this knowledge allows an articulation of the reasoning behind practice. In the case of Earlham, calling on theories and the history of education, and being explicit about why decisions were made, enabled us to justify particular approaches. For example, in developing the garden it was important to emphasise nature and a naturalistic environment informed by the theories of Froebel, rather than an outdoor classroom with many man-made structures and a curriculum that mirrored the indoors. We hope that by documenting our philosophical and ethical journey we are able to share tools for the development of practice in the hope that others will feel confident to explore them too.

The progressive tradition that underpinned much of the practice at Earlham Nursery School had a long lineage rooted in national, European and American traditions. Earlham exemplified Froebel’s emphasis on the importance of nature and the natural environment, Margaret McMillan’s influence on architecture, Susan Isaacs’ model of narrative observations and John Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of creating school as a social community which reflects community life (Dewey, 1910:32).

Throughout the last 100 years, different governments have commissioned reports from academics and educationalists and then ignored or only partially implemented the findings as they have been swayed and buffeted by more pressing political concerns. Our experience at Earlham has often been complicated by the tension between what we consider good practice and local and central government expectations. It is heartening to know that this has historical precedents, some of which are examined below.

## **Why did nursery education develop?**

From the middle of the 19th century, Britain moved from an agricultural to an industrial society, which brought about changes in society. In pre-industrial times, children were gradually introduced to the skills of work by their parents as they grew up working alongside them. This changed with industrialisation, where factories were built to serve manufacturing and a working class was recruited as a labour force to meet the needs of these factories. There developed a need for provision for very young children when their parents and their older siblings were away at work or doing piece work at home.

At the turn of the 19th century, the conditions of child labour were being revealed to the public and there were attempts to get factory employers to provide education in reading, writing and arithmetic on weekdays and religious teaching on Sundays, but this was not enforced. In Scotland, Robert Owen – who was interested in using education as an instrument for social change – established the New Lanark Infant School in 1816 for the children of his mill workers.

In England, the non-conformist and evangelical Anglican churches established facilities for working-class children motivated by an interest in “moral and social rescue”. The model of schooling often reflected the factory system. They aimed to provide instruction for children over six years old based on a monitorial system where one master taught the older children, who would then each instruct ten or 20 of the younger children. The schools were usually housed in one large room with rows of wooden benches where children learned by heart what was told to them by the monitors. An alternative to these monitorial schools were the Dame schools. These were run by women or girls who lived locally and acted as childminders for a fee. They were held in private premises and were variable in quality. The arrangements for them were regarded as private agreements and they were unregulated.

By the mid-19th century, the need for provision for younger children from the working class continued to grow due to increasing mechanisation and government regulation. School inspectors began to recognise the needs of younger children and recommended the provision of a separate room for a ‘babies class’ in elementary schools so that their older siblings did not have to stay at home to care for them.

# Philosophical influences on the development of nursery education

The 18th century's Age of Reason brought with it an emphasis on our potential to understand our world and society. Questioning of traditional sources of knowledge was common and reasoning was emphasised. The focus moved away from religion to the idea of a more humanistic way of life. Education became more scientific and practical, accompanied by the idea that children's education was a natural process that needed the support of adults.

The philosophers whose ideas influenced the development of working with young children in the 18th and 19th centuries were John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. John Locke (1632-1704) was a doctor, academic, philosopher, political theorist and influential thinker of the Enlightenment. He believed that knowledge and morality are not innate but that we are born a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. Information is derived from our senses and our experience of the world and is converted to understanding through reasoning. He also thought that each child had a unique character. These ideas supported the close observation of individual children in order to understand how they can be encouraged to improve.

Locke did not believe that children were intrinsically motivated to want to learn. He understood education to be the process of extending the experiences of the child in order that they could develop into a rounded adult. He strongly believed in 'nurture' over 'nature' and this led him to emphasise the idea of early education and changes in parental care, such as allowing infants to be free from swaddling, allowing young children to explore their world physically without restraint, and the use of gentle forms of discipline. He emphasised respectful, loving relationships as the best way for adults to inspire the child to copy their behaviour, and that learning should be enjoyable, not a task to be imposed.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a self-taught philosopher and social theorist. He was born in Geneva, Switzerland, although he spent most of his life in France. He challenged the idea that children are born into the world with 'original sin' – Rousseau believed children were born with inherent goodness that was corrupted by civilisation and he challenged Locke's belief that one should always reason with children. He believed education should begin at birth and continue well into adulthood but at the same time he emphasised the differences between the minds of children and those of adults. He believed that experiencing and exploring their environments was very important for children and he was an advocate for natural, spontaneous, undirected play, free of adult interference. Rousseau encouraged parents to show their confidence in their children's natural growth by allowing spontaneous activities and nurturing of their children's interests.

The views of Rousseau and Locke form the basis of the differences in approach to early education, with one model which prioritises the child's interests and autonomy and another which believes children will only be motivated to learn if they are supported by an adult. However, both philosophies have influenced current practice.

At Earlham, our interest in sharing observations of children, the emphasis on physical and sensory experience and the importance of interactions and relationships, are influenced by the ideas of Locke. Rousseau's writings on the importance of free play, respecting children's autonomy, valuing children's ideas and decisions and nurturing their interests have influenced our thinking on the curriculum and the adult's role.

## How these ideas shaped educational thinking in the 19th century

At the beginning of the 19th century, the middle class in Britain was starting to expand and along with this expansion went an interest in education and how parents brought up children. For example, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817), writer and politician, was strongly influenced by Rousseau. In his book *Practical Education* he acknowledged the value of play and advocated active learning with real objects.

In Europe, Johann Pestalozzi (1745-1827), humanist and influential educationalist, was also influenced by Rousseau. He set up schools using child-centred methods based on sensory exploration and developing observation skills. Pestalozzi's emphasis on observation and sensory experience in learning and his use of nature as a learning resource shaped the ideas of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), who had taught for two years in one of his schools.

Back in Britain, industrialist philanthropists were taking an interest in the housing and health of their workers. Robert Owen (1771-1858), the Welsh manager of the school that was set up as part of the New Lanark cotton mills in 1816, also visited Pestalozzi's school. His ideas were influenced by Locke and Rousseau. Owen had a developmental approach to education and his curriculum included singing, dancing, fife playing and marching to music. Books were excluded for the very young and the children spent three hours everyday outdoors in the playground. He emphasised children's play and used the natural world as a focus for study and activities.

## Developments in the 19th century

From the middle to the late 19th century there began a demand for social education for middle class infants. In 1836, the Home and Colonial Infant School Society, which had been influenced by the ideas of Pestalozzi, was formed to train infant schoolteachers and ten years later the British and Foreign School Society established a school for nursery governesses. Froebel's ideas became influential in the 1850s and 1860s and both of these organisations provided teacher training influenced by Froebel's kindergarten methods and techniques. There is evidence that these methods may have reached Norfolk (Woodham-Smith, 1952:38). These early kindergartens were privately funded. They were based on a model of a school that had two spacious rooms, one with child-sized chairs and tables for seated occupations and the other left clear for games. Groups were to be of no more than 25 children to one teacher and children were to have direct access to a garden with opportunities to use it for play and learning (Slight, 1952:97)

In the second half of the 19th century the number of young children had risen and ways to accommodate their needs separately were being sought among the better-paid working-class families. From 1838, younger children were often accommodated in a 'babies class' of 50 or 60 children sometimes overseen by a teenager and charging a daily fee of 2d-4d a child (Whitbread, 1972:25). This 'babies class' was for children under five and had a curriculum that was based on learning to speak clearly, to understand pictures, to recite the alphabet and to march to music, clearly informed by Locke's theory of a *tabula rasa*, which considers the child's mind a blank slate waiting for the educator to write on it.

For the poorer working class, some authorities, like Manchester and London, set up free nurseries and in 1873 the first free Froebelian kindergarten was set up by the local authority in Salford. The Froebel Education Institute raised money for free kindergartens and they began to emerge in working-class areas.

They offered nursery education based on play and provided baths, meals, rest and parental training. The London Kindergarten Association a precursor of the Froebel Society was founded in 1874 and the initial meeting included Mary Gurney of Norwich. This organisation introduced training and accreditation for those working in kindergartens and this continued as training colleges were established. Many of the earliest teachers at Earlham were trained at Froebel colleges and had Froebel certificates as their qualification.

By the end of the 19th century there came a political impetus to support nursery schools as trade unions and socialist groups began to promote the education and health needs of young children. In 1900 they joined in a single body to sponsor parliamentary candidates. Once elected, the Labour parliamentarians were active in supporting educational issues and continued to press for changes in education, in particular the provision of food, and the medical inspection and treatment of school children.

## Nursery schools in the early 20th century

In Norwich, up until 1902 the local council played no part in elementary education, which was the responsibility of the school board. Church and company schools existed alongside the school board's provision. After 1902 the local council took responsibility for all education, from nursery to further education, to discharge statutory responsibilities. This had the effect of bringing education, health and welfare together through the introduction of school meals and through school inspections (Rawcliffe & Wilson, 2004).

Alongside the development of a new working-class political movement ran the struggle for women's enfranchisement and political action. Mabel Clarkson, an active promoter of nursery education whose name is reflected in Clarkson Road (the road adjoining the nursery), was beginning her political career in Norwich in 1906. She was an active suffragist and went on to become the Lord Mayor of Norwich and the first woman Sheriff of Norfolk County. She was particularly interested in supporting economically disadvantaged and physically disabled children.

Nationally, the Acland Report (1908) – the Consultative Committee Report on the School Attendance of Children Below the Age of Five – recorded that, although three to five-year-olds should ideally be at home with their mothers, many of the homes were not satisfactory and the best place for these children was therefore in a nursery school. It proposed that three to five-year-olds who had been on the registers of elementary schools should now be educated in nursery schools with premises that should be roomy, well-lit, warm and ventilated. It advised that there should be no formal lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic for young children, but that they should be provided with freedom of movement, constant change of occupation, frequent visits to the playground and opportunities for sleep. There should be singing, brick-building, modelling, sorting, nursery rhymes, storytelling and equipment to include sand troughs, boxes for planting, pets and a piano (as seen on the list of resources bought for Earlham). The nursery teacher was to be specially trained and selected, have an assistant and not care for more than 30 children. It proposed that new nursery schools should be built and existing ones be improved. Local authorities should be charged with estimating the numbers of children for whom provision should then be made, for admission at the age of three.

Another influence on early childhood education was emerging at the turn of the century. This reflected new theories and understandings about psychology. Sigmund Freud began treating patients in Vienna in 1886 and his ideas spread quickly to Britain. In 1901, the British Psychological Society was formed followed by the London Psychoanalytical Society in 1913. These ideas were to influence Susan Isaacs, who directly supported nursery schools, and also Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, whose theories have influenced nursery practice at Earlham. The key person approach, supervision support of staff, importance of observation and underlying interest in relationships and interactions that underpin practice and structures were all informed by psychoanalytical theory.

## **Influential educationalists of the early 20th century**

Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) was a pioneer of nursery schools along with her sister Rachel. She was influenced by Froebel and the French-born educationalist and psychiatrist Edouard Seguin (1812-1880), who emphasised the importance of sensory and motor training on intellectual development. McMillan had experience of rural and industrial poverty in Bradford and Kent before working in London. She joined the Fabian Society in 1892, became a foundation member of the Independent Labour Party and when she got to London in 1893 she joined the Froebel Society and became a very active member. She and her sister wanted to address the many children's health problems they had seen at school clinics (such as tuberculosis and eye, ear and respiratory problems) that were endemic at the time. They began with an experimental clinic and went on to initiate a schools treatment centre in Deptford. They later established night camps for girls over eight years old and an open-air nursery for under-fives in 1913. To prevent the spread of disease, the shelters were designed to open on the south side and encourage the flow of fresh air. This emphasis on the flow of air and classrooms open to the air was influential on nursery school architecture and is evident in the design of the nursery school building at Earlham, with its clerestory windows on both sides and the original windows on the south side folding back to reveal one side of the building completely open to the fresh air. Her ideas very much influenced the Hadow Report (1933), which set out the expectations for nursery schools and must have been used in the planning of Earlham Nursery School.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an Italian from a medical background with a special interest in children with mental disabilities. She viewed the problems of children from deprived backgrounds from the standpoint of a doctor and psychologist and drew on her experience of working with children with cognitive problems. She had a theory of stages of learning for which she designed materials to promote sensory and concept development. Individual learning and self-discipline were encouraged by an ordered and structured classroom environment. The Montessori-trained teacher's role was to guide, not force, and to direct but not instruct the child. Montessori's ideas spread to England in the early 20th century. The importance of the individual child's development, the principle of the prepared environment and the design of appropriately child-sized resources influenced the provision and practice of nursery schools. For example, at Earlham, discussions about the environment as the third teacher led us to organise the classroom with the intention of providing learning opportunities not led by the adult, but by how the resources were presented.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist, democrat and educational reformer. His 1906 essays on education interpreted Froebel in the light of contemporary discoveries in science and psychology and had a less rigid emphasis on Froebelian resources. He criticised schools for teaching children en masse and not treating them as unique individuals. He believed

that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum. His work highlighted the social function of education and he believed that the "... conception of the school, as a social community which reflects and organizes in typical form the fundamental principles of all community life..." (Dewey, 1910: 37-38). He also influenced Susan Isaacs, who developed his ideas to apply to nursery education. His influence on the organisation at Earlham between 1995 and 2016 was to put the child at the centre of all decision making (see the Priority List, Appendix 3) and to have an overarching ambition to create a learning community, not just for the children but as an organisation. In the curriculum his ideas influenced the emphasis on real and meaningful activity as a starting point for learning.

Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) was a member of the Froebel Society. She trained as a teacher under Froebelian Grace Owen. Later, transferring to study a philosophy degree in 1912 before moving to Cambridge with a scholarship to study psychology. She gained a master's degree and qualified in medical psychoanalysis. When she left Cambridge, she became a lecturer in infant school education at Darlington Training College before moving to London to develop her interest in psychology and psychoanalysis. She studied and experienced analysis and in 1923 she was elected to become a full member of the British Psychoanalytical Society. In 1924, she was invited to set up a private experimental nursery in the Malting House School in Cambridge which was where she undertook experimental and influential work in early childhood education. She linked the recent theories around psychology and psychoanalysis with her own recorded observations to inform her theories on nursery education. She used the Malting House School as a source for her research by recording the interests and interactions in detailed and systematic observations of children aged between two and nine years old.

Her legacy to nursery schools includes a strong emphasis on narrative observation, a commitment to providing a rich, exciting environment (including outdoors) and a pedagogical approach that develops children's interests and values reflection. She started from the premise that the intellectual and social development of children was closely related to their emotional development and she described the role of fantasy in play as an expression of children's difficulties. She promoted the knowledge of child development and the importance of observation skills in the training of professionals working with young children. She was the first lecturer to run child development courses at the University of London's Institute of Education and one of the first to understand the importance of the work of Jean Piaget. She was also a pioneer in child psychoanalysis and was responsible for the theoretical development of Melanie Klein's work. Susan Isaacs wrote an advice column (as Ursula Wise) in *Nursery World* magazine and this strongly influenced ideas on nursery practice. Her ideas, observations and books such as *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* (1930) and *Social Development in Young Children* (1933) were a great influence on the theories and practice of the education of young children. Susan Isaacs strongly influenced the development of our narrative observations and the importance of analysing them for what they tell us about the child.

"Her rejection of the narrow behaviourist psychology that was then fashionable, and her emphasis on language and reasoning were of fundamental importance for the evolution of a sound pedagogical approach to nursery education" (Whitbread, 1972:70).

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss genetic epistemologist most well-known for his theory of cognitive development. He was a pioneer of constructivism which understands knowledge as a process rather than a bank of facts and sees children as active and intrinsically motivated learners. He also emphasised maturity, experience and social context as key aspects of cognitive development. Piaget used the concept of schemas (the cognitive structures and frameworks through which we

understand the world) to help explain his ideas. Chris Athey's (1924-2011) work on children's schemas was developed from Piaget's research. Her work considers how repeated behaviours reflect how children process incoming information from the outside world. Staff at Earlham documented children's behaviour in order to identify schemas to support their learning.

## Changes between the world wars

The First World War had a profound impact on British society. There was an idea that the old certainties should be swept away and work should be focused on developing a new and more equitable social order. The ideas and philosophies of McMillan and Isaacs, both Froebelians, appealed to the progressive education movement during the interwar period. There was a push for public provision of homes, schools and hospitals and this included political support for nursery education. The Labour Party in 1919 gave its endorsement to nursery education and advocated its universality. This was later expressed in the Hadow Report (1933). However, arguments continued against the establishment of more nursery schools with principle objections being cost and the fear of the spread of disease (Wright & Gardner-Medium, 1938:14).

In the 1920s, nursery schools were providing social and medical care for the poorest and least vocal section of the population but unfortunately this meant that they were not seen as a priority by politicians. Nevertheless, the Board of Education continued to explore discussions around provision for children under five years old. By 1923 there were 24 nursery schools in existence, the Nursery School Association (now called Early Education) had been founded, and Margaret McMillan became its first president. The McMillan model became the prototype for the limited growth of nursery education after the First World War, of which Earlham Nursery School is an example.

Local education authorities were given discretion to provide or support nursery schools through Board of Education grants but there was no political pressure from government and this discretion was later withdrawn. However, official recognition continued and in 1924 the Education Enquiry Committee recognised the work of nursery schools in promoting good health through early intervention and preventative work.

## The Hadow Reports

There was a view developing that state nursery schools had a role in supporting social as well as health needs. This was articulated in the Hadow Report (1933) and by progressive thinkers like Bertrand Russell in his book *On Education* (1926), written after he had visited the McMillan Nursery School in Deptford. He expressed the view that nursery schools had a positive role in supporting social mobility and breaking down class division through education. Establishment support continued with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Education (1927), which urged that the church should actively support the nursery school movement. In 1929, the Education Enquiry Committee Report published *The Case for Nursery Schools* and in that year nine new nursery schools were opened, making a total of 40 nursery schools. The year later the Ministry of Health and the Board of Education issued a joint circular asking local authorities to provide open-air nursery schools, day nurseries or nursery classes. This may have motivated the reorganisation of schools by Norwich City Education Committee including "a nursery school for children aged two to five... afforded by the building of the new Earlham Estate".



The Hadow Report on Infant and Nursery Schools (1933) advocated the large-scale provision of separate nursery schools on the McMillan model in working-class areas. This probably influenced the siting of Earlham Nursery School in planning for the new Earlham estate, as it mentioned the need to provide nursery schools with garden playgrounds in new housing schemes. The report emphasised the part that nursery schools played in parenting support and children's health and stated that most children would benefit from nursery schooling. The 1933 report saw the aim of nursery education was to "aid and supplement the natural growth of the normal child" in a planned yet unrestrictive educative environment, with opportunity for individual attention and informal work with small groups. It advocated that nursery education should be widely available in disadvantaged areas. The nursery school would provide an environment in which the health of the young child – physical, mental and moral – was safeguarded. Nursery children would be encouraged to explore and experiment and not be expected to perform tasks which required "fine work with hands and fingers". It referred to training and said that nursery school head teachers (superintendents) should be specialist teachers of very young children and classroom helpers should be provided to assist. Hadow's recommendations regarding the structure of education were, in the course of time, implemented by government but its recommendations on the curriculum were not.

Public interest continued in the growth and development of young children and Susan Isaacs promoted and supported this in her radio broadcasts and magazine articles in *Nursery World*. In 1937 she published *The Educational Value of the Nursery School*. This stressed:

- The importance of child-centred provision.
- A focus on play, exploration, imagination and problem solving underpinned by language and logical thinking.
- The need for an appropriate environment and for an adult supporting and extending learning.
- The differing needs of two, three and four-year-olds.
- The need for air, space, exercise, rest and good food.

With the current funding from central government being taken away from maintained nursery schools, these are the areas that we are concerned we will lose to the detriment of today's children living in poverty.

In spite of the publications and reports produced in support of nursery schools in the interwar years and the proposition of the development of nursery/infant schools that would provide for children aged from two to seven years old, the recession of the 1930s inhibited their expansion and growth.

The Second World War gave a huge impetus to the creation of provision for young children in order to release women to work. The responsibility for this was shared between government bodies representing the departments of Education, Health and Labour. This was demonstrated in the funding for the building of Earlham Nursery School. Norwich Education Committee minutes for February 2, 1938, note that the cost of the nursery school "... be raised by way of a loan, and application be made to the Minister of Health for sanction...". This shared accountability contributed to the continuing ambiguity on the purpose of nursery provision and lack of clarity around purpose and roles of those working within them. The professional domains of health, social care and education, if looked at together, would complement each other to the benefit of families. However, there is professional competition which inhibits the development of this holistic approach.

By 1943, a government White Paper (Board of Education, 1943) stated: "There is no doubt of the importance of training children in good habits at the most impressionable age, and of the indirect value of the Nursery School in influencing the parents of the children. There is equally no doubt

of the incalculable value of the school in securing medical and nursing care, and the remedial treatment of defects which may be difficult to eradicate if they are left untreated until the child enters school in the ordinary way at the age of 5". This White Paper proposed a duty on LEAs to provide or aid the supply of nursery schools, as necessary. It stated clearly that self-contained nursery schools (as opposed to nursery classes) were the most suitable type of establishment for children under five years old and should form the new provision. It recommended nursery schools for all children, to include those from "good homes", but particularly for those living in the poorest parts of the larger cities.

The Ministry of Health became responsible for co-ordinating services for the under-fives through the wartime nurseries scheme in 1941. The aim of this was to safeguard the health of young children and to release women for war work. Under this scheme there were three kinds of provision:

- Full-time nurseries for children from a few months old to five years, open for 12 to 15 hours a day with a trained nursery schoolteacher for children over two and a half
- Part-time nurseries open during school hours for two to five-year-olds and supervised by a teacher
- Nursery classes in infant schools were lowered to two years old

The war nurseries scheme was seen as a success for day nursery providers where health was seen as the priority above education. In Norwich, Earlham Nursery School had a role in supporting families in the wider community during the war. The school logbook and Norwich Education Committee minutes show that in August 1944 and December 1944/January 1945 Earlham Nursery School was one of seven centres in Norwich where children who were disadvantaged could have school dinners provided during school holidays.

During 1940-1944, LEAs had to produce development plans for nursery schools and classes and submit them to the Minister for Education to show how they would implement expansion of nursery education. These plans informed the 1944 Education Act, which advocated:

- establishing nursery schools for two to five-year-olds, to release women for work in industry.
- a duty on LEAs to cater for under-fives in nursery schools and classes.
- the introduction of free milk, and under Section 49, placed a statutory duty on local authorities to provide school meals and milk.
- raising the school leaving age to 15.
- the introduction of free nursery, primary, secondary and FE education.

Following this Education Act, the Nursery Schools Association continued to press for universal nursery education, but due to post-war financial constraints, resources were mainly used for primary schools. The different roles of nursery provision in terms of health and education were soon seen to be supported by different government bodies. In March 1945, Hansard records that day nurseries were for children up to the age of two and nursery schools were for children aged two to five; the report supported the idea that the wartime nurseries should continue as nursery schools and talked of the need to teach 'parent craft'. Sixty years later this would be echoed in the establishment of local Sure Start centres and Children's Centres.

The ambiguity of aims and accountability exposed the diverse approaches to nursery provision. There was disagreement between matrons who prioritised health and nursery teachers who prioritised education. At the same time, infant schools became more child-centred and there was more experience of nursery classes, which made the idea of the infant and nursery school a popular model at the expense of the nursery school. The White Paper on Educational Reconstruction stated:

“The self-contained nursery school, which forms the transition from home to school, is the most suitable type of provision for children under five. Such schools are needed in all districts, as even when children come from good homes they can derive much benefit, both educational and physical from attending a good nursery school” (Board of Education, 1943).

In spite of this, there continued to be a lack of political support for nursery schools. While acknowledging their importance in supporting children’s education, the statutory age for school remained at five years old. Education was organised into three stages; primary, secondary and further education which, because it was not given statutory status, excluded the nursery stage. In addition, pressures from increases in the birth rate at this time meant that schools were forced to apply their statutory obligation to older children at the expense of nursery provision.

## **Nursery education after the Second World War**

After the war, women’s expectations and experience about employment changed. This was the result of government policy during the war to encourage them into the workforce as well as advances in technology around food and domestic appliances that meant less time was needed in the home. Increased access to secondary and tertiary education meant that women were better qualified and had higher expectations for themselves and their families. This all contributed, along with economic pressures, to women taking up at least part-time employment which, in turn, put pressure on nursery provision.

Nursery education was seen as complementary to the home and a new focus by child psychologists on emotional deprivation alongside physical and material needs meant that all children were seen as more likely to benefit from attending nursery school. The 1944 Children’s Act had encouraged the setting up of nursery schools by local authorities, but this did not happen in reality and a reduction in grants for new day nurseries meant that informal childcare began to rise. In response to the lack of control over the quality of informal provision, the 1948 Children Act gave local health authorities responsibility for registering and inspecting childminders while schools, nursery schools, play centres and provision maintained by the local authority were monitored by children’s committees set up by them.

Although nursery schools had nominal support from government after the war, the lack of statutory status meant they were vulnerable to economic pressure in the early 1950s. In 1952, in some areas, nursery schools and classes were already being threatened with closure. However, the economic situation began to change and by 1954 the number of new nursery schools was increasing again, but this was not officially supported by the government. By the end of the 1950s some part-time nursery school attendance was introduced – by 1960 4,000 children aged two to four years old were attending nursery education part-time and 196,000 were attending full-time. In the same year there was a prohibition on building any new facilities for nursery education. A two-shift system of part-time attendance was recommended as a way of accommodating more children without additional expenditure and nursery schools began increasingly to take three and four-year-olds rather than younger children.

By the 1960s a progressive style of education was being supported. This was loosely defined as a move towards more informal, child-centred education with an emphasis on individualisation and learning by discovery clearly described by Sybil Marshall (Marshall, 1963). Alongside this, from 1961, the playgroup movement developed in order to compensate for the lack of more official

pre-school provision. Groups of mothers set up and ran playgroups under the auspices of the Pre-school Playgroups Association and by 1974 13 per cent of three and four-year-olds were attending playgroups (Blackstone cited in West and Noden, 2016). Educational authorities welcomed this as a low-cost substitute for nursery schools (Kwon, 2002) although the emphasis was on opportunities for social development rather than education.

## The Plowden Report

In 1969, a report on primary education commissioned in 1963 by the Minister of Education was published. It was commonly called the Plowden Report after Bridget Plowden, who chaired the investigation, and it echoed many of the findings of the Hadow Reports more than 30 years earlier. Molly Brearley, principal of the Froebel Educational Institute, was a member of the Plowden Committee that wrote the report and she brought a Froebelian point of view into the debates and discussions.

The key points regarding nursery education in the Plowden Report were:

- a focused attention on the needs of young children and praise for a child-centred approach to education.
- support for the expansion of nursery education, especially in areas of social deprivation. As a minimum, all children aged four to five who lived in deprived areas should have the opportunity of a part-time attendance and that perhaps half should have full-time places.
- a stress on the need for verbal stimulus, opportunities for constructive play, a more richly-differentiated environment and access to medical care.

The Plowden Report influenced teacher training in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the time when one of the authors (Felicity Thomas) was undergoing her training. She remembers it as occupying a large percentage of her studies.

The Hadow (1931) and Plowden (1967) reports were welcomed in their own time but were not consistently implemented and the underlying theories were not explained, so that teachers did not always understand why they were using certain methods. Plowden revealed a consensus among teachers, playgroup leaders and parents distinguishing the social care in nurseries for a minority of children under three and the benefits of nursery education for all three and four-year-olds (Whitbread, 1972). This is now agreed by the government and demonstrated by the current free places for two-year-olds for those who are most economically, socially and educationally vulnerable.

By the end of the 1960s there had developed a new model of provision of nursery education. This was a combination of nursery schools, nursery classes, playgroups and day nurseries catering for nought to five-year-olds. Nursery school interests were represented by the Nursery School Association, which in 1972 became the British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE), commonly known as Early Education. There was a move away from child-centred, progressive ideas sparked by press attacks on the concepts of comprehensive education, egalitarianism and progressive teaching methods. The Black Papers of 1975 and 1977 (Gillard, 2018) advocated voucher schemes under which parents would be issued with a free coupon and enabled to choose their school. This was the precursor to the idea of the Nursery Voucher scheme which was developed and piloted in Norfolk in 1996. Official policy was inclined to support more structured schools at this time and from 1969 there were attacks on 'progressive' methods, particularly in regard to nursery education. This was illustrated in the 1970s with a conflict between a structured approach to language acquisition (using

systematic language instruction informed by American research on direct teaching in pre-school programmes) and the Froebelian, constructivist and developmental tradition.

Margaret Thatcher, as Minister of Education in 1972, proposed the wholesale expansion of nursery education to accommodate all three and four-year-olds whose parents wanted it for their children. The economic crisis prevented this from being implemented but she continued to talk about expanding nursery education on a part-time basis. Under the Wilson-Callaghan government of 1974-1979, the continuing economic recession meant that there was no expansion of nursery provision and the impact of financial constraints was illustrated by the fact that the government held a conference on Low Cost Day Provision for the Under Fives.

Attacks on progressive education were being justified by economic pressures and continued on other fronts. In particular, after the Auld Report on the William Tyndale School (1976), several issues were raised about the whole education system including nursery schools. These included:

- the control of the school curriculum.
- the responsibilities of local education authorities.
- the accountability of teachers.
- the assessment of effectiveness in education.

All of these points have become the responsibility of central government and legislation and have diminished the importance of the child in education.

In response to these attacks at the time, Prime Minister James Callaghan called for a public debate on education to allow employers, trades unions and parents, as well as teachers and administrators, to make their views known and to inform policy.

## **Nursery education as a commodity**

By the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's education policies aimed to convert the school system from a public service into a market and to transfer power from local authorities to central government. This was attempted by challenging the educational establishment on the role of local education authorities, the training of teachers and the curriculum in the 1988 Education Reform Act. In this context, nursery education was still being supported – although not necessarily in nursery schools. Although under the 1980 Act local authorities could establish, maintain and assist nursery schools, they were not under any duty to do so. The 1985 Better Schools report recognised that about 80 per cent of children attended nursery schools or classes before the age of five and that places should be prioritised for those most in need. It committed the government to continue funding this proportion of places.

In the early 1990s there was concern about the quality of nursery education and the Rumbold Report, *Starting with Quality* (DES, 1990), looked at the quality of provision. The recommendations:

- highlighted opportunities for all, regardless of race, sex, social background or special needs.
- guarded against too much formality.
- stressed the importance of play and talk.
- considered the process of education as being as important as the content.
- valued the vital role of parents in their children's learning.
- valued the importance of the child's all-round development.
- encouraged the need for closer links between day nurseries and schools.

It also recommended a curriculum based on the areas of learning in the HMI report *The Curriculum from 5 to 16* (Department for Education and Science, 1985). It built on the nine areas of experience and learning set out by HM Inspectorate for under-fives: linguistic, aesthetic and creative, human and social, mathematical, moral, physical, scientific, technological and spiritual.

The *Start Right Report* (Ball, 1994) published by the Royal Society of Arts stressed the importance of quality (and raising quality) in Early Years education and the need for expansion of provision. It set out the prerequisites for high-quality provision – an appropriate early learning curriculum; the selection, training and continuity of staff; high staff to child ratios; building and equipment designed for early learning; and a partnership role with parents. There was also an increasing understanding at this time of how early learning had an impact on success and achievement in later life. One of the responses to this emphasis on quality was the development of a self-evaluation programme, the *Effective Early Learning* project, by Christine Pascal and Tony Bertram from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood at University College, Worcester. This gave settings the tools to evaluate and develop quality of practice and provision and was taken up by Earlham Nursery School in 1997 through the *Effective Early Learning* self-evaluation programme.

Both the Rumbold Report and *Start Right Report* influenced my own teacher training and were the documents we were expected to use when discussing curricula. In 1998, the Early Childhood Education Forum published *Quality in Diversity: A Framework for Early Childhood Practitioners* (Early Childhood Education Forum, 1998). This was a document that aimed to help practitioners shape their own curricula for children under eight years old. It became one of the documents that framed the thinking around developing the curriculum at Earlham Nursery School.

There was an increasing take-up of nursery education but this tended to be part-time in nursery classes attached to schools rather than in nursery schools. By 1995, five per cent of children aged under five years were in nursery schools with a high proportion of these in London, the north of England and parts of the Midlands (West & Noden, 2016).

In the same year, the Conservative government passed the *Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act* (1996), introducing a pilot voucher scheme for nursery education of which Norfolk was a pilot area. Parents of eligible children were able to exchange a voucher for a place offered by a provider in a maintained nursery school, or a nursery class or reception class in a primary school, or in the PVI sector. This place at a setting was directly linked to a non-statutory curriculum framework/set of guidelines called the *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education* (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996), which settings had to register for before they received vouchers. This was the change that motivated teachers at Earlham to begin to explore alternative curriculum models.

In 1997, the incoming Labour administration abolished the voucher scheme but linked direct funding for three and four-year-olds in all types of settings to regular inspections by Ofsted (the government body responsible for inspecting institutions receiving government funding) against the *Early Learning Goals* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority/Department for Education and Employment, 2000), which superseded the *Desirable Learning Outcomes*. The 1997 Education Act provided for 'baseline assessment schemes' which were to be taken in reception classes and would establish a point from which future measurements of the primary school could be made. Later, in October 1999, the government published the *Early Learning Goals* to replace the *Desirable Learning Outcomes* and introduced a *Foundation Stage* to precede the existing *Key Stage 1*.

This created a separately recognised stage for three to five-year-olds and linked it to preparation for statutory schooling and the primary curriculum.

In August 1999, the government announced the launch of a pilot programme of Early Excellence Centres (EECs) to develop and promote models of high-quality, integrated Early Years services for young children and families (Centre of Excellence Programme, DFEE, 1997). By December, some Early Excellence Centres had been named and promised funding until March 2006. These settings were intended as models of good and innovatory practice, combining education and childcare for under-fives along with parental support, adult education and training, care, health and community development. Many of these centres were nursery schools and there was a strong emphasis on their role in raising the quality of early education and learning by sharing good practice and organising training and development for local practitioners. Earlham Nursery School was made an Early Excellence Centre in 2001, with specialisation in supporting parents, outdoor learning and developing its own curriculum. It was given funds to expand and the building was refurbished to include a hall and training kitchen as part of a community wing. A childminder network and toy library were supported within the nursery school.

The Labour government of 1998 introduced free Early Years education for all four-year-olds in England, consisting of five weekly sessions of 2.5 hours for 33 weeks of the year (in 2006 this was increased to 5 x 3-hour sessions for 38 weeks). In the same year, in the Meeting the Childcare Challenge Green Paper, the government acknowledged the links between education and care, and Early Years Development Plans produced by local authorities in England were extended to cover childcare and included provision by nursery schools.

This period is characterised by the urge to get parents back into employment and to treat parents as consumers and education as a commodity. Curriculum and inspection became more centralised and there was a focus on and questions about quality of provision, which was explored in different ways – by longitudinal research studies, by supporting the best provision to model and train others, and by exploring self-evaluation. Early education was viewed in terms of provision and there was a curriculum emphasis on preparing children for entry to statutory education rather than for them to explore and learn at a developmentally appropriate level. Earlham Nursery School responded to this by developing its own curriculum based on local strengths and needs to run alongside the curriculum advocated by the government. It was founded on the principle of putting the child first and used observation to understand and support individual children's learning. The period from 2000 until the present has been characterised by a plethora of legal constraints, initiatives, programmes and government curricula that have all served to politicise education. These will be considered in Chapter Eleven.

## Reflections

- There is a repeating pattern in the long history of nursery schools which reveals swings back and forth between philosophies which either foreground the active child, whose play and learning is facilitated by an observant and analytical adult, or those which consider children to be passive receivers of information in preparation for formal schooling. Froebel believed in the former and expressed this through his principles.
- There is a strong tradition in nursery schools of the importance of the theories underlying pedagogy in Early Years education and care. Alongside this there has always been an emphasis on well-qualified and appropriately-trained staff. Froebel was the first educator to identify the need for trained and knowledgeable teachers.
- The 'political' role of the nursery school has changed from providing social, health and educational support for disadvantaged children in the early 20th century. It has become a tool for increasing the engagement of adults in the workforce.
- The increase in state funding and the growth of private, voluntary and independent providers has led to an increase in accountability systems and procedures. The increasing diversity of provision has also led to fragmentation and financial uncertainty for all settings.
- Frequent changes in government departmental leadership in education has led to continual change and instability at the school and community level and has increased fragmentation.
- Nursery schools have always existed outside of statutory school provision and are presently suffering from the lack of a clear definition of their role within the education system and a lack of clarity over funding.



# Chapter Five

## The Building, An Architectural View

*“I don’t think that architecture is only about shelter, is only about a very simple enclosure. It should be able to excite you, to calm you, to make you think”*  
(Zaha Hadid, 2011)

### Between the wars planning for nursery schools

Nursery schools not only have a rich philosophical and pedagogical history, as seen in the previous chapter, but they also have a distinctive architectural style dating from the early 20th century, of which Earlham is a good example. At this time, in contrast to current approaches to civic architecture, there was great interest in the built environment and how this might promote health and education for young children. Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin wrote a whole book, published by the Architectural Press in 1938, on the design of nursery and elementary schools in which architects were encouraged to consider the needs of the environment for learning in the light of educational thinking of the time.

The design of Earlham Nursery School reflects the wave of investment in civic building in England between the world wars of the 20th century. Much of the architecture was influenced by the modernist movement and lay alongside a desire to create public buildings that were good quality and worthy of those who had returned from the Great War. The old idea that there existed a natural evolutionary progress in society had been destroyed by the horrors of the war. Architects, like other professions, had been affected by this and expressed their yearning for change by developing designs that aimed to sweep away the past in order to create a new world. The English architectural expression of this was characterised by structural systems and functional usage as demonstrated in nursery schools such as Earlham. Harwood (2010), in her examination of open-air schools in the 1930s, states: “The burgeoning interests in modern architecture and new teaching ideas came together in the nursery movement. Lightweight, highly-glazed buildings offered a freshness and informality thought to stimulate young minds.”

From 1902, local school boards became responsible for education through to further education and this included the construction of new schools. In Norwich, the Education Committee of Norwich City Council became responsible for schools within the city boundaries. Later, in 1930, the Labour

government's Housing Act laid the way for slum clearance and the City Council started to clear Ber Street and the St. George's area of the city. A development on the Earlham Estate was planned to accommodate, among other groups, the people previously housed in the Ber Street slums and this is confirmed in later HMI inspection reports when the Larkman schools (including Earlham Nursery School) are described as having provided places for those children displaced by slum clearance.

The Education Committee decided to reorganise elementary schools in 1936 to ensure greater efficiency and better conditions. This coincided with the purchase of the Earlham Estate on the west of the city to build 2,500 houses. By 1937 Earlham Nursery School had been included in the plans for the new housing project on the site of the North Earlham Estate. This reflected the more thoughtful relationship that was emerging between architecture and town planning in Britain in the 1930s. The evidence for this joint working is demonstrated in the way that the schools were planned in the middle of the estate, allowing families to walk by footpath into the schools from one of the many entrances sited around its boundary.

A nursery school for two to five-year-olds and an infant school for five to seven-year-olds (including two nursery classes) was planned with an adjacent junior school for children between seven and 11 years old. In February 1938, the City of Norwich Education Committee recommended that subject to approval of the Board of Education "...a nursery school be erected on the North Earlham Estate... at the cost of £8,848". Tenders were accepted in March and work had begun on the building by July (Norwich Education Committee, February 1938).

J. Nelson Meredith was the first city architect of Norwich City Council and was appointed in 1932. He had trained at Chester School of Art before working as a senior assistant to Sir Arnold Thornley in Liverpool, where he worked on the parliament Buildings in Northern Ireland at Stormont among other projects. He may have been influenced by the Department of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool, which taught town planning alongside architecture and encouraged the idea that public service in local government was an appropriate career for an architect. It was he who designed Earlham Nursery School before he left Norwich to become the city architect for Bristol. It is probable that Nelson Meredith was influenced by Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin's book as it was published in 1938 and gives advice on the architectural design of nursery schools. He appears to have had a particular interest in the design of this type of school and in a paper written regarding the rebuilding of Bristol after the Second World War he made a point of stating: "Nursery schools demand serious and careful consideration" (Nelson Meredith, 1942).

The 1933 Hadow report gave guidelines on the architecture of nursery schools and one of the recommendations noted their importance in disadvantaged communities:

"The nursery school is a desirable adjunct to the national system of education; and in districts where housing and economic conditions are seriously below average, a nursery school should if possible be provided." It is interesting that in discussing the nursery school policy at the time, both the Hadow Report (1933) and Gardner-Medwin describe the ultimate objective as combining nursery schools with infant schools into nursery-infant schools. These were later referred to only as nursery schools providing education for two to seven-year-olds "...which will steer the children carefully from early childhood to the stage at which they are ready for the beginning of formal education about the age of seven" (Myles Wright & Gardner-Medwin, 1936). This reflects the influence of Froebel and other European pioneers in understanding formal education as appropriate from the age of seven years but not before, a discussion that continues to this day.

The architecture of Earlham Nursery School is important because it reflects the thinking around nursery education during the time of its planning and is an example of Margaret McMillan's influence on architectural design.

## Architecture reflects a new approach to nursery education

Classrooms being open to the air, and children allowed to play actively and mix socially, demonstrated a commitment to the social importance of nursery schools. It showed a move away from a Victorian model of rows of desks where infants had information dictated to them by elder children, learned by rote, and exercised in a yard. This old model was industrial, hierarchical and sedentary. The newer interwar model valued social and physical education alongside cognitive development. It also recognised the importance of an architectural design that included stimulation of the senses. This approach was demonstrated in the importance shown to light and to air flow, to sand and water play experiences and opportunities for social play inside and outdoors.

Open air schools had their origin in a school established in a pine forest in Charlottenburg, Berlin, in 1904. A report on this school was published by London County Council in 1907 and described the emphasis on teaching, exercise, solid meals and afternoon rest, with most lessons taken outdoors. The school buildings comprised of one hut open to the south used for sleeping on wet afternoons and two other huts open on all sides for meals and teaching in wet weather. The report told of increased weight and growth of the children and, because of these positive health outcomes, was copied in temporary school buildings in London. Research on children's eyesight at this time implied that poor school lighting was causing harm. This increased support for open air schools and architects began to include glazed walls and clerestory lighting in school design.

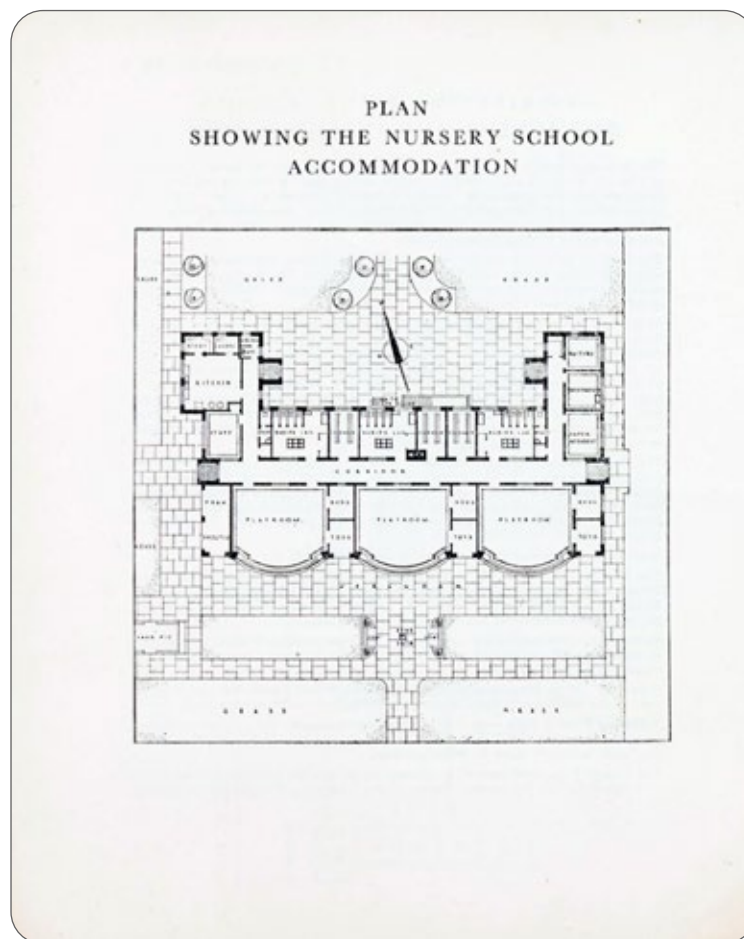
The links between children's health and their education is evident in the plans for Earlham Nursery School and its neighbour, Larkman Primary School. It was also informed by the ideas of Margaret McMillan (an active member of the Froebel Society) which were promoted through her political activity, her writings and the models she presented in her own open-air nurseries and schools (McMillan, 1919). She was directly motivated by the need to provide a healthy and safe place for children who were living in slum conditions. In her book *The Nursery School* (McMillan, 1919), she outlines a plan for the building of a nursery school which she saw as catering to the needs of nought to seven-year-olds. The access to light and the free flow of air in the classrooms in order to prevent tuberculosis and other diseases was a key feature. In Earlham this concern is reflected in the folding, wall-length windows, in the south-facing front aspect of each classroom, and the clerestory windows at the back and front of the building to allow for catching a breeze. A similar design at the Rachel McMillan Nursery School was described in a radio broadcast in 1927: "The air is moving there always, and nearly always the southern end is away! Healing light falls through lowered gable and open doors" (Mansbridge, 1932:101).

## The Earlham Nursery School opens

On 11 May 1939, Earlham Nursery School was opened. The population of children on the newly built estate was high and by July of that year the nursery school had 132 pupils on the register. The Hadow Report (Board of Education, 1933) had advised on the size of nursery schools declaring that "the most suitable [size] is the nursery school for about 160 children". It also recommended that "the nursery school building should not be 'institutional' in character, but as far as possible of a light

and open ‘garden pavilion’ type”. The report referred to the Rachel McMillan School in Deptford and many of the recommendations use Margaret and Rachel McMillan’s schools as a model. This included the emphasis that part of the role of the buildings is to be comfortable and informal. Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938:21) recommended that nursery schools not become too large, that the maximum should be provision for 120 children of two to five years averaging four groups of 30 each. “Semi open-air buildings” and “garden playgrounds” should be provided to secure “the essential conditions of fresh air, sunshine and light”. The design of Earlham Nursery School reflected these concerns in its airy, full-length south aspect windows that opened fully to the outside.

The original design of the nursery had a stretched U-shaped plan (Figure 2) and was entered from Cadge Road. The three classrooms were south-facing with curved south walls of sliding and folding Crittall type windows with low sills and a veranda (Hadow, 1933; Myles Wright & Gardner-Medwin, 1936). These classrooms had clerestory windows that could be opened to capture a through breeze. Each class originally had its own cloakroom with a peg for each child, a bathroom with child-sized toilets and sinks with one large ‘butler’ type sink per classroom. A photo from 1958 shows how these were still in place 20 years later.



**Figure 2. Plan of Nursery in 1939**  
(City of Norwich, 1939)

There was a corridor which separated these classroom spaces from cloakrooms and toilets. Each classroom had space for the storage of beds and a separate storage space for toys. To the east behind the classrooms was a wing for the administration spaces; a waiting room, observation room, staff

toilet and the superintendent's (head teacher's) office. There was access to a basement boiler room from the north. The west wing behind the classrooms housed the staffroom, staff toilet and the kitchen, kitchen store and kitchen staff toilet.

The kitchen was situated so that it could "give service as necessary to the Nursery Section in the adjoining Infant School" (City of Norwich, Education Committee, 1934-41). Further evidence shows that the kitchen provided for a wider population than just the nursery school. In a report to the Norwich City Education Committee for 8 May 1944, there is a discussion laying out plans for providing meals to disadvantaged families during the school holidays of Christmas 1944 and Easter 1945 at seven schools in the city, which lists Earlham Nursery School as one of these.

The outside area beyond the glass walls continued to reflect an understanding of the needs of parents and other siblings by providing a pram shelter. It also catered for children's physical and social development with a sandpit and grass areas and opportunities for exploring and observing nature with seating and a bird bath.



In July 1939, responding to a civil defence call from the Lord Privy Seal, Norfolk Education Committee began to make preparations for air raid protection for schools. Air raid shelters were built in the ground to the south of the nursery. Three shelters were found during excavations for development of the garden in 2002. One of these was opened up. Staff went down a series of narrow, steep steps to view the shelter. It had originally been gas lit and gas piping was found leading from the school to the shelter. It had remained vented so the air was still sweet. The shelter had small, child-sized benches and a telephone at one end. For a similar example see Photo 7.

Once revealed and explored by staff it was surveyed and pronounced structurally sound before being filled in to await the time when the school would have the money to develop it.

**Photo 8. Entrance to an air raid shelter for a school**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2017)

## Architecture and pedagogy

The architecture and shape of a school building both reflects and advocates choices about curriculum. In the case of the nursery school, the children's educational, social and health needs were prioritised in the design process. The resulting architecture was practical but not solely utilitarian as it also included creative flourishes like the animal sculptures showing rabbits, mice and squirrels that sit above the south-facing veranda (Photo 10).

The relationship between form, function and pedagogy is influenced by the society and culture from which it emerges. In the architecture of Earlham Nursery School, we can appreciate some of the ideas that were current in the England of the 1930s relating to architectural form, social and political ideas, the importance of health and education, and the role of the community. Many of these resonate with issues that remain relevant today and are represented in particular aspects of the design. The siting of the building indicates that due thought had been given to ease of access.

This reflects an understanding of the nursery school as an important part of the local community with equality of access for all those who need to use it. Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin, in their guidance to architects, recommend:

“A Nursery school should be placed away from traffic and noise, and children should not have to cross main or secondary traffic routes on their way to school... In new housing schemes it must be planned for and provided” (1938:20).

This advice was followed and it illustrates an understanding of the impact of sound in the educational environment, something that is recognised today in the architecture and pedagogy of the nurseries of Reggio Emilia (Ceppi & Zini,1998).

Before this, schools for very young children had often been designed on the same model as those for older children – large central halls with fixed desks and a gallery. In cities these were often built up on several storeys to economise on the cost of the site. Alternatively, schools were designed with long narrow rooms where more than one class could be taught.

The Hadow Report (1933) advocated a different design for younger children that supported free movement and opportunities to explore the world through their senses. Fixed desks were replaced by moveable tables and resources with a greater allowance of floor space per child. Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938) use the word playroom rather than classroom for the space designed for nursery and infant children. All of these changes indicate a move away from a didactic and ‘empty vessel’ approach to young children’s learning towards a more active and exploratory pedagogy.

In addition to the change in classroom design and resourcing, more attention was given to corridors. They were made wider with windows onto rooms. The wide corridor can still be seen at Earlam Nursery School and was utilised as an extension to the other learning areas. Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938) advised architects that corridors should be at least six feet wide and should be “made interesting”. This indicates a change of role from that of connecting or distributing children between places under the control of adults to a more child-centred and educational function. It also demonstrates a sensibility which understands that all of the built environment is part of the learning experience.

This understanding would also have been extended to the interior decoration. There is no record of the original colours used in decorating the nursery except that it was “bright and cheerful” and it would have been affected by the materials used in the building – the brickwork, flooring, tiling and glazing. Architects considered the effects of colour and light and there is evidence that the architect of the nursery, J. Nelson Meredith, had strong views on colour. He is quoted in a newspaper article as saying:

“Colour plays an important part in our homes, schools, hospitals...the aspect of a room has an important bearing on the colour that should be used. One facing north needs quite a different colour treatment from one facing south. Different functions of rooms, too, demand different colours...” (Nelson Meredith, 1942).

We may presume from this that thought went into the colours used and this infers a similar respect for the needs of children and their environments as there is for those of adults. There is also evidence that there was a general interest at this time in how colour affected the learning environment, as in the Hadow Report (1933):



“The internal decoration of schools for young children has been a subject of many recent experiments. The general opinion of our witnesses was that fresh harmonious colours had a marked effect on the spirits and general tone of the children and were preferable to the monotonous dark green or dark hard-wearing red which has been almost traditional in recent years.”

The design of the building revealed a view of the children’s rights to access these natural phenomena of light and fresh air. This appreciation of the natural environment implies a democratic approach (access to a space not controlled by adults) and, through its flexibility and diversity, allowed for a more creative and stimulating outdoor learning area.

## A design that supports children’s health needs

In the interwar period, Margaret McMillan’s influence was evident in the consideration of orientation in the design of schools. Her concerns that there should be a free flow of air meant that the warmth of the building might be compromised, so she encouraged nursery buildings she constructed to be facing south or south-east to catch the warmth of the sun – as Earlham does.

“The... appearance of the shelters may be broken up by long awnings, or paved cloisters that offer shelter to children on rainy weather or sunny afternoons... the front of the shelters should be open most of the year, but sliding glass doors or screens may be fixed in about the time when the days grow very short...” (McMillan, 1919:33).

Catching the sun also meant catching the light and the children’s rooms at Earlham were bathed in natural light because of its orientation, clerestory windows on the south and north sides of the building, and from the fully-glazed south-facing wall. Shade from the sun was provided from the veranda and trees outside.

Sleep and rest were catered for by rooms that could be used flexibly, with the provision of stretcher beds made out of canvas and buttoned on to a simple wooden frame with collapsible legs (Photo 8). These were packed away in big built-in cupboards at the side of the classroom. Exercise was encouraged and metal climbing frames, a paddling pool and a sandpit were part of the original school design.

The garden provided spaces for growing food and vegetables and children were given the opportunity to develop independence and self-sufficiency by cultivating crops as Froebel did in his school at Kielhau.



**Photo 9. Children sleeping on original beds**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, n.d.)

Children's cleanliness and sanitation was provided for by child-sized toilets and a place for a towel, toothbrush and a beaker in the bathroom. There was a large sink to bath the children if needed. Margaret McMillan recommended "white pot baths fitted with hot and cold taps... so high that the nurse need not stoop in bathing". The original baths at Earlham were at adult height and refurbishment in 2002 re-sited them at child height in the boot rooms as they were no longer needed to bath the children.

## The garden – an outdoor learning environment

The importance of the natural world and of social and physical development were expressed in the design of the garden or outside area. Each classroom faced the garden and had access to the outdoor area through steps which ran up to and down from the sills of the folding windows. All of the playrooms faced onto the garden with the bathrooms, cloakrooms, kitchen and administrative rooms placed behind. This prioritised the children's access to the outdoors, acknowledged the learning potential of the garden and recognised the health benefits of access to the natural environment reflecting Froebel's philosophy of encouraging engagement with and in nature. It thoughtfully located the children in the best area to support their health and learning and also represented a democratic approach to social and physical play offering each class equal accessibility. Susan Isaacs' influence on the psychological, social and emotional development of young children was becoming influential at this time and this may be evidenced in the design.

"For some part of every day, young children between infancy and ordinary school age, should enjoy a time of free play with other children, not very much older or younger. This is one of the many ways in which the Nursery School is valuable" (Isaacs, 1929:123).

The built resources in the garden indicate an understanding of children's sensory development – these include two large sandpits, a paddling pool, brick seating and a grassed area. Children's interest in the living world was encouraged by providing a bird bath. There is no direct evidence for pets but Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938) recommend special provision for domestic animals: "If these are to be kept they must be given plenty of space, and the best place for them is not near the playroom windows" (1938:24).

Later there is evidence from the head teacher's logbook that in the 1950s and 60s the nursery had budgerigars and an aquarium for fish, and later, in the early 1970s, a guinea pig. The bird bath and possibility of pets show that observation of living things, and possibly life cycles, would have been part of the curriculum. The thoughtfulness about a child's point of view is reflected in the stone animals provided by John Ellis and Sons Ltd – "Carved stone figures representing squirrels, rabbits and "Mickey Mouse" are placed above the sheltering canopy and serve to differentiate the Playrooms" (City of Norwich, 1939).



**Photo 10. Rear of the building with sculptures**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2016)



They remain to this day and have been repaired and added to over the years although the description of the mouse as being like the famous cartoon 'Mickey' is surely mistaken!



**Photo 11. Sculptures in detail**  
(*Private Collection, Norwich 2016*)

## A flexible learning environment

The architecture of the nursery promoted the development of independence in the children. The low windowsill gave them a view of the garden and the small ladders provided a route in and out of the playroom. Equipment allowed children to acquire skills to wash and toilet themselves by having space for individual towels and toothbrushes. Separate pegs were provided in the cloakroom so that children had more individual space and could find their own coats. All the classrooms were organised so that furniture and equipment could be moved as necessary and children might be able to move around the class as appropriate rather than be fixed in one place at desks in a sedentary fashion. This adaptability meant that the space could be manipulated and transformed depending on the interests and needs of particular groups. This would have encouraged creativity and responsiveness in teaching and in learning. A similar contemporary view on the importance of a flexible environment is expressed in the environment advice to the schools of Reggio Emilia in 1998:

“The school environment must be flexible over time and manipulable. It must also change and be open to modification by the children’s processes of self-learning and, in turn, interact with these processes and modify them” (Ceppi & Zini, 1998:14).

The provision of storage implied that resources were flexible and not fixed and also indicated a more creative approach to the environment. The evidence for supporting and modelling creativity is found in the provision for the music curriculum. The tender for the school lists “pianos provided by Messrs Cramer & Co. Ltd”. The piano was seen as a necessary part of the nursery school equipment and is mentioned in both McMillan (1919) and Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938). The Hadow Report (1933), when listing the internal equipment for nursery schools, notes:

“A piano and some instruments of percussion will also be required.” Rhythmic movement, dancing and singing games were considered as important parts of the curriculum at this time, supporting listening, speaking, physical development, social development and creativity, and reflect a Froebelian influence, originating from Froebel’s ‘Mother Songs’ and many of the finger rhymes we still use today (Tovey, 2017).

## **Architecture supporting social and community needs**

The design of the school fostered a sense of a community reflected in the spatial characteristics of the building. Using a single storey layout and shared spaces demonstrates an interest in the social life of children. The large shared space of the garden onto which each of the classrooms faces is a place of meeting, a public place. This had a pedagogical role in supporting the development of wider social relationships and fostering group interaction, play and friendships.

The building was designed so that it could also be used by the wider community outside school hours and for local activities. The kitchen was used by the infant school and by the wider locality during the war years to provide meals in the holidays for those in need living to the west of the city. The design for the buildings on the campus where the nursery school was situated included an infant school, a junior school and a maternity and child welfare clinic, so that the whole site provided “continuous observation and training from the Ante-Natal period to the time when the child leaves one of the post primary schools” (City of Norwich, 1939). This indicates a holistic view of childhood which understands the importance of continuity over time for those services providing for children and parents.

The architecture of Earlham Nursery School reflects the progressive approach to early education influenced by Froebel, McMillan and Isaacs that prevailed during the 1930s and was actively supported by the government through the findings of the Hadow Report (1933). It was a view that harnessed both health and educational approaches with a focus on continuity from the antenatal stage up to the end of junior education. This view prioritised children’s needs over those of the adults working with them. It encouraged a pedagogy which was flexible and creative, supported curiosity and an interest in the natural world and promoted healthier physical development as well as increasing social interaction.

## **Constraints of the building**

In some ways the building was inflexible. Asbestos in the original materials prevented too much work on the fabric of the building and subsequent changes had to make pipes and services external to the existing walls, which didn’t always look very attractive. In addition, the nursery was built on a ring beam with all walls being load-bearing, so there was never any likelihood of opening up the rooms to each other. The location of the boiler room in the basement under the cloakrooms meant that access was always necessary on health and safety grounds and therefore it was difficult to be creative about the use of the centre of the quadrangle.

Although the building was thoughtfully designed for the 1930s, some of the features became constraints over time. For example, the large and wide corridor separated the classrooms from the bathrooms. This meant the management of children becoming independent in using the bathroom needed thought and consideration, although the bathrooms themselves were spacious.

The corridor was good when the traffic through the nursery was one-way but once a day care facility was necessary, which needed a different type of security, this route was no longer possible. With two-way traffic into and out of the nursery building, there were often difficulties at the beginning and end of sessions. This was partially solved by creating a covered area where pushchairs could be left. During the quieter times the corridor could be used by children and it was provided with resources attached to the walls at child level for this purpose.

## Additions and changes

Each of the original classrooms had its own discrete cloakroom. These were adapted as part of the Early Excellence plan and transformed into a soft-play room and a sensory room accessible to all classes. The coats and bags were then stored in the corridor outside of each classroom, which was wide enough to accommodate them.

Temporary buildings have come and gone with different demands being placed on the nursery. In 1983, a small mobile classroom was placed in the garden to accommodate the unit for hearing-impaired children. This was later used as a library and then removed when the garden was enlarged in 2002. Another mobile office was added when the nursery school became a Children's Centre in order to increase office space. This was later joined to the building with a covered walkway and used as a meeting room.

Additions to the original plan of a hall, training kitchen and room space as part of the Early Excellence programme allowed the nursery to offer training opportunities, an improved staffroom and increased office space. A later extension as part of the two-year old programme allowed an indoor and outdoor space especially built to accommodate the needs of two-year-olds while giving direct access to the large shared outdoor area.



**Photo 12. Front elevation, 1996**  
(Private Collection, 1996)



**Photo 13. Front elevation, 2016**  
(Private Collection, 2016)

The garden area was also extended as part of the Early Excellence programme and the spoil from the construction site was used to create a more diverse landscape. For example, the builder's waste was used to form a hill in the garden which became known as the Magic Mountain. Over the years it has changed with the growth of vegetation and the addition of naturalistic landscaping and artist-designed structures.

In spite of these changes and the constraints outlined above, the building has stood the test of time as an example of design that was led by an intention to provide an environment that supported both the health and educational needs of young children.

Earlham Nursery School was designed and built at a time of pride in public buildings and how they represented a commitment to creating new communities and facilities for working families in the aftermath of the Great War. Architects were encouraged through the Hadow Reports to consider the ideas of educationalists in their designs and for schools to think carefully about space, light, colour, access to the school garden, and the impact these would have on children's learning. Sadly, at the time of writing in 2020 the public education system has become fragmented and funds have become scarce. Designs are more likely to be determined by space and building regulations than by the needs of the users and the community context, and unlikely to be based on the ideas of contemporary educationalists.

For nursery and infant schools there was an emphasis on health and educational support for antenatal as well as postnatal welfare, as demonstrated in the provision in the adjoining junior and infant school of a maternity and child welfare clinic. The school was seen as a resource for the wider community as in its use for providing meals for children in the wider locality during the war years. This approach resonates with some of the aims of the Children's Centres of the early 2000s that had a focus on providing integrated education and childcare, family support, child and family health services and support with accessing jobs. However, an emphasis on getting parents into the workforce and reducing local authority budgets, rather than child development and family well-being, has meant that many of the initiatives for helping parents with the health and education of their children have fallen by the wayside and many Children's Centres have been closed in recent years. Research shows that the effects of the health and welfare of the parents, what happens in utero, and the earliest experiences of children, have a long-term impact on the individual children, the family and society at large. Agencies providing facilities for children and their families, including care and education, need to take this broader, longer term perspective into account as they have in the past.

## Reflections

- Architecture reflects political and social ideas and priorities. These have often been explicitly formulated as part of government reviews and reports and have determined the structure and style of educational buildings.
- Nursery schools were originally set up to serve as a model to house care and educational facilities for two to seven-year-olds.
- When it was built, Earlham Nursery School had access to a maternity and child welfare clinic. This reflected Froebel's emphasis on the need to link family, school and community. Over the years this was lost but returned in the form of a multi-agency Children's Centre in the early years of this century. In 2020 this has been lost again because of the local authority's financial difficulties (through the government's austerity programme).
- Educational buildings can benefit from the expertise of educationalists and health professionals to create an environment that promotes learning and good health.
- Public architecture does not only need to be simply functional but also needs to celebrate its contribution to society and can include playful and decorative aspects.
- Access to the nursery garden and the benefits of a natural environment in learning and development have been acknowledged over the history of the building and continue to be relevant today. This celebrates the Froebelian principle of engaging with and in nature.

# Part Two

We are all learners...



# Chapter Six

## North Earlham, the Social Background

*“The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community”*  
(William, n. d.).

When I took up my post at the nursery as deputy head teacher in 1995, I was unprepared for the prejudicial remarks I got when I mentioned that I had taken a teaching post on one of the social housing estates in west Norwich. “What! Monkey Island – Ha!”, “Lucky if you come out alive!”, “They string teachers up on Monkey Island you know!”, “You must be mad”. These remarks give a flavour of the perception some Norfolk people had of this estate. It is interesting to me to see how a whole community was categorised by others who had no personal knowledge of it. How was this view started and perpetuated across Norfolk?

### Social Myths

To help me understand the area I was going to be working in I read a pamphlet published in 1989 which described the work done by Project Link (see Chapter Five). The pamphlet (Docherty, 1989) described a multi-agency approach to supporting young men on the estate to develop skills and interests which would help them both socially and in the world of work. This pamphlet also described how the estate was populated in the late 1930s. The author describes four distinct groups of people being rehoused in the new “suburban” estate close to Norwich but separate from it. These groups were broadly categorised as:

- People from the slum clearance in Ber Street and along the side of the river.
- Farm labourers from across the rural area of Norfolk who were migrating to the city because automation of farms was leading to a reduction in work.
- Irish ‘navvies’. This was a time of road building and railway expansion and there was plenty of work for Irish labourers in the city of Norwich.
- Diddakois – a name commonly used in Norfolk for gypsies – settled on this estate which had been built largely on the apple orchards of Earlham Hall, where the gypsies had come to apple pick for many generations.

Docherty implied that these four groups of people were housed together by the council and this had caused a 'ghetto' experience on the two local estates as the different "communities did not co-exist well together" (Docherty, 1989). This interpretation of the people and culture of the estates was strongly disputed by Rogaly and Taylor (2011) in their Moving Histories series. They interviewed 73 members of the community and found evidence that the city council never had a policy of 'ghettoising' people. These estates were only a small part of the house building and house clearance project of the 1930s. People in overcrowded housing and cleared slums were housed throughout the many estates built around the perimeter of the city at this time. "The process of dispersing the population of the slum clearance areas from central [city] to all of the new estates being built around the city's fringe was reinforced by the officially sanctioned concept of 'decanting' – whereby families living in overcrowded accommodation anywhere in the city could be allocated housing built under slum clearance legislation" (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011:48).

My experience in this area was that some families had gypsy-traveller and Irish antecedents. Others talked about their grandparents working the land. The nursery gained from these backgrounds as we had wonderful heavy horses visit the nursery and a pony and trap which used to give the children rides around the garden.

The other important factor outlined in Rogaly and Taylor's book is that council housing was for skilled and 'white collar' workers. At this time if you lived in a council house it showed that you had a productive job which gave financial security (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011).

I met and worked with many of the families who wanted to improve their literacy skills. I found a functioning community that supported each other and had a history of living together. There were large extended families which cared for older and younger family members alike. Many families had suffered marital break-up and were coping as single parents with support from other family members. The unusual aspect of this was that many fathers were actively engaged in parenting, whether as single dads or estranged dads who wanted to stay involved.

The other interesting and strong element of this community was that people would become engaged with the Family Literacy Project once others had experienced it first. Word of mouth which could reassure was the best method of advertising a new project and this remained the same throughout my time working at the nursery.

I felt welcomed as an 'outsider' and never experienced any negative comments or behaviour while I was working on this project. So why were these two estates thought of so negatively in the wider Norfolk community? Rogaly and Taylor (2011) conclude that the myths around the antecedents of the people had given the estates a very negative identity. The people in turn perpetuated this, as having a negative identity is better than being an invisible community with no voice at all.

In 1995 I became the deputy head of Earlham Nursery School and met again with some of the families I had worked with in the Family Literacy Project. At this time in the history of the nursery, children were admitted from the estates but also from many other areas of Norfolk. There was no policy for nursery education for all three and four-year-olds and it was those who believed in early education that applied for a nursery place. Others were referred because of specific needs which early education would help support. The local authority was in charge of the nursery admissions and we operated a very large waiting list. This list usually had between 150 and 200 children's names on it.

When management was devolved to the head and governors in 1999, one of the first things we did was to develop admissions criteria which prioritised:

- Children living in the local area.
- Siblings of children already attending the nursery.
- Children with additional needs.
- Children identified in terms of the new Green Paper, 'Excellence For All'. (Department for Education, 1997)

This helped to reduce the waiting list however it was the advent of the government Nursery Voucher Scheme (Department for Education and Employment, 1996), for which Norfolk became a pilot authority, that provided enough places for all children in the area. The pilot funding allowed the local authority to build new nursery classes in local schools. Three new classes were built on neighbouring estates and opened between 1999 and 2000. This ensured that all children had a nursery place with no waiting.

There were many young children in the area and families were still large. The norm was between seven and eight children per family, but some families had up to 14 children. Another feature of family life was that young women started their families early. I remember a mother at the nursery proudly telling me she had been the youngest 'mum' in Norfolk, having her first baby when she was just 14. There were three pre-school playgroups in the area; one playgroup on the north side of the main road and two others on the south side. The north side playgroup was the strongest and run by a local parent who was a trained and experienced nursery nurse.

The other two playgroups had changing fortunes and were always struggling to survive. In 1996 I became the new head of the nursery school with a commitment to community engagement. I approached the three playgroup leaders and the three infant school head teachers. I visited all six settings and talked about their hopes for the children in their care. I started to build relationships with them and eventually I asked them to come to a meeting to discuss working together for the community. In 1999 this small cluster (without one of the playgroups) formed a group which became known as ELM (the initial letters of the names of the three estates we served) and adopted the symbolism of a tree, an obvious Froebelian influence. Our guiding principle was that we were all providing good quality early education for children in the area from three to seven years old. We therefore needed to work together and train together.

Our first big project was to bring music to the children and we jointly applied for funding from The National Foundation for Youth Music – First Steps. We were awarded funding and developed a research project on how young children respond to rhythm and sound. The lead researcher was a music specialist and governor at the nursery.

From 1995 through to the advent of Children's Centres in 2005, the nursery and the community went through a plethora of chosen and enforced changes. As previously mentioned, in 1995 the nursery was managed and overseen by the local authority. They were benevolent and largely uninvolved. Nursery schools were not high on their priority list as there were only four in Norfolk. However, change was on its way both from the outgoing Conservative government and the incoming New Labour government of 1997. These were changes in legislation and therefore enforceable.



## A brief resume of legislation changes from 1996 to 2005

- Nursery Voucher Scheme (DFEE, 1996a). This gave 'parent choice' over the flexibility of hours they could have for early education and supported some parents to do part-time work.
- Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on entering compulsory education (DFEE, SCAA, 1996). Curriculum guidance for Early Years but based only on children being given a structure to learn facts and knowledge. It did not address the holistic needs of the child. We felt this did not benefit the children at Earlham.
- Ofsted - Office for Standards in Education, (Education Schools Act, 1992). The first government-led inspection regime initially for schools. Earlham had its first Ofsted inspection in July 1997.
- Neighbourhood Nurseries. (Norfolk County Council, 2002). An initiative to develop extended hours for working parents offering places from birth to school.
- Sure Start Local Programmes (Institute for Government, 1999) were being rolled out across the country and each local authority had to provide these in areas of deprivation. Earlham, although high on the local authority deprivation scale, was not considered for a Sure Start Local Programme anywhere on the estate as the local authority deemed that the estate had had a great deal of financial support and that this initiative must go elsewhere. The first Sure Start Local Programme was set up in another area of the city.

## Chosen changes 1996 – 2005

There were many initiatives which we could opt into and so had choice in what we did. One of these was the New Labour research programme called Early Excellence. New Labour wanted to know what would work for young parents and challenged high-quality Early Years providers to research new ways of working which benefited families and young children. The senior leadership team at the nursery was interested in becoming part of this research and had a preliminary visit from an Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) who came to see if we had innovative practice based on sound early educational principles. He agreed that we were eligible to apply. In 2000 Earlham Nursery School applied to the government to become an Early Excellence Centre on the grounds of good practice in the following areas:

- Inclusive practice through the understanding of a dispositional curriculum (Chapter Nine)
- Working in partnership with parents
- Developing a natural outdoor learning environment which gives rich opportunities for learning

At the beginning of this century, the three local estates were at the centre of a huge amount of social change. I have mentioned the new government's expectations in terms of integrated education and care for very young children. New Labour had a dream of revitalising rundown and dangerous estates with the strategy known as New Deal for Communities (Rallings et al, 1999). However, at the same time the world was entering an unstable and confrontational period. Conflicts around the world led to mass migration both in terms of formal refugees and informal asylum seekers. The three estates became a refugee and asylum seeker area for housing. This dramatically changed the ethnicity and culture on the estates. It also very subtly changed community attitudes to education. Previously on the estates, education had been seen as something that had to be endured but was not useful or helpful. This was voiced in the Moving Histories study: "...I wouldn't do nothing [at school], would I. I would just leave it and when he came round, he'd say 'you ain't done nothing'. Well, I said, I don't need it for fruit and veg, do I?..." (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011:51).

With the influx of refugees and asylum seekers and, later in the decade, economic migrants from Eastern Europe, the value of education was seen very differently. These migrant families saw education as the way out of their difficulties, be these inflicted by war or from lack of work in their home country. During this time the nursery had changed its name to Earlham Early Years Centre to reflect its new aim of working in collaboration with all in the community. The leader of one of the playgroups became a staff member of the centre in a part-time capacity to support many of the asylum seeker families. Together we worked with the Red Cross and their New Routes initiative to support these families. We had families from the Bosnia-Herzegovina war, from the Iraq and Iran war, and from the terrible conflict in the Congo.

The Congolese families arrived with refugee status and had a great deal of support to help them find work and settle into a new and alien culture. One of these mothers had agreed to talk to us about the challenges and difficulties they had faced in the Congo. I don't know what I was expecting, but certainly not what I experienced. We were given a picture of life in the Congo with each village being self-sufficient and then the Rwandan and Ugandan rebels arrived. This was explored through role play. She put us into village groups and the role play began with us being terrorised by violent and extremely loud rebels (played by the refugees). I remember hiding under a table and being really frightened. This certainly gave us an emotional response to the plight of the families that had been displaced by this conflict.

## Partnership working

As an Early Excellence Centre, we were trying out new ways of engaging with other services, both publicly funded and charities. In this way we hoped to support the changing needs of families living on the estates. We also became involved with our other local public services, such as health visitors and social workers. We wanted to build a local service with midwives but this proved to be too difficult at this time. We developed positive links with the board of the New Deal for Communities initiative and our chair of governors was also the chair of this board. We also expanded our partnerships with many other local charities working with children and families, but we worked most closely with two of them. One worked with young fathers and the other worked with young



**Photo 14. Sculpture by parents.**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2019)

families in distress, using local people as volunteers. We also worked with the Red Cross New Routes group as previously mentioned. We set up a credit union for children at the nursery to help them understand and save their money. We also developed links with both the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts and the Norwich Art School to broaden the horizons of families on the estate. We did a successful project with clay with the art school that involved the student artists coming to the centre to develop the ideas of both children and, in this case, mothers.

They decided they wanted to make a sculpture which showed that the centre was changing to involve and work in partnership with families and not just children. The children and mothers went to the art school to make their sculpture. I went with them and was amazed to find out from our discussions that none of them had ever been to the art school, nor did they know that Norwich had an art school. The sculpture they made was beautiful, inspired by jelly babies to represent adults and children working together. The children made small clay jelly babies and they were able to keep these to take home. The sculpture became a symbol of change and was situated at the front of the building in the quadrangle.

We worked hard at developing positive partnerships with parents to support collaboration between the nursery and local schools. We engaged with parents to link our understanding of their children's learning and development. To this end we began our own curriculum parent group and these focused on one nursery room of children and their parents each term. These groups proved very effective and parents really did become engaged and interested in their children's learning. Some parents enjoyed doing observations and would volunteer to do this. Others wrote up how their children were playing at home and what really interested them. One parent said to me: "As a mum, I knew I had to make sure my kids were safe and fed and clothed and warm, but I had no idea I was also an important part of their education."

She went on to write a journal about all the activities she was confident to encourage her children to do at home, in particular making her sitting room furniture into an obstacle course and den area!

If we reflect on the previous comment about 'learning', this statement shows the dawning of a change in attitude. Parents began to see that they could have some control and impact on their children's learning. As mentioned earlier, part of the Early Excellence research programme was to find new and innovative ways to bring services together and so we became proactive in engaging with other statutory agencies such as health and social services.

## **Multi-agency leadership**

We expanded our senior leadership team to include a health visitor from the local surgery. This led to more collaborative working with the local health team and some primary health care services developed at the nursery. These were baby clinics, some antenatal classes, and two-year-old parties, which were a way of engaging parents to bring their children for their two-year-old developmental check. Health visitors also began parenting classes.

The governors and I approached the local authority – which had recently merged its two arms of education and social services into a united children's services – to explore greater collaboration with the social work team for the area. In my past I had led a Family Centre in Devon which had been equally accountable to education, health and social services. This had given me a good insight into how constructive this could be and helped us to put primary prevention at the forefront of our thinking and working. The local authority began to see the positive possibilities of a social worker based at the centre to provide continuity to families and be there to support them before their needs became too great.

This social worker would be part of the local team and would be line-managed by the team leader and supervised by me and the team leader, bringing the services together. This area had long been high risk in terms of safeguarding and we had developed a positive working relationship with the social work team over the years. The team leader knew the area well and was extremely supportive

of the work with parents happening at the nursery. She was enthusiastic about the proposal of having a social worker based at the nursery. The local authority set up a pilot scheme funding six social workers in areas of need across Norfolk based in the new Sure Start Local Programmes and Earlham Early Years Centre. Our first social worker was newly qualified and very enthusiastic about the opportunities that working within the community could bring to both the social work team and the families on the estates. She wrote up her struggles in defining this new and emerging role in her master of arts dissertation. Her conclusion was that families need support services which can identify challenges in family life early. However, her perception was that New Labour had sidelined social workers and saw this support coming from other voluntary agencies and government programmes. She felt that there was a distinct role for social workers in a multi-agency service and suggested that “the social work profession should be allocated a role in centres in order to best maximise the well-being and safety of children and families” (Stafford, 2006).

## **How the New Deal strategy links to history and benefits the nursery**

The New Deal for Communities status and grant had been agreed for the three estates to work together in 1999. The local council had put in a bid for this grant without consulting with the community. They were unsuccessful and the residents had taken matters into their own hands. They had organised a bus to London where the initiative was being discussed, lobbied at the Houses of Parliament and were supported by the local Labour MP (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011). People on the estates were coming together to be a force for change in the community rather than accepting what others had decided for them.

Having this status granted gave some residents a real feeling of power and belief in their abilities. However, other residents, who had over the years worked tirelessly for the community, felt disenfranchised. Some historic initiatives were taken under the wing of the New Deal structure. One of these was the School Watch Programme. This had been run for years by a few local families who wanted to reduce the endemic vandalism that happened to the schools on the estates every night. This, I am afraid to say, included the nursery. How disheartened we used to feel when we arrived in the morning to find windows broken along the south side of the nursery. Every night all the resources had to be covered or put away to stop the broken glass falling into them. This culture of wanton vandalism had not changed over the past 50 years. In 1952 the nursery logbook states:

“During last night the school was broken into. Two drawers of my desk forced and attempts made on other drawers and on the safe. One of the drawers was taken to class 2 bathroom where some of the contents were burnt. As far as can be ascertained no important papers were destroyed. The keys of the classroom cupboards were taken and three pairs of scissors from a cupboard which was forced in class 1.”  
(Earlham Nursery School, Norfolk Records Office, 1952).

So, things had not moved on and the children of the estate still indulged in this type of vandalism. In 1997 the dedicated volunteers from the school watch team came around every night, whatever the weather, checking that all windows were shut, and that doors and gates were locked. They would often have a friendly word with me and remind me not to stay too late! For the first time with New Deal these volunteers had proper training, back-up support and equipment from the police. This really made a difference and gave them confidence and a feeling of worth. One of these volunteers went on to get a cleaning role at the nursery. He excelled in organisational skills and was appointed as an administrative officer when the nursery expanded and became a Children’s Centre in 2005.

He was encouraged to take further training and attained his NVQ level 3 in office administration. Many parents who had initially brought their children to nursery became volunteers and then were encouraged to train in areas of strength. Parents took teacher training, childcare, cooking or community work courses and were all able to access paid employment in the nursery, schools or other community facilities.

The nursery also benefited from the New Deal grants. I applied for a grant to start a parent and toddler group and other community activities such as healthy walks and baby massage. We were successful with these applications and one of the nursery nurses who had worked at the nursery for 25 years became our first community nursery nurse and outreach worker. I remember meeting with this member of staff in the summer holiday of 2005. It was a beautiful sunny day and we met at the Millennium Library and sat outside. I discussed my ideas with her and asked if she would be prepared to be released from her room duties to work in the community. She was understandably cautious at first but keen and enthusiastic about the ideas. I explained that she would be ideal as she knew the families so well, often having taught the mothers or fathers of the children we had now. This meant she had a good knowledge of grandmothers, and in some instances great-grandmothers. She had had some experience of working half a day a week, released from her room duties, to provide for parents and siblings of children already at the nursery. We had used a soft-play room which was very small and part of the old staff room. This staff member had made a great success of this small parent and toddler group and was open to expanding this. Moving groups out into the community, however, was a big ask and one I gave her time to think about.

She decided to embrace this new challenge. Her length of service at the nursery gave her credence in the community and she was accepted and trusted by the families that used the nursery and the schools. She was also well known in the community and was able to develop Stay and Play groups at other community venues. She worked well with the leader of the successful playgroup in the area who had been a big contributor and influence in the previously mentioned ELM group.

Initially, three Stay and Play groups were developed across the community with families from the three estates. Later we developed a fourth group in a local infant school. These groups were monitored by the New Deal for Communities grants committee to ensure they were meeting the outcomes of New Deal and the needs of the community. This was another way that the community was playing a powerful part in realigning the old myths in terms of education. They saw and communicated their aim for education, which was 'education from the cradle to the grave'.

Our main challenge was initially getting people to come to community venues. Numbers began to build but still there were those families that did not want to be part of a group and found the social aspect of the group hard. Some of the venues were very challenging in terms of the environment they offered (this was before the days of the smoking ban in public places). The community nursery nurse felt that the hardest session was the nursery-based session on Monday in our beautiful but large hall. It was like a release after the weekend and parents were looking for their own needs to be met rather than responding to the needs of their children. The numbers for this session got out of control, sometimes having up to 40 families. Later, this tension was relieved somewhat by the group having access to the nursery garden.

The group at the local infant school was the smallest and many families found it hard to engage. Again, the community nursery nurse had to think of ways to encourage them. She used the strategy of going to meet families at their homes and then walking them back to the group, collecting other families on the way. This gave them confidence to walk into a group.

Once the Stay and Play groups were established, we worked on extending our reach in terms of family health. Additional training was needed, so the staff member went to work alongside a health authority-referred walking programme to find out about the benefits and the processes involved. She attended training for postnatal walks for babies and mothers in Sheffield. She came back enthused and set up a series of walks for mothers with their babies and toddlers every Tuesday and Thursday. The focus was to walk and talk and to go to green spaces which were easily accessible. This initiative was very successful as the mothers with very young babies and children were introduced to a support network early and tended to stay on, joining the Stay and Play groups and then the nursery or local playgroups. Walking and talking seemed to break down barriers and friendships were made that helped isolated families feel part of a community which they could enjoy. In many cases we found parents also took part in other activities to support them with parenting and building their own confidence and well-being. Like the art school initiative, we found that many of these young mothers had never visited any of the many beautiful Norwich parks. The community nursery nurse went on to extend her skills by training in baby massage and ran successful groups at the nursery and then as part of the Children's Centre.

## **Nursery School and early education myths**

At the beginning of this chapter we wrote about the myths that had grown and flourished around this marginalised community on the edge of Norwich. We want also to outline the myths that flourished about Early Years and nursery education at this time in Norfolk. The local authority had no history of a strong ethos in nursery education. Historically, Norwich had been an industrial city between the wars and into the 1970s. The industries had been brick making, chicken wire manufacture, munitions and all products from tanning. There had been a very large shoe industry which continued until the end of the 20th century, with the last surviving factory making Start Rite shoes closing in 2001.

Earlham Nursery had developed a strong and reciprocal relationship with this factory over many years. Three times a year, managers from the factory came and measured all the children's feet to ensure they had correctly fitting shoes. Start Rite shoes could be bought at cost price but Start Rite gave away a number of shoes to children in need and requested their parents to make sure the children used them roughly. This was an annual research project which benefited the children of the nursery by ensuring that they all had properly fitted and comfortable shoes but also enabled Start Rite to develop comfort and durability in their children's shoes. The Start Rite factory allowed us to use their office premises in 2002 when we had to close for two weeks because of building work for the Early Excellence initiative. This meant we could have a useful two-week training programme with all the staff contributing to the vision of the nursery in the future.

Norwich, as in many industrial towns, valued nursery schools mainly because they allowed women to work in the factories. Norwich City Council built two other perimeter estates at the same time as Earlham, also providing them with their own nursery classes. Norfolk had four stand-alone nursery schools which were far apart in this large rural county. The head teachers did their best to work together by having a combined training day every year. The local authority treated them as schools but saw them as 'square pegs in round holes'. For example, Local Management of Schools (LMS) (Edwards et al, 1995), allowed maintained schools to have charge of their own budgets. It was not fully applied until 1990 and Norfolk nursery schools did not become part of this legislation until 1999. The formula which was set for this was just for the four nursery schools and therefore had different requirements and accountabilities to all other Norfolk schools.

However, when further change came which shone a spotlight on Early Years, the local authority was required to develop a childcare strategy and a multi-agency steering group was set up, known as the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) (Dawson, 2001). This highlighted the different funding between nursery schools, the voluntary sector and the private sector. However, it did not emphasise other differences such as:

- the requirements of maintained nursery schools to have trained teachers.
- the tradition of nursery schools being flexible to the needs of the community, often providing lunches and full-time places.
- the tradition of having a medical officer providing regular weekly surgeries at nursery schools and the tradition of providing holistic support for families.
- the fact that nursery schools were schools and accountable to the schools structure, with governing bodies, HMI inspections and, from 1993, the Ofsted Schools Inspection Framework rather than the Early Years Inspection Framework.

These traditions were lost in the brave new world of Early Years care and the New Labour National Childcare Strategy (UKchildcare, n.d.). This provision was seen as separate from education and a separate delivery arm at the local authority was set up. The myths began to grow that nursery schools were anachronistic and over-funded. They did not provide for enough children or young enough children for the New Labour strategy, which was to get all parents back to work. This myth is prevalent today as nursery schools are struggling for their existence and may well lose their funding in 2021. If this happens the world leaders in providing holistic early education will be gone forever and generations of children will not benefit from this excellent and innovative provision.

It is interesting to me that in 1929, in the Educational Enquiry Committee, a clear and cogent case was made for nursery schools. That was in 1929 I hear you say, but one of the clear recommendations was because of the benefit that nursery schools had on children's mental health (Education Enquiry Committee 1929:60). This is still a grave concern for children.

## Reflection

- Nursery schools serve as a bridge to marginalised communities. Take this away and these communities may become even more isolated or marginalised.
- Forming relationships across the wider community enables families to access resources which may previously have been outside their scope or knowledge.
- Parents were encouraged to see themselves as educators. We were influenced by Froebel's ideas around valuing the family.
- The staff team was supported to extend and develop their skills as learners and reflective practitioners.
- Working as a multi-agency team made communicating, supporting and advocating for children absolutely central.

# Chapter Seven

## Nursery School Life 1935–1995

*“The Nursery school is an extension of the function of the home, not a substitute for it; but experience has shown that it brings to the child such a great variety of benefits that it can be looked upon as a normal institution in the social life of any civilised community”*  
(Isaacs, 1954).

Having looked at the historical influences on how nursery schools have developed, the impact of the architecture on learning, and the social context, we will look at the events and challenges from the opening of the nursery to the period in which the authors began teaching at the school. Evidence for this chapter was found in the school log book, the Norwich City Council education committee minutes (up to 1955), and the school diaries. There were also interviews with a head teacher and two members of staff, who reminisced about the 1970s and 80s.

### Management and leadership

On completion of the building in 1939, a caretaker was appointed to look after the building and grounds. The head teacher and three support teachers were in post soon after. They were all well qualified with an emphasis on Froebelian approaches; two of the teachers had been awarded Froebel certificates from Maria Grey Training College and the third had qualified at Gypsy Hill Training College, where the principal, Lillian de Lissa, had been strongly influenced by Froebel, Dewey and Montessori. Six months after their appointment the team were joined by a fourth teacher who had been awarded the Froebel certificate from Maria Grey Training College. In addition to these teaching staff, three unqualified nursery ‘helpers’ were employed to support the children.

The building opened in May 1939 but the outbreak of hostilities against Germany meant that schools were closed for a week after the declaration of war and then shut for the summer holidays. It continued to be closed as a nursery in the following term, but the classrooms were utilised by the adjacent infant school. The kitchen was used for providing food for “necessitous children” until April 1940 when the building reopened as a nursery. The children attended full-time and this included



all their meals, although later the provision of food may have been limited to dinner. At first the nursery appears to have been open in term time only, but from July 1942 meals were also provided during the summer holidays at the nursery for children in the locality.

In December 1944 the head teacher “resigned on marriage” – this was common in professional jobs between the wars as authorities implemented a marriage bar preventing women from continuing to work after their marriage. This bar was removed for teachers in 1944 but a culture based on the idea of a woman resigning from her professional work after marriage may have influenced the head teacher’s decision. One of the original teachers who had been recruited in 1939 was promoted to the role and continued in post until 1972.

During this period the head teacher was advised on her duties by Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools (HMI) who visited up to three times a year. This source of support changed in 1950 when a local authority assistant education officer replaced the HMI in the advisory role. The support offered was more regular and the contact by telephone and personal visit (about once a month) gave occasion for advice and guidance on staff management, admissions and transfers to primary school.

There was separate local authority management of the kitchen staff and this dealt with any issues around the provision of meals. An example of this appears in the school logbook from January 1951:

“[Miss...] visited the school to inspect the kitchen equipment and transfer some that is needed for use in the school, and to discuss the duties of the dinner women. It was agreed that their only work in the rooms should be the laying of the tables... “  
(Earlham Nursery School, Norfolk Records Office, 1950).

There was some staff turnover and in the 1960s teachers were still being recruited with qualifications from Froebel training colleges. This altered in the 1970s, which was a period of extensive staffing changes for the nursery. The existing head teacher retired in July 1972 and at the same time three other members of staff left to take up new posts. School reopened that autumn with a temporary head teacher and three new teachers. It was not until 18 months later that a new permanent head teacher was recruited to start at the nursery, in January 1974. The new teachers were qualified at colleges of education (often linked to universities) but with no Froebelian accreditation. The impact of this was that Froebelian ideas lost their explicit influence in this nursery and more widely. The non-teaching staff were qualified with a NNEB (Nursery Nurse Examination Board qualification) and often recruited from the local further education college.

Staff who served in the 1970s recall the nursery as “...very formal, the head teacher stayed in the office and didn’t teach or relate to the parents”. This was confirmed by a staff member who was also a parent of a child who attended in the 1970s and lived in the road next to the nNursery. She recalled:

“When I had [my child] I didn’t know this [nursery] existed. It was only on a health visitor’s visit when they said, ‘Why don’t you get him into the nursery?’ ...I had no idea it even existed. So, he started. I didn’t have much to do with the school then, only dropping off and collecting.”

The next change in leadership occurred in March 1985 when the head teacher retired and was replaced temporarily for two terms by an acting head teacher. The new appointee in 1986 recalls that when she started there was a concern that the nursery would be closed down, a common occurrence in the late 1970s and 1980s, and she felt that it had been run down in light of this. She was concerned

to develop the nursery and you can hear in her school logbook entries a frustration with the lack of time available to do her job:

“I managed to clean half of my room, getting rid of a great deal of surplus paper. It is only in the holidays that it is possible” (5 April 1989),

“A staff meeting was held today – many items on the agenda! There is never enough time for all we wish to do” (3 May 1989).

There is also evidence of the development of an explicit and new vision for the nursery in the late 1980s alongside efforts to engage the staff and governors more actively:

“Staff meeting held to discuss aims of school to be presented to governors at the next governors’ meeting. It was agreed that fortnightly staff meetings be held, partly to discuss prearranged topics, and partly to bring up any subjects needing discussion” (14 May 1986).

Governance had been shared with the First School up until 1988 under a joint governing body but in October of that year the nursery school began the process to set up its own governing body. Initially it had trouble finding a chair of governors but after much searching, they eventually elected a willing volunteer in May 1989. As well as the governance, other management structures began to change. The management of finance and training moved from the County Council to a more school-based responsibility for resources. The regular meetings to support managers/head teachers changed to a mix of more formal meetings with the local education authority and the establishment of less formal networks of support.

## Nursery school life in the 1930s

The nursery school day in the 1930s had a clear timetable and a regular rhythm, with an emphasis on supporting children’s health. Here is a flavour of what it may have been like in Earlham Nursery School when it opened, drawn from a more detailed description of nursery school life in Myles Wright and Gardner-Medwin (1938).

On their first day the child’s mother would talk to the superintendent or the teacher to share information about the child and the superintendent would carefully observe the child to check for any health needs. Once the child had been accepted for a place at nursery, they would be taken to school by their mother or an older sibling.

Nursery began between 7.30 and 9am depending on the mother’s working hours. Each day would start by going to the cloakroom and hanging their coat on a coat peg which had their own personalised picture symbol above it (for example, a tree or a flower). They would then wash their hands and face or might have a bath supported by a helper who would check for any health or medical needs. After a bath they would get dressed in an overall or apron provided by the nursery.

After this they might feed the pets, play in the garden or set the table for breakfast, which was usually served between 9 and 9.30am. After breakfast they would help to clear the dishes away or might go outside to use the climbing bars or the wheeled toys.

Between 11 and 11.30am it was time for table top play and the children would choose from a range of occupations, perhaps puzzles or blocks, or they may join the other children in singing games or breathing and nose-blowing exercises. If a child was unwell, or referred by the superintendent for minor medical treatment, they may see the community doctor or a trained nurse in this period.

At 11.30am, after a short time in the garden, the children would clear up and wash their hands and faces in preparation for dinner. This was usually a two-course hot meal served in the outdoors when possible. The children helped to lay the table, to serve dinner, and wash the plates afterwards.

After this they were supported to use the toilet. They collected their own bedding and blanket and had an afternoon nap for up to two hours. At about 2.30pm in the afternoon they would get up, go to the toilet and wash before going outdoors. In the garden they could play in the sand and water pits, do some simple gardening, arrange flowers, play with the pets or explore their own interests. This was followed by a group session of singing or physical games.

Four o'clock was tea-time. The children helped to prepare the meal, and clear away afterwards. After tea they played in the garden or indoors for a while before being collected. When their family came to collect them, they put on their home clothes before making their way back to the place where they lived.

## Changes in the nursery school day at Earlham

During the Second World War normal nursery provision was interrupted and re-organised to support working mothers. After the war the nursery quietly resumed its pre-war routines and working practices. By January 1966 new school hours operated to offer a more flexible start and end to the sessions. Children attended all day sessions and could arrive between 8.40 and 9.15am and leave between 2.45 and 3 pm. This arrangement was established to help working mothers who had to be at work before 9am. This changed again in the following September when, due to pressure of numbers, classes began to be offered as part-time sessions. "One class is taking children part-time up to thirty for the morning session and approximately twenty-five in the afternoon" (School logbook). By September of 1967, more detailed thought had gone into how to encourage children to settle. When first admitted children started in an afternoon session, while older and more settled children attended in the morning.

The routine of the session was also becoming more flexible during this time. One of the nursery nurses remembers when she started in 1978 that the morning routine was:

- 8.50 - 9.00am arrival
- 9.30 - 10.00am room-based activities
- 10.00 - 10.45am choice of outside offered (supervised by nursery nurse)
- 10.45 - 11.00am tidy away and milk
- 11.00 - 11.30am carpet time

Memories of the environment at this time also give us a picture of life in the nursery.

For example, one nursery nurse described how the tables were set out as three squares – a milk table, a writing table and a painting/craft table with each child having a chair. Another member of staff remembered that there were always puzzles and a craft activity each day.

A third member of staff recalled:

“When I started in the late 1970s it was the first year they changed from a system where each class was different. There [had been] a wet room, a dry room and a room for other activities and the children moved through the rooms on a rota.”

This rotation was confirmed by a colleague:

“Each month all the table top toys, floor and craft resources were packed up and moved clockwise around the rooms. This meant [that] not many resources were stored and you had a change each month.”

She went on to describe how at this time they used clay a lot and had craft activities such as painting, sticking and sewing with binka – all possible remnants of the influence of Froebelian Occupations.

The routine of nursery had changed again by 1986 when there was a more flexible start time offered and a specific time for play in the garden:

- 9.00 - 9.30am arrival
- 9.30 - 10.30am play at tables and milk
- 10.30 - 11.15am outdoor play supervised by nursery nurses
- 11.15 - 12am circle/story time

Children were being offered longer times to settle into their play at each session, but the routine reflected the primary school model for older children, which worked around teachers' tea breaks and saw outdoor play as a supervised time for letting off steam.

The head teacher of this time remembers that the wooden beds once used for sleep time still existed and were kept in the basement but not used, as children only attended for half-day sessions. However, there was an exception to this – there were eight lunch places offered per class to children on a termly basis who had been referred by a health or social services professional. A nursery nurse recollected:

“The children who had lunches had their own towel, flannel and comb... they had two sets. The towels and flannels had all different pictures embroidered on them by hand by the nursery nurse. If you weren't good at embroidery that was a bit tough. Towels, flannels and comb hung on a peg in the bathroom.”

## Relationships with parents

Relationships with parents began to develop more closely during the 1980s. Channels of communication were set up more formally with annual open evenings for parents from 1988. Home visits became available to children who had been referred by other agencies and evidence that all children were admitted slowly over a period of six weeks, in order to settle well into nursery, is shown in the school logbook.

In spite of this improved relationship, the parent was viewed less as the child's first educator and more as a source for volunteers to support activities, make displays and create resources.

A nursery nurse from the 1980s recalls that parents were involved as volunteers but mostly kept at arm's length.

In the summer term of 1988, visits to the coast at West Runton began. On these family days the whole nursery was closed and families were driven to the coast in three double-decker buses with accompanying staff to support families to enjoy a day at the beach together. These were hugely popular and continued for 12 years until new health and safety legislation made the logistics very complex and it became too difficult to continue.

## Learning, teaching and the curriculum

The Hadow Reports (1923-1933) had argued that there was no single perfect curriculum. The job of teachers and educationists was constantly to ask questions and seek better answers. It advised that the curriculum “should be planned as a whole in order to avoid overcrowding; it should arouse interest while ensuring a proper degree of accuracy”; and it should be planned “with a due regard to local conditions, and to the desirability of stimulating the pupils’ capacities through a liberal provision of opportunities for practical work” (Hadow in Gillard, 2006). From 1939-1955 there is little evidence in the school log of explicit curriculum statements and concern for the learning environment. This may have been because of the upheaval of the war and no detailed prescription from government on an Early Years curriculum.

We know from the school log that during 1939-1955 the classrooms were referred to simply as Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3, in an echo of statutory primary schools. This was in spite of the animal sculptures on the roof above each classroom which may have represented a classroom name. In October 1952 the assistant education officer visited the school and promised to find an old table for the newly installed aquarium. This indicates that there was an interest in observing the living world (aquatic life) and these references continue. There is mention of keeping school “pets” (in 1962 a budgerigar and a fish, and in 1971 a guinea pig) which infers a curricula interest in life cycles and caring for living things. The only other reference regarding resources in the school log was in 1958, when there is a note of ordering “a dolls’ pram and other large apparatus”. This may indicate a curriculum emphasis on the physical and imaginative areas of learning.

From 1974, visits to places outside the nursery began to take place, for example, to a local dairy, to Norfolk Agricultural School by minibus, and to the fire station. This implies a more outward-looking approach to learning, a view that knowledge and understanding can be acquired from spaces and people outside of the school, and an interest in how knowledge of the local community supports understanding and learning. Back inside the classroom, staff from the late 1970s described wooden blocks and tessellating shapes being available (another record of a Froebelian influence). The curriculum appeared to be adult led with an emphasis on developing fine motor skills through table top, creative and craft activities. This is reflected in a parent’s memory that there was “more emphasis on pencils and paint. More structured in a sense... they did learn skills... they always had a cutting table”.

This emphasis on skills was not confined to the academic but included the domestic, particularly woodwork, sewing and regular cookery. This is confirmed by a nursery nurse:

“When M came they bought woodwork benches (M was a parent volunteer who became a nursery nurse with a particular interest in woodwork). They also did cooking every week using an electric Baby Belling cooker on a trolley which moved to each class on a rota.”

The head teacher recounted that when she first came to the nursery in the 1980s there were few resources but many tables, leaving little room for movement except for finger and action rhymes. This confirms the other evidence of an emphasis on adult-led, fine motor, creative and mathematical activities. The curriculum seems to reflect a move away from Froebelian methods and towards a more adult-centred and skills-based model.

Visits outside the nursery continued to be made throughout the 1980s, both within the locality and further afield, often based around plants, birds and animals in farm and recreational contexts. There was an effort to visit local museums and amenities like the railway station and the Castle Museum. In addition to this, experiences of people from the community were utilised as a resource. Visits from local individuals (a guide dog owner and mother bathing her baby) and services (road safety and firefighters) were organised to broaden the experience and understanding of the children and to promote local and community knowledge.

The creative arts were experienced through the performance of visiting musicians, mime, theatre and dance companies as well as an annual Christmas pantomime, usually based on a fairy tale, from the students at a local high school. There was a continuing relationship with the library service, the head teacher collecting and choosing the books for the school and later half-termly visits from the mobile library van from where books were selected. A parent from this time remembers:

“There was a library... it was not used in the way it is now... [as a parent] I don’t remember borrowing any books...” We presume from this that books were available in the classrooms to support language and literacy but not offered to families to borrow and take home.

## Planning and assessment

An increase in the influence and use of behaviourist approaches, and using tests for assessment of intelligence, is reflected at the nursery in the fact that in July 1965 an educational psychologist visited the nursery school to try out a new piece of intelligence testing apparatus on the children.

In the 1970s planning was limited and done mainly by the teacher as a nursery nurse recalls:

“There was no recording or paperwork [done] by nursery nurses. Each week we were responsible for the planning of the creative table and then expecting every child to take part because there was an expectation that every child would have something to take home... the teacher did the teaching and the nursery nurse the other.”

At this time staff believed that if children went home with a piece of work that they had produced at the nursery, this was evidence of the children’s learning.

By the 1980s this had changed to a curriculum planned and organised around themes (for example, snow, rainbow, autumn) selected by the adults with songs, stories and activities chosen to support the theme. Assessment of children at this time was regularly carried out using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale for their understanding of language and the Goodenough Draw-a-Person test for their cognitive ability.

# Training

Training and professional development from the late 1980s had good support from the local education authority, which offered many advisors on various subjects and free training which staff were encouraged to access. The nursery also organised its own training events and invited other schools. For example, in October 1990: “We organised a SEN conference for all four nursery schools. 32 people attended with speakers a.m. and a panel in the afternoon” (School log, 19 October 1990). Internal training from 1986 was through regular staff meetings and occasional teachers’ meetings, which often hosted visiting speakers.

From September 1987 the nursery school was allowed to close for five days in each academic year for in-service teacher training (Baker Days). These were initially supported by an allocated TRIST (teacher-related in-service training) advisor but eventually responsibility for this was devolved to the head teacher and training days were opened to all staff, not just the teachers. Subject advisors visited the nursery often, reflecting an initiative or focus identified by the local education authority (e.g. maths and religious education). In terms of curriculum there was advisory input on maths, music, science, religious education, IT and early language.

During the late 1980s there was much discussion around the importance of documentation and assessment of children, the role of the adult, and developing appropriate curricula for four-year-olds. Teachers attended six conferences provided by different bodies on the curriculum for children under five in the late 1980s and the head teacher records in the school log: “I joined a group of teachers who are to trial an Open University pack for working on the curriculum for under-fives.” This ran alongside an interest in different Early Years curricula. In June 1987, the school log notes that a meeting was held after school of the Structuring of Play group and two years later a staff development day was held on High Scope (Schweinhart et al, 1993) methods. Interest in the role of the adult was implied by an INSET Day in 1993 led by the author of *The Nursery Teacher in Action* (Lally, 1991).

The four nursery schools in Norfolk developed a tradition of an annual shared training day to discuss common issues that included developing the Early Years curriculum. The head teacher cultivated links with the University of East Anglia (UEA) and attended conferences and lectures provided by them, sometimes accompanied by other members of staff. She belonged to a UEA research group and attended research group meetings.

Like other maintained nursery schools, Earlham had a large percentage of children with additional needs. Developing an inclusive environment was a focus for training in the 1980s and 1990s – for example, behaviour support and child protection, as well as whole school approaches to racism, bilingual children, multi-cultural provision and traveller family support. In addition, staff attended training to support specific needs such as visual and hearing support, speech and language support, mobility, and sensory support. These were often backed up by individual members of staff visiting schools that already made provision for these particular challenges.

## Links with other educational establishments

The nursery school had always had links with the other schools on the same site but these were formalised in 1974 when the head teacher attended the inaugural managers' meeting, which was a twice-yearly meeting to discuss shared concerns. These continued under different names and forms up until the time the present authors were in post. From the late 1980s there is evidence of good relationships with other feeder schools and well-established transition systems, with visits both of teachers and children to feeder settings and from teachers from the feeder schools.

Relationships with the local playgroups were developed from 1986. The school log records head teacher visits to four local playgroups to attend committee meetings and also records a visit from the staff of another setting to observe at the nursery. The head teacher gave talks to some of the local playgroups about the nursery and on children's art and language. Complementing this was regular attendance by staff at community lunches held by community health workers at local health clinics.

The nursery school was also used as an educational resource which supported the learning and development of many individuals, school pupils and research students. School children from secondary schools studying childcare across Norwich undertook work experience or subject placements at the nursery. In further education colleges and higher education institutions (teaching and PGCE students), students undertook placements and observed the classrooms at work. In addition, when international groups visited Norwich the nursery school was on the itinerary. These included the education director of Novi Sad in the then-Yugoslavia, and two accompanying teachers in 1977, and Norwegian nursing students in 1978.

## Children's health

There was concern about children's health during and after the war and this was compounded by several outbreaks of serious infectious diseases at the nursery between the 1940s and the 1970s, as well as regular reports of chickenpox, measles and whooping cough.

Nursery schools were used as a vehicle for improving health. An example of this is that of April 1944 when Norwich Education Committee decided to supply children under five years of age in full-time attendance at elementary and nursery schools with cod liver oil and orange juice. There is also evidence for this in the 1970s, when a nursery nurse remembers adding vitamin C drops to the children's milk. Children's health was monitored through the nursery school and after the war regular medical inspections by the community doctor occurred at the nursery, first annually and later increasing to termly checks. Medical inspections continued in the 1950s, 60s and early 70s, occurring at least annually until 1972. After this they seemed to occur sporadically, perhaps in response to individual need or demand. Dental inspections followed a similar pattern, being recorded from the 1950s to 1970s, and later on an annual basis.

There is evidence at least from the 1970s that some children who attended the nursery would need additional help. In 1978, according to a member of staff at the time, there were 21 or 22 children in each room with two staff, a teacher and a nursery nurse. If a child had a difficulty and needed extra attention they were counted as taking two places. Additional staff were occasionally recruited to support particular needs. For example, in 1989 part-time remedial teachers were recruited to help children with difficulties and in 1990 a teacher for non-speaking pupils supported children with language needs.



From the 1980s there is also evidence of a developing sense of the role the environment plays in health when in February 1988 it was agreed that the school would become a no smoking zone.

One of the constant challenges for the nursery was head lice and the school nurse made regular inspections from the 1970s in the spring and summer terms. There is evidence that she also carried out hearing tests alongside the senior teacher of the deaf or the county organiser for audiology.

In 1982, a support unit for children with hearing difficulties was established at the nursery under the direction of the teacher of the deaf. The need for this service fluctuated – at times there was a special welfare assistant for children attending the unit and at other times no full-time extra support. There were many meetings in 1987 about combining the unit of the hearing-impaired with the Norfolk unit for the visually-impaired but this seems to have come to nothing. There is a heartening story from 1986 about an Egyptian child with hearing difficulties who attended the unit. The staff raised money through an appeal, a fair and sales of cakes to pay for new hearing aids for her as her family planned to return to Egypt and feared they would be unable to access support for her there.

Hearing tests were also linked to speech and language difficulties. In 1976 there is a record of the community doctor and nurse testing the hearing of 12 children who had been referred for speech and language therapy. This system of testing the hearing of those children referred for speech and language therapy continued until 1988 when a speech and language therapist was appointed to support children on site. The speech and language therapist also assisted staff by leading training sessions on the methods of assessment and support that were used. In addition, the head teacher, classroom teachers and nursery nurses all attended training on speech and language development from the late 1980s. There was also support for those children with more complex communication needs from visits by the speech and language therapist from the Child Development Unit at the local hospital.

Another group of professionals recorded as supporting children during this period were educational psychologists. They visited occasionally in the late 1970s and then more regularly from the 1980s for children who had been referred. The educational psychologists also contributed to multi-agency meetings and reviews of individual children's special needs. They talked to staff about problems, assessment and referral, gave advice to teachers and the head teacher on strategies to support children, and also met with parents separately.

The system for supporting special educational needs appears to have started in 1986 and there is evidence of SEN statement reviews with meetings and advice from county advisers from this date. The academic year 1987/8 appears to have had a focus on supporting children with additional needs. In November 1987, the education officer, advisory teacher for Early Years and educational psychologist met at the nursery to review the needs of the school in terms of SEN, as it was the only nursery school in Norwich. This led to a workshop on behavioural problems, assessment and referral delivered by the area school psychologist later the same month. In September 1987 there is mention of the Portage scheme to provide a home-based, small steps approach to support young children with special educational needs and their families. Several members of staff were trained in this service across the 1990s.

From 1988, a health visitor and the education welfare officer were recorded as paying regular weekly visits to the nursery. Clinical psychologists gave advice on strategies to support those with behavioural difficulties and these children were sometimes offered a place in nursery early.

In March 1988, a psychologist from Boston, USA, was invited by the local education authority to lead a conference on Project Link. This was an American project to facilitate co-operation between agencies involved with children and young people with additional needs. This was explored and promoted by the local authority and was adopted in the local area. Meetings of an interdisciplinary team across local schools were held at least termly to discuss how to co-ordinate and support families that had been referred and this continued until 1993. On a nursery school level from 1991, termly school support team meetings attended by a team from the local authority assisted with reviewing the needs of identified children with SEN.

Through the 1980s there is growing evidence of awareness and provision for safeguarding. The head teacher received training and advice from several legal and social service professionals and by 1989 all staff were receiving training on child abuse. In 1988, the head teacher had received training and was advised by other professionals and by 1993 procedures had been formalised and a designated teacher for child protection was trained and in place.

## Changes to the building

Apart from external decoration in 1953, there is not much detailed evidence of the improvements until a complete re-roofing is documented in September 1977. Then there is a ten-year gap until electrical work and a complete internal redecoration in 1987. The main addition to the building was in 1983, when a small mobile classroom unit for the hearing-impaired was placed in the garden. In the same year a series of break-ins provoked a visit from the crime prevention officer, who advised the creation of a strong room and an estimate was prepared. The school log of September notes: "Staff feel that (although the architects' department felt unable to help financially) it would be money well spent to pay for the strong room out of private funds in the Post Office account." However, there is no evidence that it was built and in 1992 the log reports that a safe was installed in the floor of the head teacher's room.

## Changes to the garden

The first mention of possible changes to the garden is in the school log of 14 April 1951, where the head teacher writes: "I asked her [the assistant education officer] to look at the children's garden, from which all the plants, which had been put in last week, had been stolen, and made a further plea for an enclosed space." There did not appear to be a response to this until two years later when there was a visit from the local authority to discuss changes to the garden – "...work for inclusion in this year's estimates... i.e. wall or fence to enclose ground at front of school, sandpit, paddling pool to be filled in and new sandpit provided in enclosure". This indicates a continuing interest in the outdoors as a learning environment, but it is hard to know its role in the curriculum. A recollection of a member of staff talking about outdoor play in the late 1970s illustrates a strong concern for safety. She described the 45-minute period in each session when the children could go outside supervised by a nursery nurse on a duty rota basis. She said:

"There was like a metal scaffold structure of three triangles, ladders and all of those things and [it was] absolutely treacherous. On hindsight it was too big for the children's grip and we had to haul 10-15 mats out to put under it to make it safe. Even then it wasn't safe, they couldn't reach it."

The apparatus survived and in 1986 the newly appointed head teacher recalled that outdoors there was a metal climbing frame and temporary paddling pools.

Improvements to the garden were initiated in the 1980s, and in 1987 balls and hoops were purchased and money was raised for an adventure playground. Staff were engaged with the design and agreed a plan which was implemented by the groundsman. In addition, the services of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers were used to create a wildlife area. The school log records: "BTCV came and dug a section of our wild area for a meadow. They planted wildflower and grass seed with the children." Later, in September of the same year, "our wild area has grown well with all the rain and children can now run over 'the hill' ". It appears that the garden was being developed for its potential for physical education and for learning about nature.

## Difficulties

There were intermittent incidents of vandalism during the period. A report to the Norwich Education Committee in 1944 stated: "The Earlham Nursery School, the first of its kind in Norwich experienced many difficulties but [the head teacher] has made the school a great success." The "difficulties" may have included incidents of vandalism. The Norwich Education Committee minutes of 12 October 1942 record:

"A Report was received from the Chairman on the wilful damage being done at the Larkman Lane Schools by children and youths, and the result of the deputation's interview with the Chief Constable. The Chairman appealed to parents on the estate to help stop this damage and asked the press to give the appeal as much publicity as possible."

There were continuing occasional instances up until the 1980s and in 1984 there was rather a sad incident recorded in the school log:

1.10.84            School broken into overnight but not a lot of damage done. About £150 worth of materials and toys had been taken. The police came to take fingerprints. It appeared that a young person had slept here in the Orange house.  
2.10.84            Some person had again slept here, in the Mauve Room on the settee, but there was little sign of damage. Police visited again to take fingerprints.  
4.10.84            Policemen returned to us six bags full of toys, felt-tip pens, crayons and so on, that had been taken the previous weekend. The boy who slept here was an old pupil."

An ongoing difficulty from this date was defining and fighting for the role of the nursery school in a county with only four nursery schools spread across a large area. From 1986, the head teacher was actively involved in advocating and campaigning for nursery education. She attended meetings for the National Campaign for Nursery Education locally and nationally. Evidence in the school log records that the nursery head teachers met with County Hall officials to put the case for nursery education. In the winter of 1987 representatives from the County Education department, advisory service and educational psychology visited twice to gather information and review the role of the nursery school regarding special needs provision. From these discussions extra posts to support children with additional needs were established. In the same year, she, along with the other nursery school head teachers, met with a local authority representative at County Hall to put the case for

nursery education. There is also evidence that the head teacher attended a meeting in Westminster, London, of the National Campaign for Nursery Education in March 1992. This was supported by engaging with politicians. In March 1989, the log records:

“The shadow education spokesman Jack Straw and our local MP... visited after visiting UEA. Jack Straw spoke to all the staff and sat down with children. He told us his mother had been a nursery school head teacher and his sister is a teacher. He was concerned about training for nursery nurses to become teachers and of course for more nursery provision.”

## Celebrations

The nursery enthusiastically celebrated many public holidays and was used as a polling station up until 1955. In 1939 and 1940, Empire Day celebrations saw local dignitaries such as the Sheriff and the Lord Mayor visit the nursery. Victory festivities for the end of the Second World War meant two days' holiday for the children and staff and this was followed in 1948 by a half-day holiday to celebrate the King and Queen's silver wedding. The most extensive celebration was the coronation of Elizabeth II. The school was closed for two days, coronation mugs and sweets were distributed to the children, a coronation party was held where coronation souvenirs (tins of toffee) from the City Council were distributed to children and on 22 June 1953 the children, accompanied by staff, attended the Ritz Cinema at 9.30am to see the coronation film *A Queen is Crowned*. Later royal occasions such as the Queen's silver wedding and the wedding of HRH Princess Anne were also the focus of celebrations.

The nursery has a history of fundraising for charitable causes – for example, in October 1959 there was a jumble and gift sale in aid of the World Refugee Year Appeal, which raised £16 and 7 shillings. Jumble sales, bring and buy sales and garden fetes were popular ways of raising money in the 1970s for school resources and from the 1980s there was a fun day or fete held annually in conjunction with the First and Middle Schools. The school log describes the occasion in 1988:

“We took part in the annual fun day on the big field. As usual we put out big toys (bicycles, scooters, cars and so on) for the small children. There were also stalls (cakes, plants, books and puzzles, nearly-new clothes, tombola and cold drinks). We made a total profit of £220.”

Open evenings were held annually and were open to professionals and the community as well as parents. One such in 1989 was described as follows:

“Open Evening today from 7- 9pm. Besides parents we invited people from the community education, other pre-school groups, governors and health dept. This made the evening more worthwhile as more people came including our new senior advisor! The school looked very nice, and the classrooms showed the wide variety of activities we provide.”

In the 1990s, celebratory sing-songs to parents in autumn and at Christmas were performed. A separate performance was made for an audience of local senior citizens. Another seasonal tradition that started at this time was the May Day celebrations with dancing and folk music, which continued as an annual school event throughout the next 20 years. Several of the ongoing traditions

of the nursery became established during the 1980s, including providing each class with a Christmas tree to decorate, hot cross buns at Easter and whole school family visits to the seaside at the end of summer term.

Over this period there were many celebrations of the founding of the nursery. These included the 21st anniversary of the school opening to which parents were invited. The Sheriff “received 21 flowers and also £42.15.5d and a knitted blanket for the World Refugee Year Appeal. [The] Assistant Education Officer received 21 flowers and helped by 3 boys planted the first of 21 flowering trees and shrubs given by past and present members of staff.” The ceremony was captured by a photo in the local evening paper and a photo in the Norfolk News, and it was featured on BBC East Anglian News. In May 1989 the nursery celebrated its Golden Jubilee: “Golden Jubilee celebrations held. All children met in the Yellow room and sang songs. Then a few were chosen to light the candles and cut the cake. All children had a piece of cake as they sat in a large circle, wearing paper hats they had made.”

During this period there was a growing understanding of the value of the community to support children’s learning. This was limited to using locality as a resource. Little consideration was given to how the community viewed learning and their experiences of education. Few attempts were made to engage the community in a shared understanding of their role in children’s learning. The next chapter looks more closely at the role of community.

## Reflection

- This chapter sets out to fill the interval between the building of the nursery school and all of the positive intentions expressed in its founding up to 1995, when the current authors began their work at the school.
- This chapter demonstrates the paradox between an open, modernist approach expressed through the architecture and a more traditional, hierarchical style of organising people.
- This historical review shows that the educational experiences of young children are extended or limited by the passions and enthusiasms of the adults that work with them.
- This chapter illustrates the changing role of Froebelian influence on nursery education. At the beginning staff were trained in Froebelian principles and understood how these could be expressed in teaching and learning. In later years activities and resources continued but without the knowledge of the underlying philosophy.
- This chapter reminds us that the educational and care experiences of young children are dependent on the quality of the adults who work with them.
- In this chapter there is evidence of local authority expertise having regular input into the nursery. Staff were also encouraged to broaden their own education by visiting other institutions.
- This account has ample evidence of awareness and research into children’s emerging special educational needs, long before there was a general understanding of this across all areas of education.
- The chapter emphasises the importance of the holistic nature of early education, including the building, health and the community.
- From the 1950s there is evidence of a curriculum that was enriched by active involvement in sensory activities and in exploring the local community. This was not explicitly Froebelian but it reveals his historical influence on nursery education.

# Chapter Eight

## Developing a United Vision

*“In order to carry a positive action, we must develop here a positive vision”  
(Dalai Lama, n.d.).*

### The beginning of the story

In 1995, the changes in the Early Years agenda were slowly emerging as seen in the chapter on nursery school life. The realisation began to dawn that nursery schools could give support to children with special educational needs. The profile of nursery schools became stronger with the emergence of the National Campaign for Nursery Education.

The Early Years and nursery ages had been invisible for many years, but government began to understand that having more places for young children would enable families to have both parents working. This was a powerful motivation for change. As we have seen in a previous chapter, Earlham Nursery School had seen periods of radical change in the war years and then again in the 1960s and 70s. It had had periods of stability and quiet when it was almost forgotten and had become introspective and less than dynamic.

The head of Earlham in 1995 had been there for ten years and had achieved a great deal of change using discussion and reflection. However, she was looking towards retirement and was keen to get some younger and different thinkers on board. The nursery had four teachers in 1995, which comprised a head teacher with no classroom responsibility, a deputy head with full classroom responsibility and two classroom teachers. The deputy and one teacher left. In September, two new teachers started – me as the deputy, and Steph as a newly qualified teacher starting out in her second profession. This radically changed the dynamic of the nursery and for some staff it was hard to adjust.

Steph’s history was very different, having been an archaeologist before retraining as a teacher. Her history and her natural disposition gave her a great capacity for critical analysis and attention to detail. My history and natural disposition was to be looking for the bigger picture and painting

a canvas of ideas without really considering the detail. We were then, and still are, very different people but we both shared a passion for young children and their learning.

My experience in Devon gave me a new understanding of partnership working and the importance of parent engagement. This built on my Froebelian understanding of seeing the child as part of a family which in turn is part of a community. The experience in Devon had given me insight into reflective practice through regular supervision. By supervision, I mean the regular, timetabled one-to-one supportive discussion, which jointly identifies areas of practice to celebrate and to develop. Supervision was not a process that the education establishment generally endorsed, and our development of supervision will be charted later in this chapter.

We were both excited and motivated by the challenges ahead and wanted to put Earlham Nursery School on the map of good practice and innovation in Early Years. However, we were new and therefore had to not only prove ourselves with the existing team, but also find ways to ensure that everyone felt part of the way forward for Earlham.

I felt resuming staff meetings would be a good way forward to get staff to talk and listen to each other. Support staff have a vital and underpinning role in any setting but, like many schools and nurseries, they are only paid for the hours that they are with the children. It would defeat the purpose of building a feeling of value and worth among the support staff if we could not pay them for this extra responsibility but there was no extra money. I asked my support colleagues if they would be prepared to come to a one-hour staff meeting once a week, if I could work out a rota with them to ensure they all had an hour off a week, when rooms were not under so much pressure. This too was challenging as the rooms were constantly busy.

We discussed this dilemma in a teachers' meeting. We also needed to solve another problem at this time. This was the issue of children arriving late for the morning session and leaving early in the afternoon because of varying school pick-up times. By having a flexible start and finish, both problems could be solved. Parents would no longer be put under pressure to get to nursery on time and the rooms would have a quieter start and finish. This would allow for a member of support staff coming half an hour later or leaving half an hour earlier for two sessions a week. This was not ideal, but it was a way of showing we wanted everyone's ideas and contributions to shape the way forward for the nursery and be an active part of developing a united vision.

## **Building a collective vision**

Earlham needed to work as one school with the same collective vision and pedagogy. We all had to agree on the following:

- Why are we there?
- What are our roles and responsibilities?
- How do we execute these roles and responsibilities?
- Can we agree on how children learn?
- How do we consistently support children's learning?
- How do we develop the environment to support learning?

We needed not only a vision for the future, but also a pedagogy that we all bought into and understood.

Could we use play as an underpinning pedagogy? Looking today at definitions of pedagogy, these are many and various. However, this definition from the National Strategies Early Years Learning, Playing and Interacting, chimes with our experience at Earlham.

“Pedagogy is the understanding of how children learn and develop, and the practices through which we can enhance that process. It is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children, and supported by knowledge, theory and experience”  
(Stewart & Pugh, 2007:6)

The children’s play at this stage was not always valued or extended. Sometimes there were differing views on what was acceptable, for example, do we allow children on wet grass or experiment by putting more water in the paint? Can children make choices at snack time or do we all take one piece of banana, apple and orange? Can children choose when they have their snack, or do we all have it together? We needed a consensus about choice, experimentation, autonomy and control. This task seemed almost unobtainable during this first year.

## **Changes, changes, changes**

The head retired and I was interviewed in the summer of my first year at Earlham for this post. It was a huge challenge for me but also for all the staff, as many had been at Earlham for a long time. I was appointed in the summer of 1996 to begin my new post in September.

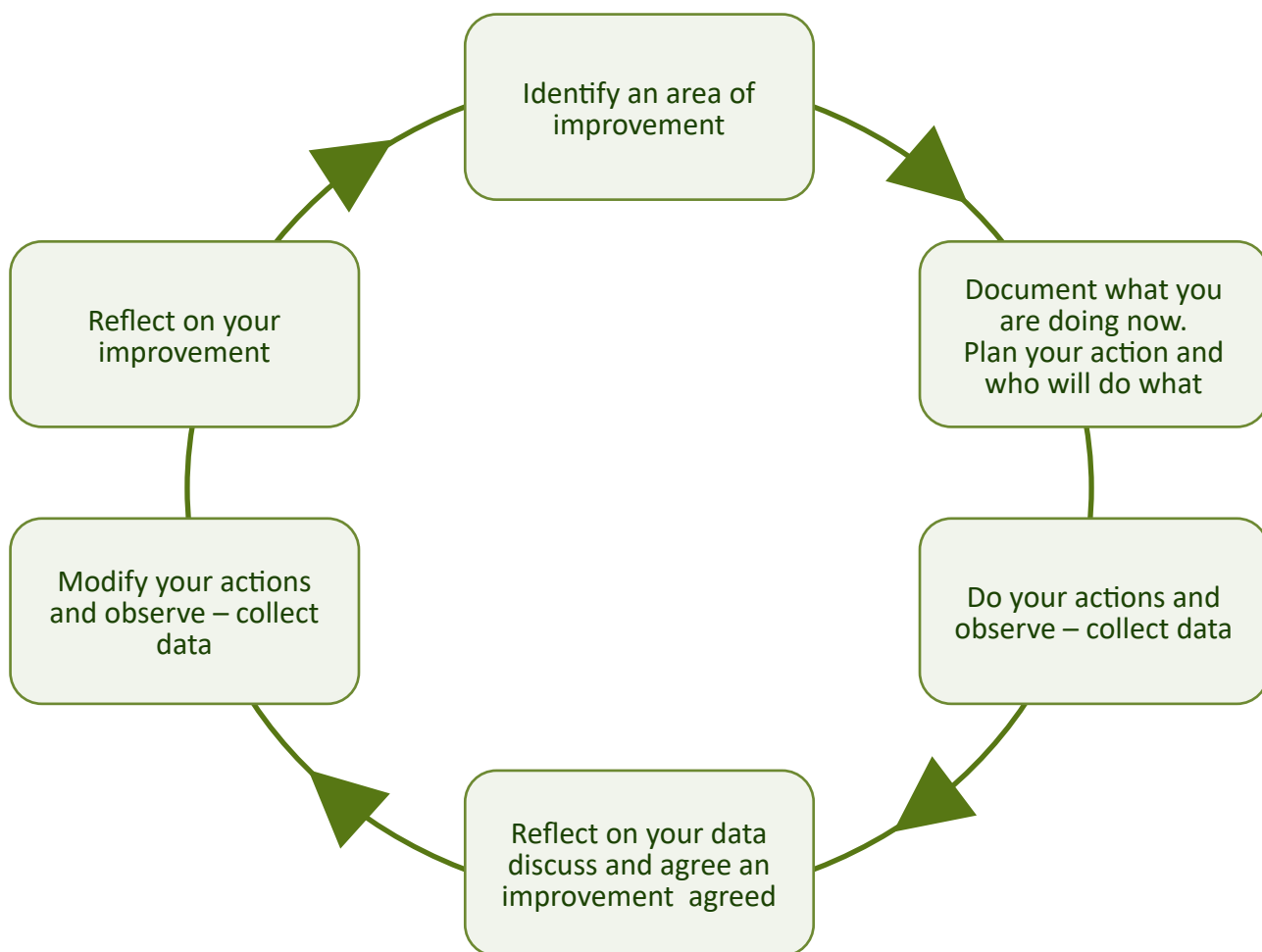
The first year of headship was extremely challenging. There was no deputy and the other teacher who had been in post when Steph and I arrived left almost immediately after my interview and appointment. The support staff felt under a lot of pressure and understandably worried about the changes to come. By the spring of 1997 we had recruited a new teacher followed soon by the appointment of a new deputy.

Inductions and regular teachers’ meetings were imperative to build a cohesive team. In June 1997 we had our first Ofsted inspection. The teachers collectively decided to use the inspection findings to promote the outdoor learning environment and to develop regular and informed observations of the children which would feed into our team planning. We decided to use action research as a strategy, as all staff had experienced this through their involvement with the EEL project (Earlham Nursery School, 1997).

## **Research as a vehicle for change**

I had had previous experience of using informal action learning in Devon and had recognised the power of this medium to open up discussion and gauge the views and understanding of all contributors. It was a powerful tool to use to start a dialogue and the process was simple. It is a cyclical experience and can develop over time with all colleagues taking part. The process can be seen in the simple diagram below:





**Figure 3. The cycle of plan, do, review.**

The dialogue between staff seemed to be missing at Earlham. Discussion tended to be shut down by comments such as, “We don’t do it like that here”. So, could this approach work?

We collectively agreed on areas which needed development and then decided on a question, for example, ‘What learning is happening at snack time?’ With this question in mind all were encouraged to take part in observing snack time with the question as a focus. This provided evidence to reflect on and a new question could emerge such as, ‘How can we broaden the learning at snack time?’ The outcome of the discussion provided an opportunity to experiment with changes at snack time and observe the difference these changes made in terms of the children’s learning. We successfully used action research as a means for change in 1997 and continued to use this model until Steph left in 2016.

We had no idea when we tentatively started with this approach that it would become embedded in our practice and enable us to clearly articulate why we work in the way we do. It ultimately led to a community of reflective practitioners who modelled this lifelong learning strategy to children.. It also encouraged parents to see learning in a different light. They came to understand that everyday domestic activities had important learning potential. Cooking became an area that parents wanted to learn about, particularly cooking healthily on a budget.

# Categories of research and their impact

We undertook numerous pieces of action research over the years. The rest of this chapter will categorise and explain the impact that this approach had on the nursery. Many members of staff led research and because of this it had a positive impact on change at the nursery. There are five categories within which we feel most of the research can be described. We carried out a lot of research on the garden and outdoor learning which will be discussed in Chapter Ten – The Garden and Beyond.

## 1. To develop staff reflection and observation

The research we used for this was the Effective Early Learning programme (EEL) (Pascal & Bertram, 1997b). The process of this has been described in a previous chapter so we will concentrate on the impact. This research encouraged all the staff to question, explore and develop their practice in a way they had never been asked to do before with questions like:

- “Why do we always set out the rooms for the children?”
- “What does this do to support the children’s choice?”
- “Do we really know what motivates children?”
- “Do we ask too many closed questions?”

Staff became energised by the discussion. This process was undergone again in 2000, but this time the practitioner who led it was a nursery nurse. This demonstrated to staff that all of us can be leaders within organisations.

The research brought new insights into the way we worked. All rooms started to loosen their structure which had, in the main, been set up using an adult-led model. Resources were made accessible for the children and clear areas of learning were created. Tables and chairs were taken away and all practitioners started to see their role in terms of teaching, supporting and facilitating learning, a step towards Froebel’s principle of “freedom with guidance”, which is described in Chapter Three – A Closer Look at Froebel.

Observations of the children were begun by all practitioners for the first time as this was integral to the EEL programme. Planning meetings were held, and the children were discussed in terms of their involvement and well-being levels (Laevers, 1993). None of us had heard of the Leuven Scales (ibid), so we were learning together. Every practitioner who started at the nursery after this was trained in these scales by Steph to ensure consistency in practice. We found this approach useful in determining our responses and resources for children. It was also a helpful model to support an open discussion with parents about their child’s engagement at nursery and soon became embedded in our practice. After the second round of the EEL programme, we began a process of annual peer observations which paired practitioners to observe each other’s practice and then have time to discuss these observations in a safe but reflective way to build on strengths and develop understanding of individual challenges.

This reflection on our practice was enhanced by the introduction of a Critical Friend in 1999. We wanted a respected and authentic Early Years specialist with no agenda other than knowledge of best practice for children to help us question and reflect on our own professional worth.

The teaching team had been reeling from the local authority expectations set on us by the advent of the Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education (Department of Education and Employment /School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996b). We needed research-based evidence to help us articulate our pedagogy and we needed a curriculum which was not imposed on us but was devised to support our approach. We found a Critical Friend who moulded her role to meet our needs (Whitehead, 2000) who guided us through all our challenges until 2016.

## 2. To develop curriculum understanding

The nursery curriculum is described in detail in Chapter Nine – Thoughtful Educators and Learners. Steph became the curriculum lead and facilitated our thinking and actions through our journey to a dispositional-based curriculum. Our Critical Friend honed our thinking about curriculum and pedagogy by helping us to define what we meant by dispositions and then by observing our practice termly and asking probing questions about what she had seen.

This all came together every year with an annual professional development day on dispositions. In 2012 we were delighted to think that the government had 'caught up' with our thinking as the Characteristics of Effective Learning (DFE, 2012) were introduced into the revised EYFS (ibid). We all agreed that it was a dispositional curriculum but with another name. Our dispositional journey was also informed by other curriculum research. This was developed from areas recognised through our self-evaluation, through EEL and areas of learning that we as a staff team felt less confident in. For example, the first round of EEL revealed a lack of confidence across the team in mathematical language and development. Maths was invisible, even though it was all around us. We needed to become more aware of how we were supporting mathematical development and the resources that we had which were 'maths rich'. This journey was again replicated in 2015 with a mathematics specialist helping to devise a mathematics audit with the team so that this area of learning could be continually monitored and reflected upon.

Music was another area we all felt very unsure of. We had a rich and varied resource of musical instruments, including a piano, which had been one of the resources provided in the original nursery following the recommendation of the Hadow Report, 1933. We were all scared of the piano, with its potential for noise, competition and danger. Steph was prepared to meet these challenges, so the piano went to her room. We had a large range of traditional percussion instruments which were used formally, usually at group time.

The music research we all became involved in was far-reaching in terms of who became engaged in the community, but also music became an embedded focus at Earlham and manifested itself in many forms over a 15-year period. The children had always loved to dance and sing and play percussion. There was a history in the community of a love of music and every year the calypso band from the local high school came with their calypso pans to play to the children.

One of the governors had a deep interest in music and musicality in young children. This governor and I worked together to put a bid into the National Foundation for Youth Music - First Steps programme. We were successful with our bid because we were clear that we wanted this to be community research, actively bringing all the local pre-schools and schools together. This became the ELM (initial letter of each estate) Music Project (Brookson, 2002).

This research was a way to bring the three estate communities together. The governor was the lead musician and co-ordinator along with a musician for the Pre-School Music Association (PRESMA). Each setting worked under the guidance of the co-ordinators, agreeing together an action research area and working with either one child or a small group of children. The research was brought together as a whole at a celebratory concert in a local school hall and all the parents were invited. Each establishment looked at different aspects of music and musicality in young children. These ranged from listening and responding to dancing, experimenting with sound and rhythm, using additional props, and spontaneity and performance (Brookson, 2002). The research enabled practitioners to “feel more confident and competent in their musical practice” (Brookson, 2002:81). It also brought many previously competing settings together to celebrate children, music and the joy of learning.

Practitioners enjoyed the way that music enriched another element in their play with children. It was acceptable to be spontaneous with music, to ‘play’ with sound and noise, to perform and experiment, to give free expression of joy in dance and rhythm. Adults could join in and children could lead – for many practitioners this was liberating. At one local school, the teachers chose traditional tales as their theme for spontaneous music making. This led on to Chinese music and developing a dragon dance. The children made up their own dragon poem to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme and were able to remember the story in more depth. They used their creativity to make dragons and draw and paint dragons. The teachers felt that using music in this way had helped the children to improve their concentration and to produce their best work (Brookson, 2002).

This research encouraged practitioners to question, explore and develop their practice and they were highly satisfied with the outcomes. It brought new insights and levels of understanding of music and child engagement with it. It enhanced the quality of musical teaching and learning and produced a programme which supported practitioners to develop children’s musical skills. This was an extensive piece of action research which brought the educational establishments together in their understanding of children and how they learn. It helped us to have a deeper insight into each other’s practice and the constraints that we all had. Within this research process we truly had become a community of learners.

This joy and love of music became embedded in our practice and we continued to research musicality with young children, becoming part of the Sistema England charity founded by Julian Lloyd Webber. This charity was based on the Venezuelan music project which focuses on inspiring young children through the power of music. In Norwich the project was called In Harmony and funded through Youth Music. This support enabled the PRESMA teacher to get funding for music therapy, which she practised in the nursery. Youth Music also funded a project with Future Radio (a local radio station started with money from New Deal for Communities) on comparing young children’s responses to traditional and digital forms of music making. This project was evaluated by the University of Suffolk.

Other research projects were on a much smaller scale. One of our Early Years educators was very interested in information and communications technology (ICT). In the main, the rest of the staff were cautious of ICT and somewhat scared of it. We were therefore delighted that our youngest colleague could support, help and teach us to be more confident with ICT by conducting a piece of research about “using computers in a nursery” (Barnes, 2004). This research showed her that, even as the youngest and least experienced member of staff, she had understanding and knowledge that we could all learn from. It also showed us that we could learn from each other whatever our background, experience and age. This was both a liberating and democratic approach.

We also used action research to help practitioners support learning in the garden – for example, using sensory learning from a tactile path. This research concentrated on observing how different age groups of children used the newly laid tactile path around the garden. This path used many artefacts left over from the demolition of parts of the old building and the children chose which parts they wanted to preserve. These included old bricks, drain covers and roof tiles, but most in demand were the metal tiles from the ramp up to the old mobile.



**Photo 15. Sensory path**  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2012)

Many other action research projects developed, such as bike use, schemas, non-verbal communication, creative thinking and creativity. By using this strategy, we began to create a community of reflective thinkers who would not do something because they had been told to. The question would always be, why? How does this improve learning and development for children? These questions show that we prioritised children's learning use every experience as an educational opportunity in the Froebelian tradition.

At the beginning of the new millennium we were doing a great deal of thinking about what was right for children in the local community. We had applied to become an Early Excellence Centre and had achieved this status. We were given no targets,

and the only expectation was that we would improve the Early Years experience for children and their families by doing things differently and measuring the impact of any changes we made. Because of these open expectations and the expanding remit of Early Years to be for the whole family and community, we decided to develop an ethos which we all agreed on. The ethos statement would act as a core principle which we could use to reflect on when we needed to agree change.

We developed an ethos policy which stated our aspiration of that time. This was to promote positive attitudes towards lifelong learning in children and their families. We would do this by supporting the learning aspirations and fascinations of all the children and give advice and help where we could to their families. We would be outward looking to allow us to engage the community to help us with this and to provide best value for the children and their families. This aspiration not only reflected our desire to be seen as a learning community, but also helped us to engage in a principled way with the government agenda of that time, which was the aspiration to help everyone see that working was the way out of poverty.

### **3. To develop partnerships and engagement with parents**

We wanted to develop a shared language with parents about our dispositional curriculum in order to have meaningful conversations about their children's learning.

Through the Best Practice Research Grant, we were able to look more deeply at using a dispositional curriculum as a tool for sharing knowledge between home and school. I had already researched how Early Years professionals engage with parents about their children. From this I realised that I needed to ask parents more open-ended questions and spend time listening to them as well as explaining the 'jargon' we often use. We needed to set aside our 'administered jargon' (Habermas, 1990:164), the professional language we use without thinking that it is meaningless to parents, for example, transitions to school.

I decided to ask parents, “What are your views on our dispositional curriculum and how can you influence our thinking?” (Thomas, 2001:1). This was a massive question and parents at Earlham had not been used to being consulted in this way. They also had no idea about our dispositional curriculum, or the ways in which we assessed their children, as we had not been confident about sharing this.

This was the task:

- To share our dispositions and what they meant for learning
- To explain involvement and well-being levels and how we used them
- To talk about what we meant by engaged adults
- To share how and why we observe their children

This research was initiated as a pilot project using one room of 26 children. All the parents of these children were given personal invitations with a choice of meeting times across the day and evening, allowing for the complexities of their lives. A crèche was available for the evening with the room staff, so all children had their familiar adults with them. One member of the room support staff was in the parents’ group with me so that parents felt comfortable. We used video as the stimulus for discussion.

Twenty parents regularly came to these sessions which lasted for six weeks. Children were filmed in the room – these films were unedited, and we were able to discuss them in terms of our new learning dispositions. Parents borrowed the camera and filmed their children at home. We also watched these films and discussed them in terms of our curriculum.

The parent group developed a meaningful dialogue about children and learning. This meant that I and my colleague had to learn to discuss and understand a broad range of ideas and opinions. For example, at one meeting a parent watched his child make a rocket in the art workshop area. His child was deeply involved and was being creative in his choice and use of materials, deciding which material was best for his purpose. He was showing advanced skill in his use of scissors and was using sticky tape successfully. His father felt this was wrong. He said that both sticky tape and sharp scissors were for adult use only, as a child could cut themselves and sticky tape was difficult to manipulate and often stuck to itself causing waste. The discussion that followed was about how his child was developing fine motor skills to manage both scissors and sticky tape successfully and that he had made thoughtful and appropriate choices about the medium he needed to use. We discussed the persistence he showed and his obvious pleasure when he had achieved his goal. The other parents also contributed to this discussion showing that parents’ views could be genuinely debated and a consensus agreed. The child’s father could see all the points made in the discussion and said that he had never realised that the things being discussed were an important part of learning.

These meaningful dialogues led to parents observing their own children and discussing their observations using dispositional language with staff and each other. We were developing a shared dialogue (Whalley, 2001). This in turn led to strengthening bonds between staff and parents. Parents continued to meet, both at the nursery and in each other’s homes after the sessions had finished, to discuss their children’s dispositional learning.

“The staff in the room found a greater rapport built up between parents and staff. Parents seemed to gain confidence and were able to ask staff more pertinent questions” (Thomas, 2001:31).

This successful pilot group led to a parents' disposition discussion group which continued every year for three years, each room being targeted each term. It was from this group research that the parents renamed and helped us devise our fifth disposition of Playfulness (previously called Pleasure in Learning). This close engagement with parents was one of the reasons that we were awarded Early Excellence status.

This research certainly got us all asking ourselves questions and we had to really explore our thinking. We were all energised by the experience and it brought new insights and challenges into our work with children. It enhanced the quality of our relationships with parents and this remained embedded in our practice. To further our relationship with parents we debated how we could enhance and continue this strong developing dialogue about learning. In 2002 we had time to discuss and debate ideas as a whole staff team as the building works for the new nursery extension had started to impact on the safety of children, staff and parents. The levels of dust from the demolition were intense and we were allowed to close two weeks early for the summer holidays. We used this time to discuss how the future development of providing new and innovative services would impact on our vision and practice.

One area discussed was the development of a key person system. I had experience of this approach in Devon and had set up a system there supported by the clinical psychologist. She outlined how she saw this working, so that every family would have a constant person who would meet them at the beginning of the session and discuss any learning and other experiences at the end of the session. This person would also support the teacher at the home visit. I introduced this model at Earlham and the positive impact that the disposition parent group had had across the nursery helped take this idea forward. However, there was discussion about children becoming dependent on their key person. Staff talked about the challenges and difference between friendship and befriending. This helped us define our boundaries and we developed a Staff Code of Practice document which became part of our induction process and was reviewed each year.

Later in 2008, when our day nursery had been established for four years and we needed to review our practice, another piece of research was undertaken on the key person system by the extended day co-ordinator. This research not only shaped our practice but also gave us the confidence to radically change the way we structured the day nursery educators' working day. This piece of work was about how educators support secure attachment relationships through the key person approach. It concentrated on the development of the role of the key person for children under three who were in the extended day service. Many of these children were at the nursery for up to ten hours a day.

The research showed how imperative the role of the key person is for children in all areas but particularly in personal and intimate care and, interestingly, in the development of children's peer-to-peer attachments. At the time the research took place, we had a key and co-person system in place, with all children having two main educators at the nursery. All staff worked between five and eight hours a day, so there was an inevitable crossover time. Parents did not see the same person at the beginning and end of the day. This was highlighted in a questionnaire as an issue for the majority of parents and caused us to rethink our staffing structure for the day nursery.

We piloted a system whereby two members of staff and the extended day co-ordinator worked ten hours a day, four days a week. This meant that parents were seeing their child's key person at the beginning and the end of the day. These staff members became co-persons as well, so that children and families had continuity if their key person was away. However, the research went on to show that even this radical change (which worked well) was far from perfect. We had to see the

key person's role and responsibilities to these very young children as being at the centre of the way we worked. The study showed that there were many occasions throughout the day, such as nappy-changing, mealtimes, settling for sleep, and playing, that the child's key person was not 100 per cent available. This is perhaps obvious – but what was unsettling was that the research showed, in most cases, that another adult covered these essential tasks rather than the co-person. The research told us we had to strengthen our co-person system. This took time as we could not unsettle children by giving them too many sudden changes. As staff left, new staff were given days and hours to work when their key and co children were in nursery. Administrative tasks that took the extended day co-ordinator out of the room were given to the administration team in the office and meetings were held when co and key children were not at the nursery. This research taught us that to have an active and responsive key person system, it has to become the driver in your organisational process.

## **4. To build a responsive learning community**

The Early Excellence criteria was clear. Government wanted to know what worked best to support families to grow and develop in an atmosphere of cooperation. So, how might the agencies who work with and for families work better together?

Pen Green in Corby, the first Early Excellence Centre, became the driving force, lobbying government to fund specific leadership training to support multi-agency working in Early Years. Pen Green already had a successful training centre and won the argument for a bespoke leadership course for the heads or leaders of Early Excellence Centres and, with the government, developed a training programme. This was called the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership – something of a mouthful so it quickly became known as the NPQICL. Its equivalence was the National Professional Qualification for Headship, known as the NPQH. This was an amazing achievement as it put the leaders of Early Excellence Centres, who came from multiple and varied backgrounds, on the same professional footing as head teachers.

I was asked to take part in the pilot course along with 23 other Early Years leaders. This was an opportunity to learn more skills, have a better understanding of my leadership, and a way to open my mind to the views of others and ideas from different but relevant backgrounds, particularly health. I had previously done the NPQH and had not found this helpful. This qualification in the 1990s had been purely based around managing paper and people. My perception of that course was that it was all about asserting control.

On previous training at Pen Green (the Advanced Diploma in Early Years Leadership), I had realised that I could be too controlling and that this shut down others' ideas and opportunities. I could relate this to a child-centred pedagogy where adults followed the child's motivations and used these to develop holistic learning. If, as adults, we are too prescriptive, or jump in too quickly with our own ideas and questions, we know that the children move away or shut down. It is the same with adults. After this training I tried to be less of a matriarchal figure at Earlham. I had been making an effort not to have all the answers (which of course I didn't) but still everyone seemed to bring their issues and challenges to the head's door.

Through the advanced diploma I had another chance to do some action research and decided to revisit my previous experience in Exeter. I realised I was missing supervision for myself and also not giving supervision to the team. This idea was radical and new at Earlham in 2003 for the nursery staff. However, since 2001 we had had two outreach workers who worked with the childminders in



the area and with other providers in the community. Since their appointment I had been having monthly supervision meetings with them.

“By supervision I mean a regular structured meeting that looks at work being done and the development of that work. Issues can be raised by both the supervisee and the supervisor. These meetings are given guaranteed, dedicated time on a fortnightly or monthly basis” (Thomas, 2003:9).

In 2002 the idea of everyone having supervision was put on the staff meeting agenda. An outline was given of the function and process of supervision and everyone was asked to discuss their perceived fears and benefits of this type of system. The benefits outweighed the fears, but the fears were no less real. The main fear was “[it] could be judgemental, there must be trust between supervisee and supervisor” (Thomas, 2003:14). This issue was mentioned by all, and more than once. This was going to be a challenging change.

It was agreed that I would meet with all groups of staff and their union representative to ensure that the way forward was seen as a positive step to support all staff in a complex multi-agency centre. I had to look long and hard at my own leadership style and try and change certain tendencies I had for control and wanting to know everything. I also needed to trust in the judgement of others.

We agreed that we needed a clear format for supervision (Appendix 2) and a supervision policy we would all contribute to. This was a huge stride forward in supporting everyone to problem-solve their own issues in their particular role within the centre. This policy and provision was moderated every year by an external expert in supervision. All supervisors met with her for an evening training session. We all brought our issues and challenges from supervision sessions and discussed the way forward together. This helped us moderate our sessions to ensure equity for supervisees. We developed our thinking in these sessions by gaining a deeper understanding of the “the person-centred approach” (Rogers, 1995) and organised our format and reviewed our policy to reflect this approach. Rogers believes in seeing the best in everyone and meeting everyone with “genuineness”, “congruence” and “unconditional positive regard”. (Rogers 1995). We all had to work at this, but it made supervision challenging and rewarding in equal measure. The impact of this over time was that all colleagues began to take more responsibility and were able to innovate in their area of expertise.

This approach to supervision encouraged colleagues to question their practice and their responses to situations. Could they have done things differently? Would they have had a different outcome? What did they do which gave this positive outcome? Could they use this strategy again? This brought new insights into the way we worked, and it gave colleagues confidence to do things differently. It also showed that, for all of us, respecting each other was our starting point in any discussion and change. It demonstrated the centrality of relationships as the foundation for building a community around the nursery. Often educational establishments create institutional barriers between themselves and the people they serve. Putting the spotlight on relationships helped to break down these barriers. In terms of the staff, I believe this supervision method – which put the person at the centre and helped them to think through the best way to resolve any issues – gave confidence to all staff and actively supported the concept of distributed leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006) across the centre.

## 5. To grow our leadership understanding and to distribute leadership throughout the centre

Supervision expressed in this way helped all of us to see ourselves as leaders. We have seen that action learning was a useful tool to facilitate this potential. Many colleagues enjoyed being part of this process and saw how discussion and reflection supported their own leadership journey.

The impact of supervision was shown on two long-standing members of staff who had started volunteering at the nursery when their children attended and had become employed as special needs assistants on an annual contract. This annual contract was in place when I arrived and it was hard to see how to change this until the new SEN Code of Practice became functional in Norfolk in 1997. I was able to engage with the local authority to negotiate a separate ongoing SEN formula to provide a budget which enabled these two members of staff to have a permanent contract. These colleagues had been sceptical about training as they had managed so long without any. Through the various action research projects achieved at Earlham Early Years Centre, and regular supervision, they became enthusiastic to gain a qualification. They both applied for and achieved their NVQ 3 in 2002. The childminding co-ordinator soon followed and achieved her NVQ 3 in 2004. This gave them all the confidence to see themselves as equal members of a learning team.

From 1997 until 2016, action learning and research became an integral part of our development. Through the Early Excellence programme, we saw ourselves as an integrated centre. When Children's Centres became the generic term we still were determined to remain integrated. We wanted families to see the nursery school and all the other supportive and paid-for services we provided as part of a whole. As time went on this proved increasingly difficult because of the local authority's segregated funding streams.

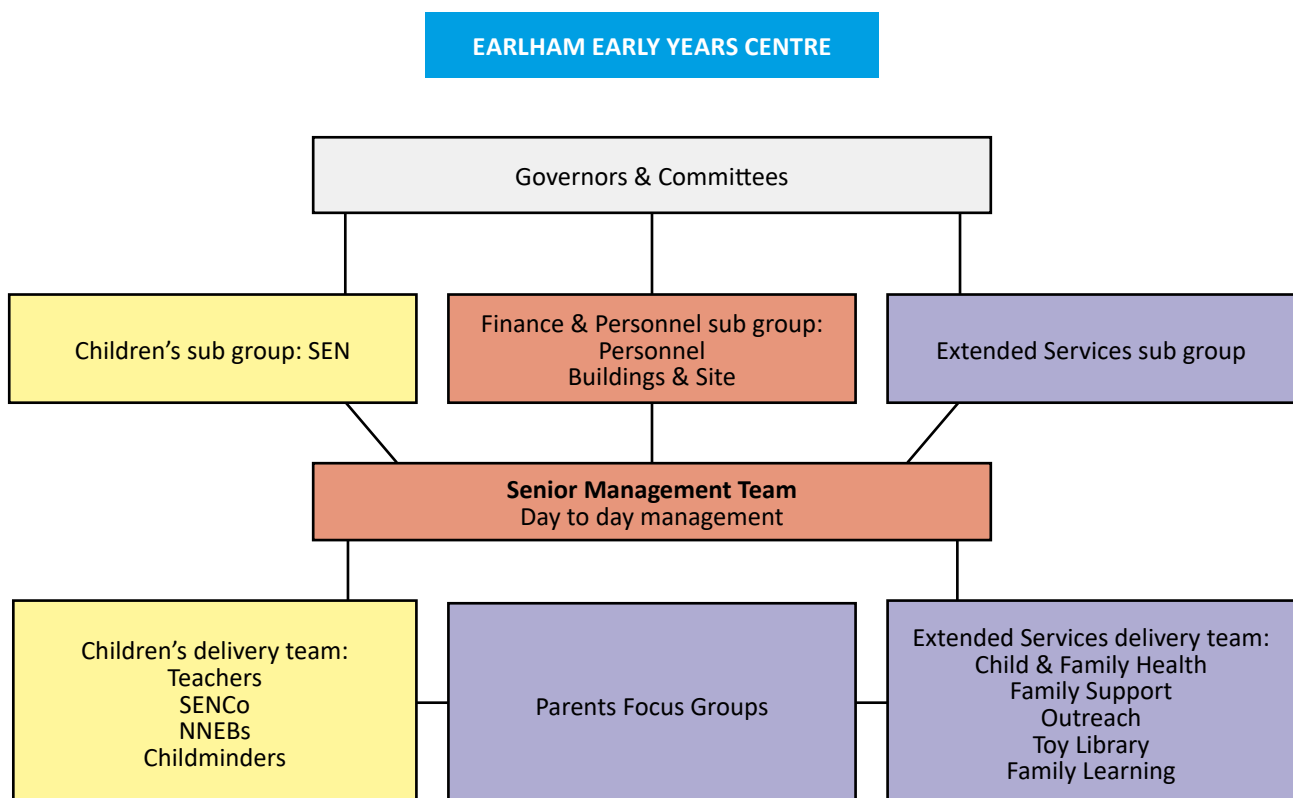


Figure 4: Leadership and Management Structure

The often-paradoxical agenda of the Children's Centre was advocating, in some instances, practices that we could not endorse – for example, the idea of 'school readiness', which didn't celebrate children's individual stages of development and learning. The title of Children's Centre often belied the focus on children and put it instead on the adults' and parents' needs, meaning the children's voices were not heard.

In 2002, when we began our multi-agency journey with integration as our aim, the organisational structure we devised tried to bind together all parts of the centre. The nursery had changed its name to Earlham Early Years Centre in that year to reflect the unity of all services.

We developed a multi-agency senior leadership team (SLT) and tried again through action research to understand our various disciplines, motivations and legacies. We discussed the work done by Whalley (2005) on professional domains and heritages and what we would be guardians of. We tried to unpack and understand our own histories and how this impacted on our leadership of this complex, and in many ways disparate, centre. We needed to agree on what we would not compromise on and where we wanted the centre to be in five years' time.

The following two diagrams describe where we thought we were as an integrated centre in 2005 and where we wanted to be by 2010. We all wrote down why we had made a career in working with children and families, what we were passionate about and therefore would not compromise on, and what we could agree on. This would give us a focus of building a strategy to work together. This is expressed in the diagrams below.



Photo 16. Visioning activity A.  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2005)



Photo 17. Visioning activity B.  
(Private Collection, Norwich, 2005)

On reflection, the centre at Exeter had been set up with a joint multi-agency vision and the structure had been put in place to dictate this. This was not so in Norfolk or indeed with the Children's Centre agenda. It was down to the governors and the senior leadership team (who were not all committed to the vision) to try and put a seamless structure in place. The Early Excellence structure and training had given us some multi-agency understanding. The NPQICL had built on this and it was important that more people in the senior leadership team should do this training. Four more people achieved this qualification, the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo), the day care leader, the social worker and finally the Children's Centre leader. They all used action research to try and define their own roles within an integrated centre or to help them understand other professional roles and their interface within the organisation.

It was not only the leadership team that was helping to develop the centre's leadership practice using action research. We used this tool in myriad ways. Staff at the centre identified ways where our practice needed improvement. An example of this is the work done by an Early Years educator who spoke Arabic and had lived in Saudi Arabia for many years. She perceived a slightly patronising approach to our increasing number of families from different ethnic backgrounds.

This was an amazing piece of work which changed our practice by encouraging us all to be brave. We needed to admit our prejudices, but also to acknowledge our lack of cultural knowledge and understanding. From her research with families, the over-riding need was that families wanted to be asked about their culture and expectations within that culture for their children. We were encouraged to ask direct questions about the families and were surprised at some of the answers, particularly families' real need to feel part of the community. They saw this as enabling their children to speak English, so only English must be spoken at nursery.

We had one very sad account of how a child with additional needs would not have been catered for in his home culture. He would have been left not to thrive because his needs were not acceptable in that culture. The parents did not feel the same and were delighted that we saw him as a unique individual like all the other children.

Another response from this research was to do whole centre training on understanding diversity, led by Jane Lane (2009). This inspired us to develop an 'international day', which became an annual event based around food, and later culture. Parents came with their children and shared their national food. This was a very popular day and parents who may never have spoken to each other began to swap recipes and enjoy each other's company. A further development was that we set up an inclusion and diversity group to monitor equality across the different parts of the organisation, with each part being represented on the group. This group was accountable to the children's committee of the governors.

We also developed our understanding of Persona Dolls (Brown, 2008). Each group had a Persona Doll, which is a life-sized soft doll with an expressionless face. Someone from each group had to develop a persona, or life story, for their doll and we would meet regularly to discuss our dolls and how they had been used in the setting. The community outreach worker who ran one of the pre-schools had a number of refugees at her setting from the Congo. At one of these groups she told her doll's story. She had an African doll who had lost a parent and was very sad because she had not only lost her parent but was also living in a foreign country. This story became very powerful in her setting because it was replicated in life. One day one of the children arrived and her mother was very upset because her father and brother had been killed in a car accident. Her daughter was distraught. The doll helped this family talk about their grief, helped the other children talk about loss, and gave them great empathy to support this little girl in their setting.

I had a Persona Doll with ginger hair, a boy named Tim. His story was that he was a looked-after child. He visited most rooms when I was covering and became much loved by children who felt 'on the outside' for whatever reason. Often a ginger-haired boy could be found gently stroking Tim's hair or a child who had challenging behaviour showing empathy and care to Tim.

As part of the action from this group we joined a Norwich-based project to support children in Malawi. We paired with a nursery in Malawi and sent resources and letters to the children. The head of the nursery in Malawi came to visit and was part of our international day in 2012. A return visit was organised and a small number of staff from the inclusion and diversity group went to visit Malawi. It was agreed by the governors, the chair of whom worked for Kettle Foods, that they would take more resources and that we would buy the nursery in Malawi their own Persona Doll (African). Kettle foods funded this. We also decided that Tim would be adopted by his foster parents and that they would emigrate to Malawi as teachers so, of course, Tim would go with them. The children were very excited about this and offered lots of advice to Tim about the clothes he needed to take and how not to get sunburnt – he had to have factor 50 sun cream and a big hat. A rucksack was bought and the children decided what he would need. We were all very sad to say goodbye to Tim but happy he was going to our partner nursery in Malawi with his parents.

Our thirst for knowledge and understanding had taken us around the world presenting research, building supportive links and learning from other cultures. This chapter could go on and on with the various research we have undertaken as a community of learners working to achieve better holistic outcomes for very young children. The vision was to grow our understanding together – to develop a collective growth mindset (Dweck, 2012) which was open to change and challenge but was based on clear principles about what we felt was right for children's learning and development in North Earlham. This approach meant that in an era of constant change we had the ability to choose what would be appropriate for our setting and what would not – and we could all articulate how we made these choices.

The governors were extremely supportive – in many instances they got involved in our research but always wanted to know the outcomes and impact. Parents were involved in our research and many went on to develop their own learning and skills. They took a range of courses which enabled them to work within the centre and the community at large. One parent who took her NVQ 3 and went to work at the local pre-school said to me: "I would never have achieved this if I hadn't been part of your parent groups on dispositions." This approach enabled us to share our continuous learning and built on our ability to focus on children and their families in an agreed and united way.

## Reflections

- Having a vision for children's education and learning is paramount. Being able to articulate and implement this vision shows that you are doing more than just responding to predetermined and narrow outcomes.
- It is important to have a collective vision for lifelong learning. This links to the Froebelian principle of supporting "knowledgeable and nurturing educators" (Tovey, 2020).
- Valuing community life enables you to draw on its strengths for children's learning.
- Do not let ease of administration drive your structure; children are the reason settings exist.
- Supervision should challenge, reward and build confidence in staff in equal measure.
- By distributing leadership, you are identifying and using the strengths embedded in your team and building sustainable leadership.

# Chapter Nine

## Thoughtful Educators and Learners

*“A curriculum is a small selection, or story, chosen from all the thousands of possible things we could tell our children from our accumulated knowledge and experience. As such, like any narrative, it reveals a great deal about what a particular human group values and cannot bear to leave to chance in the passing on of information, beliefs and attitudes to the next generation”*  
(Whitehead, 2000:32-3).

### Context

As a teacher and head teacher I have always been motivated in my professional work by a curiosity about human thinking and being able to see thinking in action in young children. I also believe it is important to work collaboratively and share responsibilities in order to demonstrate respect for individual views while forging a team approach.

I visited Saint Cugat, Spain, as part of a European COMENIUS project on early literacy at the beginning of my work at Earlham Nursery School and this gave me a perspective on different cultural expectations for Early Years provision. This was closely followed by my role as Effective Early Learning (EEL) co-ordinator for the nursery school. While undertaking the self-evaluation study for the EEL project the school had an Ofsted inspection, and there was an assumption that both processes would highlight similar areas for improvement. This turned out not to be the case. These experiences demonstrated to me that there was not a single model of good or valuable practice, but that ‘quality’ is framed by philosophical, political and ethical choices. These choices are informed by local and political constraints and preferences.

The story of how our ideas about children and learning grew to be organised and expressed through our daily practice had many roots. Earlham Nursery School was very conscious of nursery school traditions and influential Froebelian pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel, Margaret McMillan and Susan Isaacs. There was a feeling that we had a rich history that should be celebrated. The nursery building and garden had been influenced by Froebel’s view of the educational importance of nature



and McMillan's ideas on the importance of good physical health. This influenced our thinking about the relationship between children's learning indoors and outdoors. Susan Isaacs' work at the Malting House School emphasised the importance of observation in understanding children's interests and motivations. This influenced our commitment to long, narrative observations and the importance of following, documenting and analysing children's communication and actions. My reading on Tina Bruce's ideas on play (Bruce, 1991:57-81) and principles of practice in early childhood education and care (Bruce, 1997:15-54) influenced my practice and thinking about the centrality of the child, their interests and the importance of 'free flow' play.

The germination of ideas that informed the curriculum at Earlham Nursery came at a time when the Norfolk County Council education department had money and resources to support and develop training and provision for very young children. Large conferences with national speakers introduced staff to alternative ideas and ways of organising which came to have a big influence on us, for example, the American educationist and academic Lillian Katz, Margy Whalley – the influential leader of the Pen Green Centre for Under Fives and their Families in Corby – and the academics and researchers Christine Pascal and Tony Bertram.

The latter's self-evaluation project for early years settings, the Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal & Bertram, 1997) introduced me to the action research model. This gave me a framework through which to develop my own practice and that of the nursery team. It offered observation formats which we eventually shaped to our own requirements and introduced us to the Laevers' Involvement and Well-being Scales. These gave us a way to measure our provision in relation to children's needs. The Adult Engagement Scale, also part of the EEL self-evaluation, gave a format to monitor the quality of teaching. The project also made reflection part of the evaluation process within the school. The model of regular review and reflection on process informed the continual changes and adjustments which were an integral part of having our own curriculum framework.

The emphasis on the role of the parent expressed by Margy Whalley, and the training provided by the Pen Green Research Base in Corby, were also strong influences on practice. Both of the current authors studied for their master's degrees and received bursaries to further research their practice and share experience with other settings via the Pen Green Research Base. The nursery also followed the Pen Green model of engaging an independent Critical Friend to support us to reflect on our ideas and methods in order to improve practice at the school (Whitehead, 2000).

## Origins

This is the story of how a nursery school team tried to find a way of looking at individual children which would value their strengths in learning and help to nurture those areas they found challenging. In addition, it respected local characteristics that might help or hinder learning. It began in 1999 when we were asked by the local education authority to set targets for the children to achieve by the end of their time in the nursery school.

This was part of the drive for "accountability" demanded by the LEA and Ofsted. Embedded in the idea of accountability was the concept that quality of learning is measurable using nationally-imposed criteria. There was also the implication that quality is infinitely capable of improvement without an associated obligation to improve resourcing. This measurement of accountability was expressed as a checklist of skills against which each individual child would be judged.

Those of us who worked directly with the children felt that this approach would not reflect the learning, skills and understandings of the children in the local community. We had observed that they came from a diversity of family experiences and used a rich range of approaches to expand their interests and skills. This needed to be reflected in a fair assessment of their learning.

“This notion of the developing child as incomplete, a jigsaw with parts missing, means that the areas in which the child is ‘unable’ becomes the site of greatest educational interest. Competencies that can be ticked off the checklist will attract little interest” (Carr, 2001:11).

There was a need to reflect the importance of individual children’s attitudes to learning and their unique learning strategies, to acknowledge individual achievements, to demonstrate the holistic way that very young children learn, and value their engagement with real and meaningful experiences. There was a concern that measuring ‘success’ or ‘failure’ in terms of an isolated skill could be disastrous for the children’s self-esteem and could have long-term negative effects for those children whose learning was not reflected by a statement on a checklist. There was also a danger it might confirm parents’ own difficult relationship with educational institutions, rather than build confidence in their role as their child’s first educator.

There was a feeling of mixed sadness and anger among the teachers at Earlham that the diverse experience and character of children from the locality and our own creative efforts to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills were to be reduced in this way.

The idea of assessment was discussed at staff meetings and advice was sought from the nursery school’s independent Critical Friend, Marian Whitehead (Whitehead, 2000), and Professor Tina Bruce. We investigated alternative curricula for the Early Years including Quality in Diversity (Early Childhood Forum, 1998), Te Whariki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) and the work of Margaret Carr (1999b). We looked at the work of Lillian Katz (Professor of Early Education at the University of Illinois) on Dispositions as Educational Goals (Katz, 1993), as it was posed as an alternative way of thinking about what should be learned, rooted in an understanding of children’s development. It was notable that these theories and models were looking at broader approaches to learning and thinking about them in the context of relationships and interactions with others, rather than discrete subject areas.

## Learning dispositions

We were attracted to the ideas of Lillian Katz (1993). She had begun by asking herself the question, “What should be learned?”. In her answer to this question she advocated four different types of learning goals, relating to knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings. Each of these goals should be equally important and mutually supportive. Learning dispositions, in particular, need the right recognition, environment and support to grow and thrive, otherwise they may weaken or disappear.

“Though knowledge and skills not acquired early in life might be acquired later, dispositions are probably less amenable to reacquisition once damaged” (Katz, 1993).

We looked at our assessments to see how these four goals were reflected in our practice at that time. Knowledge and skills were, and still are, accommodated through the national Foundation Stage curriculum for Early Years in the form of the Early Learning Goals. We believed judgements of children’s feelings in the nursery were accommodated by monthly assessments using the well-being



scale developed by Ferre Laevers (Laevers et al, n.d.). However, we had no strategy for looking at dispositions and these seemed key to children's motivation and learning.

A disposition is defined by Katz as "a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behaviour that is directed to a broad goal" (Katz, 1993) and later by Tishman, Jay and Perkins (1993): "Thinking dispositions are ongoing tendencies that guide intellectual behaviour." Katz points out that the learning of knowledge and skills does not ensure that they will be employed. She gives an example of listening skills which children usually have, but this does not ensure that they have the disposition to be a listener. There is an increasing acknowledgement that children's attitudes and motivations for learning, rather than 'knowledge and skills', have a strong influence on children's achievements (Brooker, 2011).

Katz noted that positive dispositions are vulnerable when "the instructional processes by which some knowledge and skills are acquired may themselves damage or undermine the disposition to use them" (Katz, 1993). For example, formal teaching in reading and a focus on grammatical terms at too early an age may undermine a child's disposition to be a reader and to love reading. She said that dispositions are less likely to be acquired through didactic processes than to be explored by young children imitating what is modelled by the people around them. This implies an emphasis on the role of the adult in modelling and making learning dispositions explicit.

Not all dispositions are positive or support learning – so in choosing a focus for our curriculum it was necessary to think carefully about those dispositions that strengthen and support lifelong learning. At the same time, undesirable dispositions need to be weakened. We were drawn to nurturing, defining and documenting the dispositions that were important for learning and we decided that negative dispositions were to be dealt with by discussing these with children as they arose.

Both the New Zealand curriculum and the Quality in Diversity curriculum (ECE, 1998) recognised the importance of dispositions and rejected learning being structured by subject areas. The Foundation Stage guidance had also acknowledged the importance of dispositions in learning (QCA/DfES, 2000) although it failed to differentiate between dispositions and attitudes.

Pound's (2001) comments on dispositions articulate why nurturing them is so important. She feels it is not helpful to teach children skills in isolation. It is easier to help children learn if the context is meaningful for them. The aim of teaching is to help children to learn and think in abstract terms and this is best achieved when children have experienced real and concrete learning activities to develop their understanding. If the teacher is too directive or prescriptive this can weaken their intrinsic motivation to learn and impact on their lifelong learning.

In a search for the source of dispositions in individuals, Brooker (2011) looks at the ideas of the French sociologist Bourdieu and his idea of habitus or "acquired socially constituted dispositions" which children carry from home to school. Both Dweck and Bourdieu (in Brooker, 2011) are concerned with how thought is transformed into action and how this can inform curriculum and pedagogy to promote positive dispositions. Bourdieu's theory of habitus offers an explanation of how each individual's dispositions established in early childhood change as they move through the education system in response to new experiences. Vygotsky and other writers on socio-cultural approaches (Wells & Claxton, 2001) also regarded dispositions as a combination of an individual's own attributes mixed with social experiences and different environments.

This emphasis on the social and environmental aspects of education was analysed by Margaret Carr, who thought about learning dispositions as:

- Knowledge and skills
- Knowledge and skills + intent = learning strategies
- Learning strategies + social partners, practices + tools = situated learning strategies
- Situated learning strategies + motivation = learning dispositions

(Adapted from Carr, 2001:5)

Carr (2001) defines motivation in a child as one who is ready, willing and able; Brooker goes on to describe this as a child who at any minute in time:

- Sees herself as a learner (and hence ready to take part in new tasks and activities).
- Sees this as a place to learn (and hence is willing to undertake these activities).
- Possesses the necessary knowledge and skills to learn (and hence is able to undertake these tasks and activities). (Brooker, 2011:90)

To assess and understand how far children reveal and demonstrate their learning, the New Zealand practitioners used Learning Stories. These were observations which were documented and analysed to reveal the learning dispositions. This was something that was developed at Earlham Nursery too, using a format informed by the EEL project and the longer, narrative observations of Susan Isaacs (Appendix 3). Positive learning dispositions came to structure our approach to pedagogy including observation, assessment and planning for children's learning. We hoped this would allow children to see themselves as active learners within a supportive and positive learning community.

## Applying the idea

The staff decided that using dispositions as learning goals and as a means of structuring observation and planning would create a framework for the curriculum we wanted to offer. Our Critical Friend assisted us in discussions about how we would define learning dispositions and how to make them relevant to the local community. There was a debate at staff meetings about which learning dispositions we wanted to encourage and support. Initially we came up with 29, which was far too many, but our Critical Friend helped us to realise that we were confusing dispositions with emotional development, so we returned to Katz's definition to review our choices.

The staff team had been impressed by the way that the Te Whariki curriculum made a positive effort to be rooted in the cultures in which it was to be implemented. We wanted to use this idea as a model for developing the curriculum at the nursery school, so we considered the particular strengths and weaknesses of the community in Earlham and how the dispositions might reflect this.

- I. Curiosity was a strength in the community and a disposition which underpins creative, investigative and scientific skills.
- II. Rich and flexible in communication. In this particular locality verbal language skills are in need of support and over a considerable time speech therapists or speech therapy programmes have been supported at the nursery to address these concerns. Staff at the school believed that there was strong local non-verbal culture. Feedback from our Critical Friend and research by Harding (2000) supported this. In order to build on this existing strength, staff aimed to support the disposition to be rich and flexible in communication which would embrace all the diverse modes of communication and not only celebrate the verbal or written forms.

- III. Co-operation. Children need to learn with and from their peers. This disposition is needed to support and strengthen their social understandings and skills.
- IV. Persistence. This is necessary in order to make the most of any learning opportunities.
- V. Pleasure in learning/Playfulness. Initially the fifth disposition was aimed at encouraging a love of learning for itself and to convey the idea of the fun of learning and its importance for the whole of life. Although no one felt very comfortable with how it was expressed, we tried to encompass this in the disposition “to find pleasure in learning and finding out new things” which was later shortened to pleasure in learning. This last disposition was reviewed when Felicity did some research with parents on using dispositions as a bridge between home and nursery, using videos of children and talking about how they were learning. Parents were curious as to what was meant by play and how staff defined play at nursery. This provoked discussion with parents and within the staff team and it was decided that the fifth disposition would be changed to Playfulness, which would give us the opportunity to discuss and define our own ideas and then to share with parents when talking about their children’s learning. It would also make explicit links to self-esteem and symbolic representation.

At this time in the development of the curriculum we had not linked Froebel’s ideas to our discussions. For Froebelians “play” has a very specific meaning which is complex and linked to how the outward activity of the child reflects their inner thoughts and feelings. Bruce (1997), Tovey (2020) and Tovey (2017) explore and explain this in more detail.

As the Te Whariki curriculum became more widely documented and disseminated it was interesting to note the similarities between what Carr (2001) called the Five Domains of Learning Disposition, or the five strands of the Te Whariki curriculum, and the five learning dispositions we at Earlham chose to positively promote (see Figure 5). These ideas must have been being developed concurrently so it would be interesting to research further whether there are common themes to which dispositions/domains support very young children’s learning.

| Earlham Nursery Learning Dispositions | New Zealand Domains                       |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Rich and flexible communication       | Communicating with others                 |
| Co-operation                          | Taking responsibility                     |
| Curiosity                             | Being involved                            |
| Persistence                           | Persisting with difficulty or uncertainty |
| Playfulness                           | Taking an interest                        |

**Figure 5. Earlham learning dispositions and New Zealand learning domains**

Once we had chosen appropriate dispositions, we went on to develop working definitions of them under the headings of ‘What this means in terms of children’s learning’ and ‘The adult’s role to encourage this learning’. This was done by using video observations of the children at the nursery and discussing with the whole team over several training days how the video clips illustrated

different dispositions. Each year a different focus was chosen (for example, up to three years, boys, supportive environment). The whole staff team shared their ideas with each other based on real situations relating to specific children and known learning environments. Discussions on learning dispositions was facilitated and supported by our Critical Friend. This process allowed the team to root the discussion and judgements in real children and known situations. Using this method helped to develop a confident community of learners and teachers who could talk about children's learning with a shared and common language.

The amendment and development of the dispositional curriculum was the focus of a whole school training day each year. Developing, reviewing and amending theories and formats through collaborative discussion on an annual basis enabled the sharing of ideas and the growth of a shared language around children's learning.

This had obvious benefits:

- By revisiting and talking about how to support children's learning using examples from individual observations, we were able to keep our thinking grounded in practice and relevant to the locality
- By establishing agreed definitions and a language around approaches and methods, we could more confidently discuss between ourselves and share with external agencies why we did what we did
- By creating a centre-focused pedagogy that was based on evidence of children in the centre/school we were able to accommodate local strengths and constraints
- The longevity of the curriculum allowed the centre/school to have a consistency of approach, a continuity of ethos, and a stability that worked alongside changing government priorities and curricula
- Developing documentation for how we use the learning environment to support all of the dispositional areas in terms of what resources we provide and how these are presented to children
- In our assessments we were able to link dispositions to feelings (emotional learning), skills and knowledge

## The adult role

This process of review also aided our thinking about the adult role. We posed ourselves many questions – about when to intervene, how to observe, what language to use to record children's learning, and being clear about how the adult presence might change play and learning. One of the reviews looked specifically at the adult role and found common themes across the learning dispositions about how to support positive dispositions. These were included in the dispositional curriculum document (Appendix 4) and are laid out here:

- The ability of the adult to recognise and give status to what is important to the child
- Commentating
- Involvement as the professional
- Modelling
- Emotional support, respect, warmth and laughter
- Creating a safe setting in which the children can learn and grow (trust between professionals)
- Acting as a bridge between the centre and the community

- Professional courage (swimming against the stream)
- Planning and extending
- Orchestrating imaginative activities for children to explore
- Protecting time

As the theories became more explicit through reflection and discussion, I became very interested in ensuring that formal structures of assessment, documentation and review reflected the ideas that we had explored. Formats changed over time and as a response to changes in admissions and the growth of the centre. By July 2016 they were developed into an assessment procedure which could produce information about children's progress and development at individual, key group and cohort levels (Appendix 5).

## Impact on documentation

Once the idea of learning dispositions was adopted and a framework of thinking about learning was established, we developed formats on which to record observations. The structure of assessment documentation reflected Katz's (1993) four types of learning goals; knowledge, skills, feelings and dispositions.

Knowledge and skills were measured against the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (Department for Education, 2008) and the Development Matters advisory documents (Early Education: British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012). Reference was made to the aspects of the Areas of Learning of the EYFS and to the language used in Development Matters under 'A Unique Child'. These were used to describe learning and development when educators annotated anecdotal observations and when they described a child's learning in their long, narrative learning stories. Feelings were assessed and monitored on a monthly basis using the Leuven Well-being Scale (Laevens, 1993).

Dispositions were monitored across anecdotal and long narrative observations using the disposition grid (Appendix 6) derived from the definitions of the five learning dispositions that the centre had chosen to support. Initial assessment was completed six weeks after entry by the child's key person in discussion with the parent. It aimed to identify the child's strengths and how to build on them.

We also developed a format for ongoing assessment based on how often behaviours and interactions associated with our five learning dispositions were observed. As we had correlated the five learning dispositions with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), we were able to provide information to Ofsted and other external agencies to fulfil their requirements for learning outcomes. Additional evidence was provided by termly, long narrative observations and anecdotal, photographic and video evidence. All of this was analysed for schema, learning dispositions, the EYFS (including the Characteristics of Effective Learning) and well-being across transitional, free flow and adult-directed periods. This provided a child-friendly way of producing assessment data to show progress individually and across cohorts. It also provided a place to record the child's response to their own 'story'. All of this was shared with parents and discussed with colleagues in order to understand the child more deeply.

Over time formats were developed to support data gathering in a way that conformed to the expectations of external agencies while maintaining integrity with our ideas about children's learning. These helped us to achieve 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection judgements. They also provided

an assessment format for other more focused aspects of provision, e.g. physical assessment, listening and attention assessment, and Forest School assessment (Appendix 7).

The monthly audit of children's well-being across the class using the Laevers Well-Being Scale encouraged discussion between team members on their observations of the individual child and highlighted any emotional difficulties. If there were continuing concerns after discussions with parents, a referral to the SENCo would take place, which would provide other tools or specialists who might be able to support specific strategies.

## Research

Over the 20 years of developing a curriculum at Earlham, the importance of being able to explain and articulate what we were striving to achieve to parents, practitioners from other settings and external agencies was a challenge. The importance of communicating our philosophy and remaining flexible and open to new educational research and theories at the same time was always in our thoughts.

The experience of the EEL project had taught us that using a research approach to aid reflection was a useful way of developing practice. The first research into learning dispositions was through the Best Practice Research Scholarship programme. This funded an academic from the University of East Anglia to give monthly tutorials to advise and support three projects in the nursery school.

### 1. Dispositions as a bridge between the home and the nursery environment.

This research led to changes to the learning dispositions chosen and Playfulness replaced Pleasure in Learning. Some of the comments from parents were:

"I always thought my child was difficult and naughty, now I know that he is not."

"You have made me proud to be a parent."

"I know now that they are not just playing, there is a lot going on."

"Inspiring – gaining knowledge of disposition and schema."

The success of this project meant that it was continued beyond the research period. It is described more fully in Chapter Eight.

### 2. Gender responses to the dispositional curriculum

This investigation led to a closer look at the learning disposition of Curiosity because it evoked the most gendered response. The research led to a format for monitoring the definitions of dispositions. It was hoped that this would ensure that they were grounded in what was actually observed. In addition, we decided to try "task-oriented planning" (Carr, 2001) as a way of encouraging curiosity and questioning skills by basing planning around real and meaningful problems.

### 3. How a dispositional approach supports children with expressive language delay.

The third project led to two new initiatives:

- Developing a resource of 'song sacks'
- Building a library of reference materials and literature to support staff and family awareness and understanding of communication-based difficulties

## Dispositions in a reception class

An opportunity for further research occurred when a student teacher moved from the nursery school into a newly qualified teacher post at one of the local feeder primary schools. The teacher had felt the dispositional curriculum was really positive for young children and wanted to try to apply this in a reception class.

It was agreed with her head teacher that she might run a dispositional curriculum in parallel to the Foundation Stage curriculum as part of a Small Schools project. The introduction of a different way of working was complicated. I mentored the teacher to support any adaptations that were needed to make the dispositions relevant to their new setting. Structural differences in a reception setting such as staffing levels meant that it was easiest to gather evidence of progress in dispositions through anecdotal observations. The findings of the project identified the constraints in the reception class as:

- Financial – staff need to be paid for additional planning and assessment time above their direct teaching hours.
- Parental engagement – parents' expectations shift from a nursery to a school setting and more formal approaches to schooling are accepted. Time needs to be given to share with parents the purpose and benefits of a dispositional curriculum.
- The emphasis on more prescriptive schemes of work and more directive teaching limited opportunities for assessment by observations.
- The research found that using a dispositional curriculum in only one class of the school is not effective and concluded: "A dispositional curriculum demands a whole school approach, from the grassroots up. It requires commitment of vision from all involved, in drawing up dispositions that are relevant and beneficial not only to students' learning, but the wider community in which the student exists" (Shaw, 2003).

## How developing a dispositional curriculum supported staff

A piece of research conducted as part of a doctorate in education considered the effect on staff of developing a dispositional curriculum. From an analysis of interviews with staff, four key advantages were expressed:

- Developing a dispositional curriculum had provided a context for professional reflection
- Because it is centre-based and rooted in documented observations of known children, it can reflect local priorities
- Learning dispositions were focused on the process of learning and the motivation behind those processes. This was regarded as a flexible perspective on children's learning that is attentive to individual children's interests
- Developing a centre-based curriculum supported the development of pedagogy (the art of teaching) by providing opportunities for sharing practice and actively participating in defining how children are learning and how they can support this

The research determined that the process of developing a centre-based curriculum based on learning dispositions was an opportunity to create a "community of practice" (Wenger, 2000). It did this by providing protected time and opportunities for discussion supported by a respected external facilitator (the Critical Friend) to develop knowledge about pedagogy. This process of discussing,

reviewing and agreeing good practice became a starting point for practitioners to begin to define their professional identity and skills. The articulation and acknowledgement of the specific skills needed when working with young children is important for the self-esteem and confidence of practitioners. Unpicking, identifying and naming these skills gives people the tools to explain what they are doing and the reasons behind their actions to parents and other professionals.

One of the interviewees expressed the following views on the curriculum:

“I just think it’s [the centre-based curriculum] a really good tool and resource and a method to use with any child really because it really does support the practitioner to facilitate the child’s learning. And that was one thing that really switched me off going into teaching ...was the teaching, because the way I view it, the national curriculum is more and more prescriptive and it’s getting more towards teaching, and I just think the best learning comes from facilitated learning. So, facilitating children to do their own learning rather than just teaching, and I just think the dispositional curriculum lends itself to really support that way.”

## **The advantages of a centre-based dispositional curriculum**

In addition to researching the effects of the curriculum, the nursery disseminated its developing ideas in local and national conferences and in professional publications (Nursery World, the Early Years Update).

Inside the nursery, work continued to make learning dispositions part of the structure of the organisation. A disposition policy (Appendix 8) was produced for governors and parents and was linked to the Play and Learning policy and other documents. The annual training days continued to review the curriculum and included the role of the environment in supporting learning dispositions. To make sure that it complied with the changing government curriculum expectations over 20 years, the Earlham Nursery curriculum was cross-referenced with the Foundation Stage Areas of Learning, the Birth to Three Matters curriculum (to accommodate babies and children up to three years old) and the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

One of the benefits of developing a dispositional curriculum was the engagement of all staff in the learning and growth of the nursery curriculum, which gave a focus and a shared language for staff to talk about practice. It created a community of learners and led us to acknowledge children’s role in their own learning which we defined as follows:

- Being open to learn from children and their unique views of the world
- Being thoughtful about when to intervene in play
- Starting the planning and assessment process with observations of an individual child
- Building on the skills, knowledge and interests that the child already possesses to extend their learning
- Providing opportunities for children to lead investigations, explorations and imaginative play for themselves and for their peers
- Supporting children to be confident teachers
- Providing opportunities for children to manage risk and challenge



It enabled the nursery to be responsive to local strengths and to changes in cohorts of children over time. Most importantly, it provided a constant framework during a period of continual change in the stated government expectations for very young children and provided a consistent curriculum for parents, children and staff.

## Reflection

Earlham Nursery School from 1995-2016 is a case study of how it is possible to create and implement a centre-based curriculum to run alongside the government prescribed models of what to teach young children. The following conditions helped to enable this:

- Developing a centre-based curriculum provided a framework for all to engage with national and international theories and ideas
- Working together to develop a curriculum allowed us to put children at the centre of our discussions
- Challenging accepted or imposed orthodoxy in the curriculum encourages creativity and innovation in the educators
- Time for reflection and discussion are essential
- Leadership teams need to understand the importance of training, reflecting on practice and developing a community of learners that includes children, staff and parents
- The process of curriculum development should exploit opportunities to establish a shared language and practice amongst the staff team
- A flexible curriculum is able to respond to local strengths and to change and adapt over time
- It is vital that a curriculum is rooted in real observations of children as Froebel advocated
- Relationships and interactions should be prioritised across the setting. Developing and strengthening positive learning dispositions was one way of strengthening this
- A curriculum should be able to be applied to all children (including those with additional and special needs) and to lifelong learning
- It is important that educators understand the individual ways that children learn. This knowledge should inform their teaching to extend children's thinking. This gives children control of their learning. This in turn gives them resilience as they move through the education system and life (for example, the Characteristics of Effective Learning, schema or learning dispositions)

# Chapter Ten

## The Garden and Beyond

*“Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies. It creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation”*  
(Pace-Marshall, S. cited in *Leadership Journal for MA in Leadership, Pen Green Leadership and Research Base, Thomas, 14.7.2005*).

When we were awarded Early Excellence status in January 2002, we knew we had entered a period of challenge. This 63-year-old nursery was ready for change and the new expectations of the 21st century. We were also aware that this change needed to be a transformation, not just adding bits on. The expectations were about providing an environment which responded in flexible ways to the needs not only of children, but of the family and community.

### The starting point

Steph has written in Chapter Four about the historical influences on Early Years education. One of these major influences was the Hadow Report (1933). It was from the thinking in this report that Nelson J. Meredith (the architect for the nursery and primary school) developed his environmental design. Hadow (1933) said “the function of Nursery Schools is to provide healthy external conditions for the children – light, sunshine, space and fresh air” (Hadow, 1933:102). Earlham Nursery School was built in answer to these requirements, having a single-storey south-facing building with the rooms opening onto a veranda and the ceilings of the classrooms higher than the service area of the building to the north. This gave the opportunity for natural light in the rooms throughout the day from high north-facing windows but also access for all children to the garden through south-facing Crittall concertina windows. This was a strong foundation to build on.

### The story of transforming the garden for children and families in the 21st century

This story began in 2000 when we had started to develop our small garden. We had thought long

and hard about the role of bikes in the garden and how the garden could become a magical and exciting space for children. I was showing round the HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools) who had proposed us as an Early Excellence centre. I took him out into the garden, explaining what we had already done. He was impressed with our developments of the pond, willow tunnel and amphitheatre.



**Photo 18. Making a willow tunnel**



**Photo 19. Making a path**



**Photo 20. The wildlife pond**

*(Private Collection, Norwich, 1999)*

The HMI spent a long time in the garden watching the children. He was particularly interested in the children on bikes, who were very busy transporting natural objects and loose parts in their bike baskets. He said to me, “Where did you get your bikes?” “Community Playthings,” I replied. He looked puzzled and said, “But I have never seen such a range of bikes, all with wicker baskets on”. I told him I had a friend who made baskets from willow and that I had measured up all the bikes and she had made bespoke bike baskets for them, so the children could follow their transporting schema. He seemed very impressed with this. He asked me, “What is your vision for further development of your lovely garden?” This question took me a little by surprise as I felt we had done a lot. However, never one to say, ‘I don’t know’, I told him I would like to have the acre of land behind our garden that belonged to the First School and that no one used.

We opened the gate and went out into this barren and rubbish-strewn area. He said, “Well, what would you do with it if it was yours?” I replied, “I would make it into a natural learning environment where the children can really understand and learn about nature and engage with it emotionally so that they feel part of it and want to protect it.”

He surprised me by encouraging me to do just this. He suggested that I speak to the school and ask to have the obviously neglected plot and then negotiate with the local authority for the grounds maintenance contract for this land to be transferred to the nursery. He said Early Excellence was championing a number of garden projects and he wanted Earlham to be one of them. When I had acquired the land, I was to contact him, and he would arrange for the Early Excellence outdoor learning consultant to visit.

This was the beginning of another huge but exciting challenge. The land was transferred in due course and in 2002 we started approaching charities to fund the garden development. We wanted this money to be separate from the building so that we could ringfence it for the garden. This was an astute step suggested by the chair of governors, as building projects invariably go over budget and borrow from other monies. Raising money from charities meant that we could only spend it on the garden. We started to develop and build on our knowledge about outdoor learning.

We had, through New Deal for Communities (Department for Communities and Local Government, 1998), a working relationship with Magic Garden. This was a Norwich-based charity which helped to cultivate school grounds and worked with the children on growing and harvesting produce. Steph started to explore the recently accredited Forest Schools training and staff went to visit Bridgewater College and Worcestershire where the training was being developed. We joined the group Learning through Landscapes to gain further knowledge and we bought the Learning through Landscapes book *Special Places, Special People* (Titman, 1994).

One of the nursery educators led a project with the children to find out what they wanted from their nursery garden using some of the methods from the Mosaic Programme (Clark & Moss, 2001) to gain the child's voice. The children were given a camera and were taken to visit many different types of outdoor environments, including some of the beautiful Norwich parks. It was at Earlham Park that they decided they wanted running water in their garden (the River Yare runs through Earlham Park and has a wide accessible area for paddling and swimming). They also visited other school grounds and private gardens in the community. The children made a large display in the corridor of their wishes for the garden using drawings, words and photographs. Parents became very enthusiastic and made comments using Post-Its and put these up on the display. This conversation was a good way of getting the community involved. Everyone was talking about the nursery garden.

On a professional development day in September 2002, we met to discuss the development of the garden with Early Excellence outdoor learning consultant. This day included all of the staff, three governors, some nursery parents and representatives from the First School. We also had with us the views of the children so carefully collected through their research. At this day we developed a 'brief' which would be the guide and template for the plan of the garden.

## **Outdoor learning brief created with the outdoor learning consultant from Early Excellence in 2002**

The brief developed with the staff and others involved with the centre was as follows – to create a unique environment for children and others using the centre, which demonstrates sustainable principles and practice where children can:

- Access a varied topography in scale, contour and texture; incorporating dramatic changes in level, big mounds, large areas of sand in which to prospect.
- Plant, grow, harvest and cook food.
- Hide and not be seen; find and create places for refuge and reflection; read, share stories and use their imagination.
- Go on expeditions and journeys; develop an understanding of positional words by having places to be in, under, behind, below and above.
- Experience and understand the elements; interact with moving water, solar power and wind; be protected from the sun.
- Explore their senses through plants, materials and other elements which provide a myriad of colour, shape, sound, texture and smell.
- Independently access equipment and loose materials.
- Learn to care and take responsibility for themselves, each other and the environment.
- Be happy – be fulfilled.

As you can see this brief was conceptual. No one was allowed to ask for equipment. The consultant said very clearly, "If anyone sitting in here has it in their head to ask for swings, they can leave now"

(Thomas, 2002 journal entry). No one did!

From this brief the beautiful, inspiring and spiritual garden of Earlham Early Years Centre grew. It took more than a year to be developed and planted and most of the community was involved in some way. The families in the houses overlooking the garden were given cameras so they could photograph the progress. The children in all the local schools came on two planting days, one in December 2002 and the second in April 2003 and between them planted more than 3000 trees and shrubs. One of the Early Educators lovingly made certificates that were presented to each child with their name on it. Interestingly, after these days the vandalism at the nursery reduced.



**Figure 6.**  
**Community Planting poster**

After 18 months the garden was ready to use but the staff were worried about the enormous space with all the hidden places. We discussed this at a leadership meeting and decided to introduce the garden to both staff and children in sections over a six-week period. Every Friday night (in the dark) Steph and I would move the builder's fence to expose another area of the garden. Every Monday the staff and children, equipped with clipboards, would risk-assess the newly exposed area of the garden. This strategy worked well and both children and staff became more confident with the space.

When the sensory path was made, the children selected the things they wanted to be part of it. They chose sections from the old ramp which went up to the mobile and the rubber feet of the builder's fences used to section off areas of the garden. Also in the path was pottery we had found, many different and elaborately decorated manhole covers and lots of old bricks. The garden was full of sensory surprises, such as the legs of the little benches that had been placed around the area. If you looked underneath you found an interesting bubbly and knobbly stand. These were the metal heat exchange units from the washing machines at the local laundrette, which had recently closed. This also helped children to see that things can have many different uses and don't have to be discarded, helping them to understand the importance of developing a sustainable environment.

The builders were not allowed to send the 'spoil' from the building works to landfill. It was transported by dumper truck to the back of the garden to form our 'Magic Mountain'. With parent permissions, many children wearing hard hats rode on the dumper trucks with the builders! The builders provided training sessions for small groups of children on building techniques, such as how to mix cement and build a brick wall. In fact, a small group of children built part of the administration office!

This was first-hand, real-task learning and the children relished it. They understood the health and safety constraints and always wore their high visibility jackets and white hard hats.



**Photo 21.**  
**Excavating earth for the hall.**  
*(Private Collection, Norwich, 2002)*

The garden was formally opened by the Sheriff of Norwich in April 2004. His presence was a great attraction for the community as he was a Norwich City football player and a local hero. He planted the last tree at the top of the Magic Mountain.

The garden has matured and changed over the years, but during these years it has been a continual delight and has provided amazing opportunities for children's learning. We have done many pieces of research which have informed our thinking about the vital importance of the outdoors, in a world that is becoming very sedentary and screen-focused for children.



**Photo 22.**  
**The waterfall**



**Photo 23.**  
**View across the garden**



**Photo 24.**  
**Slope and amphitheatre**

*(Private Collection, Norwich, 2010)*

## **What did we find out about how the children engaged and learned in the garden?**

Most of the children who have come to Earlham have loved the garden and taken it to their hearts. I hope it will be a powerful memory for them. It is large and natural with a varied topography and our research over the years has found that the children respond to the garden joyously. "They particularly like the sand and water areas, and this is supported by the anecdotes of children's extended observations, hypothesising and problem solving" (Harding, 2004:13) – as seen in this observation in the very first days of the garden.

The sand is a beach area where deep digging and burying can be experienced using whole body movement. Sand gives many different sensory experiences but having a deep sand area shows how cold sand can be on one's skin even in the very hottest weather and one can experience the weight of sand through burying oneself. The water is experienced in many different ways as it is in a pond, a rill (a man-made stream) with a water splash and a waterfall as it flows down the side of the Magic Mountain, giving children the rich experience of how water can be found in nature.

Throughout the years of the garden maturing we watched the children's learning and understanding about nature deepen. Looking through the many written observations, we saw the children develop their creativity, often leading other children in their creative games and imaginings of "finding the dragon" or making houses for the Three Little Pigs so they will be safe from the wolf! One of our favourite days was the summer solstice. This became elves and fairies day and everyone, children and adults, dressed up as either an elf or a fairy. Each room learned a traditional fairy tale and acted



out this tale to each other and anyone else who was visiting. The children entered into the spirit of this day and the garden became a magical place. One year they made a fairy throne from living willow and this throne remained in the garden until both Steph and I left. Imagination was inspired, language developed, communication between all sparkled with the delight of these old stories. Children showed persistence and determination and a love for storying.

Scientific knowledge and understanding was extended through real tasks of making compost using leftovers from snack, vegetable peelings from the kitchen, and weeds from the garden. How the children revelled at the turning of the compost and they understood the need to keep it warm so that insects and worms could do their work. Seeing it become soil to go back into the garden was a great joy and children would fill up their barrows, discussing whose was heavier or fuller. Earlham Nursery School won the Norwich in Bloom composting prize for ten consecutive years until finally the judges must have felt there was no competition, so they stopped the award.

Children devised their own scientific experiments, using the pulley to transport materials across the garden and making dams to change the flow of the water down the mountain; finding habitats for spiders, slugs, snails and woodlice. The excitement of helping the adults build a fire, light the fire, cook on the fire, douse the fire and make wonderfully shaped charcoal to draw and write with. This gave mark making so much more meaning. After we did this activity and invited the parents to join us, a parent said, 'I had no idea that was how you made charcoal'. Just think how this shared experience of a parent with her child can enrich their memories and talk.

All this real activity helped children to understand rules to allow risky tasks to be accomplished safely. Rules had meaning. Often children would help to devise the rules. This enabled them through discussion to understand the risk and to help them regulate their behaviour around these risks. I always remember one of our more 'challenging' boys finding the tree loppers (unusually unattended). He very carefully picked them up and brought them to me, saying, "Felicity, these are the tree loppers they are dangerous for the little ones". He was making the environment safe for others and acting responsibly.

Throughout our research there was one other very clear theme. This was that the younger children watched and learned from the older or more capable children outdoors. Thomas (2004:29) observed: "Children often use other children, sometimes slightly older or more developmentally advanced to aid their learning process" – we saw this time and time again in our observations; the older children actively supported the younger children's learning by helping them to develop small steps to achievement. "The little ones can't reach the bars; I am going to get some blocks for them to stand on" (Thomas, 2007:31).

Communication is rich outdoors because it is meaningful and often about puzzling and finding things out together. Outdoors is a large, diverse, natural space which provides a fully equipped stage for engaging in sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). This type of shared communication only happens when both parties are in tune with each other – the adults fully understanding the motivations of the child and the child trusting the adult because they know they are understood and valued.

## What we found out from the adults about the garden as a learning environment

The adults had watched the development of the garden and were excited at the prospect of the additional space, but also fearful. At a staff meeting early on, they requested health and safety bum bags! I was somewhat taken aback but they wanted:

- A whistle for attracting attention
- A full first aid kit
- A foil blanket

We put together one for each room but within a few months they remained hanging by the door – obsolete. However, the research shows that the staff felt there were positives and negatives in equal measure. The positives were mainly about their own feelings and well-being in the garden. “The garden is extremely tranquil, I feel relaxed”, “I love the peace and quiet of the garden” (Harding, 2004:10). They also saw the huge learning potential, particularly in more structured tasks such as gardening. “I really enjoy supporting the children harvesting food, especially from the fruit trees and bushes” (Harding, 2004:10).

Communication was seen to be rich and meaningful and often led by the child.

“A child asked me to go into the willow gazebo... we sat smiling at one another, he pointed upwards and said, ‘Look’. I did and WOOSH the sky was kaleidoscopic behind the weave of the willow and I laughed, genuinely touched that I had learned and experienced what he had” (Harding, 2004:10).

They loved the landscape and the changing possibilities that were hidden within. “I think the garden is an interesting, exciting... and constantly changing environment” (Harding, 2004:10).

The staff felt that the challenges were around risk and health and safety aspects of the garden. However, they all saw their role as standing back and allowing the children to challenge themselves. This was difficult. They enjoyed the space but also saw this as an inhibitor to their interactions with the children (Thomas, 2004). It was proving hard to stand back and observe the children’s activity and engagement –trying not to interfere but at the same time showing their presence was needed! This was a real lesson in being engaged but not taking over. Froebel described this well when he talked about adults needing to be externally passive but internally active (Froebel, 1826). This means that adults need to engage their brains and think deeply to understand the child’s activity and motivation while stopping themselves from leaping in with their own ideas and suggestions.

## What we learned from parents about the garden and their child’s learning

In the first research I did with parents and the garden in 2004, I wanted to know what parents thought of the garden and how they would like it to be used. This was very early days and I think I wanted parents to love the garden as much as I did. “What is your impression of the garden?”, “How would you like the garden to be used?” (Thomas, 2004:21). These questions gave very positive answers. Parents loved the variety of space and the textures and designs found in the garden. One



parent said, “When I walk in the garden it makes me smile” (ibid:22). The research identified that parents felt there was a need for children to learn about nature and to grow fruit and vegetables. Both of these uses are structured and provide easily identified skills and knowledge in the children. They are similar to the staff ideas.

In later research I engaged parents at the beginning to help me approach collecting their views in a more co-constructed way. I did this by having a group discussion about what they wanted their child to learn in the garden. “If you were to ask me what J is learning in the garden, I couldn’t tell you, but when you tell me I see it. I don’t know what learning looks like” (Thomas, 2007:7). This made me realise that to engage parents I could not just ask them questions about what I wanted to know. I needed to work with them by doing joint observations of their children in the garden in order to develop a dialogue to discuss what we both thought learning was. In this way we could make learning visible together (ibid).

I worked with four families from very different contexts and children of different ages, from 19 months to four years. We observed their children outdoors together and then had a conversation about what we saw, how this made us feel, and how it related to learning. This was transformational for me and the parents as an approach, as we were again developing a shared dialogue about learning in the garden. This mirrored the work we had done with parent groups on dispositions, described earlier.

By approaching research in this way, I had managed to create the right conditions for a shared dialogue to flourish (Whalley, 2001). I also learned that we had all had different experiences of the natural world as young people and these experiences could either be a positive catalyst for supporting learning and understanding or, conversely, they could become an inhibitor that prevents learning in nature. I learned to be flexible in allowing parents to contribute in a way they were comfortable with. I gained understanding about mutual need – two brains are better than one. I was not the fount of knowledge I thought I was. I discovered that humility is a great virtue in learning.

## **Sustainability and maintenance of the garden**

Maintenance and sustainability in the garden are crucial in keeping the environment alive and responsive. Anyone who is a gardener knows that a garden cannot be left to fend for itself. It will very quickly become a wilderness. This is a good lesson in life skills, encouraging children to be persistent and observant about what needs to be done. It introduces children to life cycles and the continuum of nature. Children learned about change and gained an understanding of how we respond to change, both predicted and spontaneous.

The garden was carefully planned for sustainability. Shrubs were chosen and planted that would be useful to the maintenance of the garden, such as dogwoods and willows, as these can be used for fencing and weaving, and tools for creativity. Bamboo, if managed, provides an endless supply of canes for other plants to use to grow upon. Soapwort was grown in the vegetable garden to encourage children to wash their hands. Bug hotels were created to ensure that the biodiversity was rich. Environments were nurtured to encourage hedgehogs and other small mammals. Chickens were hatched and kept in the garden to provide eggs for the kitchen. Both fruit and vegetables were grown and harvested. Life cycles were keenly watched and understood. I remember nurturing the caterpillars of cabbage white butterflies – when they had turned into their cocoons and eventually hung to dry as butterflies, we released them in the garden. Every time the children saw a cabbage

white butterfly they would cry, “You were born here!”

We had a carefully planned manual which told us all of the plants in the garden along with their care and maintenance. However, we also needed experts in this area to model their knowledge and understanding for both children and adults (Harding, in Moyles, 2005). I have already mentioned Magic Garden but we engaged other environmentalists and a horticulturalist to support our understanding. We had a teacher who had a botany degree, who worked for two days a week in the garden with the children and ran a gardening club for parents at lunchtime.

Beautiful natural structures were made to support aesthetic understanding and creativity. The music area was created to show children how Norfolk reed (which we grew in the garden) was used as a roofing material.



**Photo 25. The music area.**  
*(Private Collection, Norwich, 2008)*



**Photo 26. The camera obscura.**  
*(Private Collection, Norwich, 2010)*

The camera obscura was developed from a broad brief to create something natural that would inspire awe and wonder.

The children used these areas in their own ways. The camera obscura could be a peaceful hidden haven or a sensory explosion of wonderful herbal smells. It could also be the stimulus for storytelling and making.

## **L's story: May 2011**

“L wanted to come into the camera obscura. She hadn't seen it with its wooden pinhole roof on. It was very dark inside. The floor was covered with a thick, white sheet and the door was closed by two blackout curtains. She crept in with E and I said, ‘Sit on the logs and be very quiet, see what you can see on the floor when I shut the curtains.’ The space became very dark but gradually forms and shadows appeared on the white floor. ‘What can it be?’ I said. ‘A dragon, it's a dragon,’ squealed L. ‘No, it isn't,’ said E. ‘Yes it is, and look, it will bite your toes,’ said L excitedly. ‘Don't bite my toes dragon,’ shrieked E. The curtain opened and someone looked in, the light flooded in and the ‘dragon’ disappeared. L laughed and said, ‘The dragon is scared of the light’. L and E both started to dance on the white floor, jumping on the dragon and making up a song.

‘Umpa-ti-ta, umpa-ti-ta  
Jump on the dragon  
Jump on the dragon  
Umpa-ti-ta, umpa-ti-ta’

They laughed and danced and sang. L said, ‘Turn out the light’. I closed the curtain and the space was deeply dark. Gradually the ‘dragon’ appeared on the ground moving his head from side to side. L and E shrieked and said, ‘Don’t bite our toes, don’t bite our toes, we can stamp on you when the light goes on’. They laughed and hushed together. L said, ‘Turn on the light’. I opened the curtains and the ‘dragon’ disappeared. L and E leapt up and laughed and stamped and sang:

‘Umpa-ti-ta, umpa-ti-ta  
Jump on the dragon  
Jump on the dragon  
Umpa-ti-ta, umpa-ti-ta’

They played this game together in the camera obscura for nearly an hour.”  
(Personal Journal: Norwich, Thomas, May 2011).

Everything in the garden invited the children to engage with it. They relished the real tasks of harvesting, pollarding trees, pruning shrubs, gathering the correct-sized sticks for fire making, peeling the birch bark as a fire starter, and cutting the hazel for necklaces and jewellery making. This was their garden and they understood and cared for it, echoing the Learning Through Landscapes research in 1994.

“From our research, participation was clearly synonymous with a development of ownership and belonging” (Titman, 1994:61).

Adults had a clear role in the maintenance and sustainability of the garden, which had to be continuously revisited, especially when you had a change of staff. You need a Garden Champion. At Earlham we appointed an early educator with no key person responsibility but a love and passion for the garden – her key group was the garden! This did not mean that it was all left to her, but she had a clear vision for the maintenance and sustainability of the garden which she communicated to all and co-ordinated everyone else’s roles within this.

Recently I spoke with outdoor play consultant Jan White, who used to work for Learning through Landscapes and has written many highly regarded books on the value and practicalities of learning outdoors. We spoke about this aspect of outdoor learning. She said she had developed 12 keys to sustaining an effective and satisfying outdoor learning environment. She wouldn’t tell me many but challenged me to think of my own. So here they are as simple statements. I have called them the 12 branches to a sustainable outdoor environment.

1. Sensible, accessible storage (J. White, personal communication, 2018).
2. Linking learning (indoors/outdoors and outdoors/indoors). This is a key Froebelian principle and relates to his ideas of unity and connectivity. This encourages practitioners to build on children’s prior knowledge, to understand and value what they already know.
3. The importance of transitional space between indoors and outdoors allowing for children to adjust to the different environment (J. White, personal communication, 2018).

4. Use the richness of nature for all areas of learning – less built environments.
5. Plan well for integral and ongoing maintenance and involve all children and adults in these daily, weekly and seasonal tasks, ensuring that they all have an understanding of their role.
6. Regularly revisiting and supporting the role of the adult. Ongoing training is imperative.
7. A flexible open-ended environment which is responsive to children's learning and fascinations.
8. A varied natural environment which gives space and enclosure, light and dark, dry and damp, flat and hilly, going under and over, hard and soft places, high and low, in and out, silence and sound. Again, this links to Froebel's ideas on the law of opposites, helping children to make sense of differing perspectives.
9. Topography which includes height and tunnels, dips and enclosures, edible and sensory areas.
10. Pathways and potential pathways which lead children to different aspects of the garden or outdoor space.
11. Flexible experiences, accessible for all (equality).
12. Sustainable in practice and design allowing for recycling, quality of habitats, life cycles, use of natural materials and loose parts, the ability to grow and harvest food.

I believe all these aspects are really important to develop a meaningful outdoor learning environment which is well maintained and sustained.

## The cultural perspectives of our garden at Earlham

This was not something we set out to think about, or indeed were even aware of, when we created the brief to develop the garden. However, as mentioned in a previous chapter, the demography of the estates serving the nursery changed radically from 1995. Over the years the garden has given both solace and sustenance to a number of refugee and asylum seeker families. This healing aspect of the garden didn't come home to me until we had an African student in 2010. She loved the garden and was able to link every area of it to her African village. She said the garden made her feel welcomed and at home in a strange country. Here is the poem she wrote.

### **A Cultural Perspective of the Garden at Earlham 2010**

The beauty of nature is more than diamond. It is costlier than gold.  
 It brings unity and progress even in an unknown environment.  
 Nature is powerful, beautiful and wonderful. Who can doubt it?  
 Earlham Early Years Centre outdoor speaks of various ethnicity  
     It is a voice and not an echo  
     It speaks words that are unseen  
 It welcomes you whatever race, tribe, sex and it does not discriminate  
     It gives confidence to those from other culture  
     It makes you to be part of the community  
 How wonderful it is to share the love, unity, joy, excitement with both children and  
     Adults in the eyes of nature upon a garden met .....

Oh mother, oh father, how wonderful it is to be in the great garden of our generation

Patience Unazi (2010, unpublished to be deposited in the Norfolk County Archive).

## ...and beyond.

### The building

When we were awarded Early Excellence status, we wanted our expanding building to reflect the understanding of the past but also to inspire us all to look to the future.

The Early Excellence programme was supporting many nursery schools and other settings across the country to expand their provision. It was important to visit other centres and see their ideas for improving their learning environments. Initially, we concentrated on the indoor environments. The delay in our building work gave us the opportunity for the whole staff team to go and visit other centres in small groups and then to discuss together what would work for Earlham. We visited a range of settings in London, Peterborough and in Liverpool. In response to our visits we decided that we needed to have a continuum from new to old. We wanted all children and families to feel that they were coming to one place with the same vision and values, whether they were visiting the day nursery, nursery school or community services. The message was “everyone is equally valued”. This meant that we spent a lot of money on renovating our existing building.

The old building had features reflecting Margaret McMillan’s heritage that we did not wish to lose and that we wanted to reflect throughout. These features were:

- Natural light
- Space
- Easy and direct access to outdoors
- Transitional spaces
- Artwork and creativity
- Flexibility

However, we required the new building to reflect a vision of inclusion, so we wanted it to say:

- ‘You are welcome here’ – so we needed a good-sized reception area which was bright and light and cheery.
- ‘We support you whatever your challenges’ – so access and finding your way around the building independently was very important.
- ‘We have excellent resources for you to use’.
- ‘We have a focus on food and affordable healthy eating for all’.

This last point had been raised by parents at one of the parent groups I had been facilitating. We had been talking about food and the types of food that were cooked at home and the things children liked to eat. Fish fingers were mentioned a lot. I asked if anyone bought ‘wet fish’. I discovered this was a term that no one used or understood. I explained what I meant and said that this could be cheaper and would also give variety in cooking. A mum in the room spoke about how she did not know how to cook, not even to boil an egg. She commented on not having been taught at school, so how could she learn? She felt it would be helpful to be taught at the centre and we could have a training kitchen built as part of the building development. So, in our building plan we included a carefully designed kitchen where parents and children could learn to cook together. This worked well – both parents and children used this kitchen, and parents learned to cook on a budget and enjoy cooking, eventually having the confidence to cook for the staff every Tuesday.

We also researched children's spaces and architecture and were very impressed by the work done by Mark Dudek in this field. He believes that the environment, if designed and used correctly, can become integral to the education process (Dudek, 2001). We were also hearing about the work being done in Reggio Emilia in Italy. The concept here for children's learning environments was about 'less is more' in terms of resources. It also suggested that the nursery school needed to reflect the components of a village, providing areas to communicate together, eat together and explore together, but also to find solitude and have your own space. These spaces should be fluid and flow from one to the other. The emphasis should be on light, space, warmth, texture, colour and sound in order to provide sensory stimulus.

"Children are born with an immense genetic capacity that enables them to explore, discriminate, and interpret reality through the senses" (Ceppi & Zini, 2003:16).

## Our inside space as a learning environment

We had, over the previous six years, rethought the inside environment. The old cloakrooms had been made into more flexible and diverse areas. By knocking down a wall between two cloakrooms we were able to make a good-sized soft play room. The third cloakroom stood alone so could not be extended – this made a small but cosy parents' room and group room. It was here that I led my parents' groups on dispositions.

When we knew we were going to be able to extend our building significantly we had many exploratory meetings, trying to find ways to enlarge the space without encroaching on the small garden, or destroying the features we admired of the original building. We had a long wish list! We wanted:

- A room for day care.
- A proper larger parents' room.
- A kitchen which was to teach parents to cook but could also be used by the children, so a family kitchen which was familiar in its layout to parents.
- A dedicated dining room so the children no longer had to eat in their learning space.
- A flexible quiet area so children who were at nursery for a longer day had a cosy sitting-room type space.
- To expand our library.
- A toy library to be used by the community but most of all by our local childminders.
- A better office space which would include a multi-agency office.
- An administration centre.
- A reception area which would be bright and welcoming.
- A speech and language room where the therapist could hold her appointments.
- A bigger staff room to accommodate our expanding personnel.
- A garden for staff to relax in and enjoy which would provide a quiet haven for a few minutes in their busy days.
- A large hall to provide an airy indoor space but also to double up as a conference centre with facilities. This was something the chair of governors at this time was insistent about as he had his eye to the future and the time when our Early Excellence budget would end. This facility would provide additional income so our services would be sustainable. Much of this would be 'new build', though there was some adaptation to the old building to be done.



**Photo 27. Original building and new Extension**  
*(Private Collection, Norwich 2004)*



**Photo 28. New Hall**  
*(Private Collection, Norwich 2017)*

The adaptation was significant to the way in which we structured our day. The nursery had previously felt like three unattached rooms with their own bathrooms, accessed across a wide corridor which ran the length of the building. All rooms had two doors onto the corridor with a window in between. They had one door on the south side into the garden. We wanted to open up the spaces to allow for more connectivity and collaboration between rooms. We had suggested making arches between the connecting walls, but the structure of the building would not allow for this. Our only option was to knock out a large opening between the two doors where the window was. We did the same with the bathrooms which opened onto the corridor; this made all the rooms feel a little more connected. We also wanted to refurbish the 40ft bowed Crittall windows in each room, so we could go back to the McMillan idea of transitional space between indoors and outdoors.

Transitional space for children between two contrasting environments is essential to enable young children to adjust to the differing demands, physicality and possible constraints of the two environments. Some children find it difficult to move from the smaller, contained and more structured inside to the more flexible outdoors and they require time to watch and assimilate the changes they need to make. Some children might have found it difficult to return to the indoor space. Therefore, care needs to be given to this indoor/outdoor transition. Again, we were thwarted – we could not refurbish the old windows because of new legislation on UV values, and the old windows would not allow for double glazing. Like all developments we had to compromise. We did this by putting double doors into the garden in the middle of the glazed wall. In retrospect, if we had had time to consider, I am not sure we would have done this, as these doors were in the middle of the indoor learning space and therefore reduced the transitional space for children. However, we made the wet room the transitional space and kept all the boots and wet weather coats and trousers here.

All of these ideas led to intense discussion about how to ensure we made the best of this once in a lifetime opportunity to change and expand our building. Some other ideas had to be debated at length because of the difference in the expectations of educators and architects. This was mainly around keeping as much natural light as possible and providing through air in open spaces, such as in the new hall. We also wanted to make opportunities for children to see their world through different perspectives, low windows or high crawling areas – we did not achieve this aspiration.



## Resources

Many of the resources were old and needed discarding. We had literally hundreds of puzzles going back probably to the opening of the nursery! We had to ask ourselves as we had previously done with the bikes, “What is the learning potential of this resource”? If it was linear, inflexible and narrow it had to go. We hired an enormous container skip which our unwanted resources went into. It was from this exercise that the staff developed a ‘core provision’ document. This highlighted all resources to be found in each room and outdoors, what the learning opportunities were, and how they linked to learning dispositions and later to the EYFS (2008). This gave us clear criteria for our core resources.

In addition, key persons were encouraged through their observation and planning process to supplement the core resources with enhancements to enrich the children’s interest and subsequent learning. Often the enhanced resources got ‘left behind’ in rooms long after their original intention had been achieved. This taught us the lesson that the environment needs constant care and attention to reflect the changing learning needs of the children. Our Critical Friend played a large part in helping us to think about resources and how we structured and used them. She observed and came back with things we were doing well and challenges for us to reflect on. In this way we improved our book areas and home corners and supplemented all our learning areas with appropriate labelling, writing and books.

In 2010, staff from each room went on the Communication Friendly Spaces (CFS) (Jarman, 2009) training. This had a significant impact on helping us refocus on our environment. The trained staff did photographic observations in each room, looking specifically at the CFS ideas of light, sound, texture, pathways and mood. From these observations, areas for improvement were devised for each room to develop over a six-week period. The observations were repeated, and improvements noted and celebrated. This was a manageable and discursive way to continually reflect on and review our environment.

## Varying and flexible needs of children in the learning environment

By 2004 we had all survived the challenges of developing integral, sympathetic and inspiring new spaces within a £1.3 million building project. However, if we imagined this had been a difficult challenge we had to think again.

Probably our most sensitive, influential and important challenge was getting the built environment right for a wide range of extended services. The most crucial of these was the new day care service. All of us passionately believed in a completely integrated service. Every child is unique and their needs are holistic. You cannot separate education and care. However, we had decades of experience and understanding of young children’s learning needs over a school-hour day with long holidays and children arriving and leaving at pre-set times. The flexibility of days and times across an extended day of ten hours was very new to us. We soon learned that the rhythm of the day for these children had to be different. We were guided by our extended day co-ordinator, who was extremely experienced, but I fear our desire for equality in terms of ‘sameness’ of experience meant that we did not always listen to her. We had many attempts at integrating our sessional and day care children in the same rooms. If I look in my journals they are full of timetables and ratios. However, we always came back to ‘is this right for the child?’

Transitions were difficult as children who were with us for ten hours a day had to witness two large



and different groups of children arrive and go home, as well as many individual children come and go during their day. We tried to alleviate this by taking them to another room for a quiet time before lunch and tea, but this meant that we were adding more unnecessary horizontal transitions into their day. We finally, and somewhat reluctantly, changed the Mouse room into the day care room for three to five-year-olds. The Squirrel and Rabbit rooms were for the sessional children.

Our second challenge over day care and providing an appropriate environment were the demands made by the local authority. We had become a Neighbourhood Nursery in 2003-04 and had done research into who in the community would use our extended day services. We had surveyed all our present and past families with younger children. This was approximately 250 families. We asked them about the hours they would need, the number of days required, holiday provision and whether they would use these services for babies, one to two-year-olds and two to three-year-olds. Also, we asked how much they would be prepared to pay per hour. The results were conclusive. No one would leave a baby under a year at the nursery. They would prefer to leave their baby with a member of their family – only two parents said that they would leave one to two-year-olds.

This was significant as we all felt our large airy rooms were too overwhelming for very young children. However, we could see a need for two-year-olds, and we all felt they would need a smaller and more intimate space. The type of space and where we could make it was discussed at a staff meeting and one of the early educators said: “Could we not convert the sensory room, outdoor loo and old staff room into a space for two-year-olds, as this is next door to the Mouse room” (day care room). This was a brilliant idea which we were able to achieve, giving an interesting space offering direct access to the garden, lots of light, and some small and challenging areas to negotiate. We agreed that this would be an ideal space for eight two-year-olds.

I filled in the Neighbourhood Nursery form saying we were offering day care for up to 24 three and four-year-olds and eight spaces for two-year-olds. However, a few days later the phone rang and I was asked how many spaces I was offering for babies and one to two-year-olds. I replied, “None”. The local authority said I had to offer places for children from birth to two-year-olds, or I could not be a Neighbourhood Nursery. I said, “Fine, I won’t be a Neighbourhood Nursery, as we cannot provide the best environment for nought to two-year-olds”. The local authority had put numbers for these age groups in their form to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), which included Earlham Early Years Centre. I was asked to go to County Hall to see a representative from the DCSF and representatives from the Norfolk Early Years and Childcare Partnership.

I was pleased that I had done my community childcare research as this clearly showed we would not be viable. However, I also wanted to express the nursery’s views on providing excellent environments which included the need for light, small and cosy flexible spaces, which were where children could feel both secure and in control of their environment. We were allowed to become a Neighbourhood Nursery even though we had no birth to two-year-olds and when we became a Children’s Centre in 2006 this exception was maintained by the Department of Schools, Children and Families.

The years of change we have tried to describe in part two of this book, have made us passionate advocates for high-quality flexible and holistic Early Years services, which need to be responsive to changing times. Our experience has taught us that continual reflection, discussion and engagement with the community are the tools which enabled us to continue to review and improve our Early Years practice.

## Reflections – what do we want from a learning environment?

- The outdoors and the natural world allow for experience through real and meaningful activity which develops deep level thinking, understanding and concept development in a way that generic programmes generally do not.
- Learning and understanding cannot be rushed.
- Green and natural environments require an emotional response which encourages spiritual reflection.
- Our society is challenged by the mental health difficulties of our young people. A natural environment, which fosters enquiry, collaboration, problem-solving and persistence offers part of a solution.
- Physical activity and cognitive activity are linked in the brain.
- The challenge of an ever-changing natural environment feeds the brain to want to know more – it inspires imagination, language, collaboration, negotiation, problem solving and much, much more. This is what Froebel means by engaging with and in nature
- Children need space, natural light and texture as part of their learning environment. Do we consider this when we provide learning spaces for young children?
- Flexible space responds to individual learners' motivations.
- Planning for horizontal transitions requires close observation of children's individual needs.
- Equality does not mean we provide the same for all.
- Be principled in making decisions, sometimes this requires one to say 'no'.

# Chapter Eleven

## What Have We Learned?

*“Let us learn from our children, let us give heed to the gentle admonitions of their life, to the silent demands of their minds. Let us live with our children: then will the life of our children bring us peace and joy, then shall we begin to grow wise, to be wise”*  
(Froebel, 1926).

The idea of children and childhood has changed. There is an emphasis on a scientific and technological approach to understanding how children acquire knowledge. This has led to the idea of childhood becoming a measurable process that prioritises continual improvement. We fought hard at Earlham against looking at how children learn through subject areas and developed a curriculum based on dispositions as a way of looking at how they approach their own learning. This way of regarding children’s learning appears to be under threat. The Characteristics of Effective Learning have a place in the 2017 EYFS but are not emphasised as the foundation for lifelong learning and are often ignored in the classroom. We think that this is because they are not explicit in the end of stage assessment process.

Parents at Earlham were interested and positive about their children – when asked what they wanted for their children at nursery, they replied: “To be happy and have friends”. Parents were attracted to their children’s creative learning and actively engaged with them in the nursery. Creative and social learning are the skills that children will need in the future. Parents often had not realised that education and parenthood were part of the same spectrum. It would be helpful if this could become part of the antenatal agenda.

Guidance for Early Years professionals is always changing and at present it is highlighting the importance of language to support children’s self-control. In Early Years we have always understood that an enriched language experience provides the tools for critical and creative thinking, but professionals are often limited in the training they have on this. Staff are often reticent about change, but they are always motivated by their relationships with children. So, putting change in the context of benefits for children supports their understanding and also benefits their professional worth.

# How can we create the best conditions for learning?

For us, there are four key areas for developing the best conditions for learning. These are communication, resilience, environment and organisation. Authentic dialogue with parents needs to be considerate of the context of their lives and their children's development. It should not be imposed but should motivate. These trusting relationships take time and commitment to build. How Early Years professionals present themselves is also important. At Earlham, we felt that using Christian names was a democratic approach.

## Communication

We were concerned to be visible and available and aspired to listen and be responsive. We tried to make our channels of communication appropriate to our families and asked what was the best method of communication for them. This meant that we had to develop a variety of strategies, for example, text messaging, time for informal chats, structured one-to-one meetings and parent discussion groups. We felt it was important to have a philosophy rooted in valuing relationships, positive interactions and face-to-face communication. This had to be worked at and sometimes led to unplanned opportunities. For example, the library assistant made herself available for informal talks with parents and many times this led to a deeper connection with families. In the community that the nursery served there was a perceived difficulty in terms of verbal and written language but research within the nursery led us to respect and value non-verbal forms of communication. We wanted to celebrate the diversity of interactions and this led us to develop our disposition of 'rich and flexible communication'. We felt it was important to be informed about the local community, its history, geography, culture and dynamics. This helped us to understand the community's experience of schooling and enabled us to find new and innovative ways to engage with families about their children's learning. We also ensured that we made links with other local agencies, individuals and networks to give us a rich flavour of community life.

## Resilience

The second area is resilience, which helps children to question, make decisions, see things from different perspectives and have the ability to recover from setbacks. Having a dispositional curriculum gave children lifelong learning strategies. Supervision was the mechanism which we used to support staff in understanding and using their own strengths. Within the nursery, a stable, responsible and motivated team was built using individuals' strengths. A united vision gave staff the opportunity to apply these strengths in a way that provided support for children and families. Having a successful nursery school that engaged with the community provided a source of celebration and pride.

## Environment

The third area was creating a stimulating environment which was rich but responsive in meeting diverse needs. It needed to be uncluttered, open-ended, flexible and able to be changed by children and adults together in order to enhance the learning experience of the moment. We believed that a natural outdoor environment free from man-made structures provided children with the opportunity to explore, observe and engage with the natural world. If children can understand the world we live in, they are better equipped to face the challenges of the future.

## Organisation

The last area that we believed supported the best conditions for learning was how the organisation was managed. We felt it was imperative to put the child at the centre of the organisational structure. We created a priority list (see below) that guided us in this principle and helped with making decisions.

### **EARLHAM EARLY YEARS CENTRE** **Our Key Priorities**

- The children are our focus and they have priority in terms of our time and space.
- Children need to feel welcome, secure and cherished within consistent boundaries.
- To work as a team to support children and parents to access the centre.
- To see ourselves as advocates for the child's voice within the context of a Children's Centre.
- We will value and respect the child, the family and home, and cultural experiences.
- We want the children and parents to feel that centre staff endeavour to meet the learning needs of children but also recognise that children learn from one another. We will provide environments that are enabling and challenging with plenty of opportunities to revisit and scaffold learning.
- We respect children as individuals, recognising their need to be both dependent and independent learners through being curious, co-operative, persistent, playful and good communicators.
- All adults in the centre will model positive relationships and acknowledge emotions, in line with the principles of the Solihull approach, to support children in their relationships with others.
- Through the key person approach we enable children's emotional resilience.
- We will provide and encourage a physical environment that is enabling, challenging and containing.
- We will extend child-initiated interactions and plan to provide for celebration and reflection.
- We respect and acknowledge children's changing emotional states and support their emerging self-regulation.

## What is special and particular about nursery schools?

Nursery schools are informed by at least three theoretical approaches. Firstly, Froebel's kindergarten movement which focused on children's learning and influenced the development of nursery schools and the training of nursery teachers in the late 19th century. Secondly, Margaret McMillan's plein-air schools which emphasised the children's health needs in the early 20th century and lastly, Susan Isaacs' experimental Malting House School in the 1930s, which used observation to look at children's emotional development. This history encouraged a multi-agency approach to supporting children and their families. This in turn has led to nursery

schools developing the expertise to support those children with additional needs.

Earlham Nursery School is typical of nursery schools across the country in that it is situated in a disadvantaged community. In spite of the challenges this affords, the overall quality of provision as measured by Ofsted for nursery schools is higher than any other educational sector. Nursery schools have always been led by a qualified teacher with a staff team which has been trained in child development and Early Years theory and practice. This embedded understanding of how young children learn has given them the skills to have a professional response to challenging situations. Their training has given them the ability to articulate what is right for children. In nursery schools, learning is foregrounded and there is a synchronicity between the visible learning of the individual child. This feeds the learning and understanding of the adult. Anecdotal evidence would lead us to believe that staff in nursery schools are more likely to engage with further and higher education than in other sectors.

## What can we learn from the past?

Not all educators are able to learn from the past as they do not have access to the history of education. It is not in initial training or continuing professional development, although this has not always been the case. The NNEB qualification and the Certificate in Education both had historical and theoretical elements. Having an understanding of history and theory allows students to have a perspective on current thinking, be able to develop their own ideas, and critique ideas from other countries and cultural contexts. For example, in some settings, ideas from Froebel, Reggio Emilia and Forest School are plucked off the shelf without understanding where they come from and the thinking and context that informs them. We have learned how ideas have developed and have informed a generally accepted view about young children's learning. Since the Plowden Report, however, each government review of the Early Years curriculum has reduced its content to be more in line with a skills and knowledge-based curriculum, because this meets political needs.

The key tenet of education should be relationships, and this has been advocated since the 18th century by Pestalozzi and Froebel. Relationships were also key to McMillan and Isaacs but in different ways. For McMillan, this was the importance of health and the children's relationship with the outdoors and the natural world. Isaacs was a psychoanalyst, and this meant emotional and social relationships were central to her thinking. For all of these pioneers, relationships and meaningful tasks rooted in the real world were the starting point for supporting learning.

They also advocated that in order to understand the child, the adults needed to observe deeply and reflect on children's patterns of behaviour and responses to their environment and people around them. Isaacs in particular used long narrative observations of children in her work. Current expectations undervalue the historic purpose of observing children, which was to gain a deep understanding of the child. Instead, we seem to have reduced observations to a data collection process. Within a mental health context there are models of observation which are carried out over a long period and not written but discussed afterwards among professionals, in order to explore the complexity of children's learning and behaviour patterns. This discussion aids a fuller interpretation of the observation and deeper understanding of the child. We explored this approach at Earlham in a project linked to the Tavistock Institute and decided to pilot it around children's transitions between key persons.

Discussions with parents on their observations of children at home are another important perspective. We explored this as part of a Best Practice Research Scholarship by using video taken

at home by the parents and then discussing with parents and practitioners the learning that was observed. This was a good way to build a learning dialogue with parents. Today, the tools for developing this dialogue are ubiquitous – using smart phones, families can easily and regularly share observations from home but as yet this potential remains unharnessed.

There are cyclical patterns of approaches to learning where progressive and didactic models take precedent from time to time. These patterns are created by political imperatives. Research and other evidence is chosen to fit the political views of the moment. The child and learning are not at the centre and relationships are not prioritised. We feel that education is used as a political tool to deliver economic outcomes in England, in contrast to Scandinavian models where it is used to deliver social outcomes promoting citizenship and developing a sense of community. We have learned the importance of locality and local context in all of its diversity. It is essential to be responsive and sensitive to the changes in the community. Having mechanisms for regularly reviewing practice based on observations of the current cohort of children and families allows practice to follow changes in the community.

## **What are the challenges for the future?**

### **Nursery schools**

Nursery schools need to establish a clear role within the education system which is recognised by the government. They have diversified to survive so they no longer have one identity – this poses a challenge in developing a clear national role. Maintained nursery schools have been very good in the past at developing multi-agency and multi-professional links not available in schools or in the private and voluntary sectors. This crucial link for families would be lost if nursery schools ceased to exist.

### **Staffing**

The Nutbrown (2012) and Effective Practice in Pre-school Education (2006) reports demonstrated clear evidence that outcomes improved with highly qualified staff. The challenge that this has uncovered is the diverse quality of training (including online). The Early Years Initial Teacher Training is not equivalent to a PGCE in terms and conditions – this automatically gives it a lower status and lower pay. This reflects the huge challenge of creating a well-paid workforce for young children which necessitates government subsidy in order to offer universal access.

A particular problem at Earlham was recruitment, turnover and legacy. Problems centred on how to maintain and embed good practice with a relatively small staff team. Recruitment of teachers, in particular, was challenging as nursery education is low status and seen as a backwater with limited opportunity for advancement. It is also a female-dominated workforce with little prospect for career progression which reinforces the low status of this profession. Many female practitioners also often have a risk-averse approach. The challenge is partly how to recruit more excellent male practitioners.

Earlham had a small minority population which was very diverse in origin. The challenge was how to make sure we could value and accommodate all of the culturally specific needs and practices within our community. The ever-increasing pressures for producing data as evidence for outcomes limits the time for supporting professional relationships amongst staff. Supervision of our most valuable asset can become a tick box exercise rather than a person-centred process. This may create a

situation where the potential of the individual and whole staff group is not maximised. Encouraging staff to research their own practice in informal and formal ways is a tool to deepen their individual knowledge and understanding and gives them a commitment to school development in the longer term. Creating the conditions for this to happen is a challenge but the benefits are a strong and motivated team and a dynamic and forward-thinking culture within the school.

## **Pedagogy**

There is a downward pressure from schools to prepare and train for formal schooling. Nursery schools and classes are seen as a training ground for statutory education and not as a phase of learning and development in its own right. There is a further challenge for two-year-olds based in inappropriate accommodation and with untrained staff in schools. There is a misconception at government policy level around the distinct developmental needs of very young children and the necessity of providing an environment that has a breadth and depth of rich sensory experience.

There is a challenge to make outdoor learning and learning in nature foregrounded within the curriculum. Learning in nature is an imperative for young children to understand themselves, their well-being and the synchronicity we all should have with our world. This book has shown the importance of the outdoor environment and its impact on children's learning. Outdoors should always be available as a key part of the Early Years curriculum and settings should be assessed for their provision. Ways of maintaining, monitoring, and using assessment outdoors need to be established so that we can justify its use and cost.

With the fragmentation of education services, we are at risk of losing the opportunities for sharing good practice across phases and sectors. It is important to find ways to allow statutory schools to learn from good and developmentally appropriate practice in nursery schools.

Through the course of writing this book, the authors have become intensely interested in the history of nursery education and the cyclical nature of the tension between a progressive and a didactic approach to young children's learning. This is expressed in some of the challenges we see for the future.

## **Unconscious links to Froebel, our reflections on an emerging and deepening understanding.**

### **Felicity Thomas**

Since 2014 Froebel has featured in my life and work in a more obvious way. This has happened through the time spent with Tina Bruce and other Froebelian professionals while developing a modular short course. We have discussed the meaning of Froebel's principles in today's world and what they look like in practice. These discussions and the delivery of the course, plus going to India for the Froebel Trust has helped me to reflect on the importance and central place that Froebel has held for me throughout my teaching career.

India was challenging and inspiring; working with a community of learners and teachers who had only experienced the 'talk and chalk' method of teaching and learning. To move them from this to



thinking and reflecting on their practice and how it impacts on children was a long journey. Started by team one in 2012 and continued with team two from 2017-18. The principles we majored on (because they had meaning in this culture were):

- Active child- children need to move
- Freedom and guidance [observation, know your children]
- Linking learning, don't teach in isolation facts and knowledge. Let them develop from your knowledge of the child and what they can do
- Importance of language- mother songs, stories. This was a story telling and vocal community
- Relationships
- Play; as a way that children are making sense of their world

The team one leader summed this up in a meaningful concept for the learners in Kolkata. She likened Froebelian understanding to a Biryani Feast:

Good ingredients  
Careful preparation  
The right mix and quantities  
Add things at the right time  
Keep an eye on it [observe changes]  
Taste it regularly  
Give it time  
Enjoy

I love this description as it exemplifies the link between culture and learning, the time this takes and the care and observation which is needed so that all can be part of and enjoy learning. I think Froebel would have approved.

In India, I was asked to make a garden with the children on a building site around their new school. We cleared and made safe a Froebel sized patch of ground, about one metre by three metres. We had no tools so dug the soil with our hands and used found sticks. I encouraged the children to make drills for the seeds. We talked about what seeds need to grow; we had nourishment from the soil and light but no water. A boy of about 10 years ran to the standpipe in the road with a tin can. He came back and taught us all to cup our hands and curl our fingers to make a spout between our thumb and first finger. He showed us how to pour the water slowly and continuously from this spout onto the seeds. He knew how precious water was and how it should be used and conserved. We all learn from each other and we all have fountains of knowledge.

At Earlham I may not have articulated Froebel's principles and views on early education in an overt way but subliminally I feel they shone through my practice and informed my decision making. The key things that kept me focused in my teaching career, which on reflection came from my Froebel training were, keeping the child at the centre of everything we do. The awe and wonder to be found in nature and our place as human beings in this incredible universe. Teaching is a privilege and is shared with parents, colleagues and the wider community; it is not just the premise of the teacher. While writing this book with my colleague we have often spoken of Froebel and on reflection I can see his influence in all we did. It feels a little like he has been sitting on my shoulders guiding my thoughts and actions.

When I left the Centre in 2013 the multi-agency team had all contributed to the most beautiful wall hanging of the tree of life at Earlham.



**Photo 29. Earlham Quilt**  
(*Private Collection, Norwich, 2020*)

At the two bottom corners of this quilt can be seen references to Froebel, so he truly was the corner stone of our work. I think this shows that there was an articulation of Froebel's principles in all we did and the staff team recognised this as practice at Earlham, all be it an unconscious understanding. Froebel was spoken about directly when we articulated our ideas and practice in the garden and shared this with parents as we wanted them to know that the garden was based on a true and lasting philosophy.

## Stephanie Harding

This book is a history of a maintained nursery school. It was written with the purpose of sharing our experiences as teachers and leaders. Since starting this work I have become more knowledgeable about Froebel's ideas and teachings through training to become a Froebel Travelling Tutor and being able to learn from colleagues and join discussions on Froebel's relevance for today's educators.

Initially Froebel's emphasis on the importance of nature as a resource for learning resonated with my experience at the nursery as we were determined about developing a naturalistic environment and providing knowledgeable adults to support our own and children's understanding of natural resources and processes. Once the garden was established, I was interested in its spiritual possibilities and its role in supporting a need for solitude. I found Froebel's concept of Unity and the idea that the world is a representation of what God was for Froebel very useful in spite of being an atheist myself. It seemed to chime with the idea of Gaia.

I had never really appreciated the full potential of finger plays, rhymes and songs and how understanding that a sequence of deepening complexity in songs and movement can support the development of abstract thinking and support learning across many areas as well as nourish creative skills. I wish that I had understood this as an educator as I loved singing and finger plays and realise that I had never utilised their learning possibilities to the full. The fact that these start for the youngest children and make links between family and community connected to my understanding on the importance of real and meaningful tasks that also help the development of abstract concepts and practical skills. Initially I learned about this from Margaret Carr but soon realised that it was Froebel that had first made these links earlier.

I had always enjoyed the creative and open-ended possibilities offered by the wooden blocks and thinking about Froebel's Gifts and how they help develop abstract concepts through concrete experiences deepened my understanding.

The importance of observing children to understand their interests and concerns has always been very important to me and Froebel's emphasis on starting where the individual child is validates this approach. In fact, his focus on using observation as a tool for children as well as adults to learn influenced my approach to supporting children to explore their ideas more deeply. That is, by encouraging them to look carefully and ask themselves questions about what they can see.

Froebel's ideas have both consciously and unconsciously influenced how I see the world and its learning potential both for children but as importantly for the adults who play and work with them. Supporting educators develop their professional interests and skills is an echo of how we facilitate children's learning and is a way of ensuring that a rich educational environment is sustainable for the long term.

# Appendices

- Appendix 1.**      **Supervision schedule**
- Appendix 2.**      **Learning Story format**
- Appendix 3.**      **Disposition document**
- Appendix 4.**      **Assessment procedure**
- Appendix 5.**      **Dispositional grid**
- Appendix 6.**      **Individual, Forest School and  
physical assessment documents**
- Appendix 7.**      **Disposition policy**



# Appendix 1: Supervision Schedule

Earlham Early Years Centre

Aide Memoir for Supervisee of Reflective Supervision

Name of Supervisee:.....

Name of Supervisor:..... Date:.....

## AIM

To support staff through the change from nursery school to early years centre which would be offering a multiplicity of service.

To support new staff.

To help all staff feel valued.

To give appropriate support and training to develop staff skills.

To try and flatten the management structure of the centre from hierarchical to heterarchical.

## What went well this month in terms of your practice with children & families?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|--|

## What has been difficult this month in terms of your practice with children & families?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|--|

## How could this have been done differently?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|--|

**Are there any other issues you would like to discuss?**

**How is this affecting Children & Families?**

**What would you like to do to move these issues forward?**

**Supervision will always remain confidential unless there are any issues raised.**

## **CONFIDENTIAL AGREEMENT**

The action required is beyond the responsibility of the persons involved and needs to be raised in..... meeting.

By.....on.....

We the undersigned agree for this to happen

Supervisee.....

Supervisor.....

# Appendix 2: Learning Story format (condensed)

|  |     |           |                 |
|--|-----|-----------|-----------------|
| Name: _____'s Learning Story on     /     /                                |     |           |                 |
| DOB  | M/F | Observer: | Time started:   |
|  |     | Room:     | Time completed: |
| Context  |     |           |                 |
| Time/<br>Disposition   |     |           |                 |
| Page 1   |     |           |                 |
| Story continues: Have you remembered to ask children about their learning? |     |           |                 |
| Time/Disposition   |     |           |                 |
| Page 2   |     |           |                 |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Story continues: Have you remembered to ask children about their learning? |  |
| Time/Disposition   |  |
| Child's Voice  |  |
| Page 3   |  |

|   |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |
|---|--------------|---|------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|----------|
| The evidence for knowledge, skills, feelings and dispositions is: |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |
| Ideas for continuing this story and progress on IEP:              |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |
| Extension reference:  |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |
| Parents' view:  |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |
| Areas of Development and Learning                                 | PSED         | CLL   | Physical   | Maths                                 | EAD       | UW                               | Literacy |
| Characteristics of Effective Learning                             |              | Playing and exploring                               |            | Active learning                       |           | Creating and thinking critically |          |
| Special interests or dominant schema                              | Transporting | Enveloping  | Connecting | Scattering                            | Enclosing | Trajectory                       | Other    |
| Transition well-being<br>Low Trans High<br>1 2 3 4 5              |              | Free flow well-being<br>Low Trans High<br>1 2 3 4 5 |            | Directed time well-being<br>1 2 3 4 5 |           | Involvement level<br>1 2 3 4 5   |          |
| Page 4  |              |   |            |                                       |           |                                  |          |



## Appendix 3: Disposition document

# Earlham Early Years Centre

## Dispositional Curriculum

### **The adult role in supporting the five dispositions in the curriculum**

Common themes in the adult role across the five dispositions:

- The ability of the adult to recognise and give status to what is important to the child
- Commentating
- Involvement as the professional
- Modelling
- Emotional support, respect, warmth and laughter
- Creating a safe setting in which the children can learn and grow (trust between professionals)
- Acting as a bridge between the centre and the community
- Professional courage (swimming against the stream)
- Planning and extending
- Orchestrating imaginative activities for children to explore
- Protecting time

## Rich and flexible in communication

| What this means in terms of children's learning   | Adult's role to encourage this learning  |
|---|--|
| <p>Immersing themselves in sensory experience</p> <p>Observing and imitating others</p> <p>Listening and responding to others</p> <p>Exploring the many forms of communication</p> <p>Using their bodies to show their emotions, ideas and thinking</p> <p>Using their voices and their bodies to communicate</p> <p>Becoming aware of symbols and images</p> <p>Being able to express and communicate their own needs.</p> <p>Expressing their unique and individual thoughts, ideas and activities</p> <p>Exploring and representing their ideas and feelings through symbolic and imaginative play</p> <p>Sharing and communicating their own unique culture</p> | <p>To model and encourage and share a sense of fun and celebration</p> <p>To communicate a child's learning to family members and the child</p> <p>To tune into children's individual communication</p> <p>To model and support imitation and mirroring</p> <p>To observe children intently in order to understand what they are trying to communicate and to respond appropriately</p> <p>To encourage the child to be aware of how they can use their bodies to communicate through commenting and demonstration</p> <p>To enable the child to communicate and express their ideas and feelings in lots of different ways and to see themselves as a communicator</p> <p>To support genuine and meaningful interactions and communication</p> <p>To model the use of gesture and signs and to be aware of our body language</p> <p>To provide and demonstrate a range of creative and imaginative resources for children to explore</p> <p>To model being a reader, writer, dancer, artist, musician, learner and actor</p> <p>To enjoy positive and appropriate interactions and conversations</p> <p>Enabling and supporting active listening skills between all parties</p> |

## Co-operation

| What this means in terms of children's learning  | Adult's role to encourage this learning   |
|--|---|
| <p>Building self-esteem to support constructive and positive relationships with familiar adults and children</p> <p>Start to be aware of a range of emotions and developing an understanding of what might cause them</p> <p>Identifying the beginning of sharing and taking turns</p> <p>Beginning to see the uniqueness of themselves and others</p> <p>Learning to understand that their actions can impact on others</p> <p>Caring for others, living things and the environment</p> <p>Developing an understanding of belonging to a group or community</p> <p>Observing, imitating and responding to others' needs and expectations</p> <p>Develop the confidence to share</p> <p>Being appropriately assertive</p> <p>Having the flexibility to be a leader and to be led</p> | <p>To encourage and model an understanding of fairness and justice and to encourage appropriate independence and responsibilities</p> <p>To value the knowledge of parents and carers and to work positively with them to better understand the child</p> <p>To actively seek information from a range of involved adults – staff and other professionals</p> <p>To reinforce with language and non- verbal communication positive attributes of all children</p> <p>To be open and accepting of all types of emotion and behaviour, reflecting back where appropriate and supporting where inappropriate</p> <p>To model and encourage co-operation skills with others. To be respectful in group situations and model listening and taking part</p> <p>To intervene only when it is appropriate</p> <p>To model and provide opportunity and time to empathise</p> <p>To encourage children to enjoy each other's skills and accomplishments</p> <p>To provide an environment that is rich in warmth and respect where they can learn about themselves</p> <p>To model and respect reflection</p> <p>To make visible positive co-operation between adults and children</p> <p>To find ways to value children's experience, interest and home background so that they develop a positive image of themselves</p> <p>To facilitate daily small group activities which promote a child's understanding of community and their place in it</p> |

## Persistence

| What this means in terms of children's learning   | Adult's role to encourage this learning   |
|---|---|
| <p>Being comfortable with themselves, proud of what they can do</p> <p>Returning to things and activities, rebuilding and modifying</p> <p>Exploring a range of stimuli through the use of all their senses</p> <p>Gaining knowledge about themselves as individuals</p> <p>Observing peers as role models to help them to persevere</p> <p>Sustaining involvement to support understanding</p> <p>Overcoming challenges and persisting through difficulty with determination</p> <p>Being purposeful and self-motivated</p> <p>Having the ability to become self-absorbed in a learning experience</p> <p>Asking for support to complete a chosen task</p> <p>Demonstrate resilience by showing the ability to 'bounce back'</p> | <p>To have a sensitivity towards and knowledge of individual children's interests and ways of learning</p> <p>To support children to find out for themselves and to make connections</p> <p>To follow the child's needs and respect their instructions</p> <p>To encourage children's thought processes and problem solving</p> <p>To act as an equal participant and play partner</p> <p>To allow time for the child to work things out and to know when to intervene</p> <p>To be an active listener and to ask open-ended questions</p> <p>To nurture the child's pride in her own work and to celebrate her achievements</p> <p>To sustain learning over time and to give reassurance that this is OK</p> <p>To support the child through periods of frustration</p> <p>To model persistence and self-motivation</p> <p>To talk about how current effort is linked to effort in the past</p> <p>To share with parents and carers the importance of effort and not just the achievement</p> <p>To respect children as thinkers and doers, explicitly valuing their decisions and appropriate actions</p> <p>To create and shape the learning environment</p> <p>To use multi-sensory strategies to support learners</p> <p>To celebrate failure as a tool for learning</p> <p>To use laughter and enjoyment to encourage children – modelling enthusiasm and delight</p> |

## Curiosity

| What this means in terms of children's learning  | Adult's role to encourage this learning  |
|--|--|
| <p>Exploring by using their senses and their bodies</p> <p>Feeling safe and confident enough to investigate</p> <p>Sharing their discoveries with others</p> <p>Making real discoveries based on first-hand experiences</p> <p>Making connections using previous understanding and experience</p> <p>Questioning in a non-verbal and/or verbal way</p> <p>Actively observing other people and objects</p> <p>Making sense of experience by representing it in a variety of ways, e.g. movement, drawing</p> <p>Revisiting experiences over time to deepen understanding</p> <p>Fascinated by the unknown and motivated to explore the world around them</p> <p>Finding out things from other children, adults, books and other media</p> | <p>To encourage children to observe differences and similarities</p> <p>To provide a range of sensory experiences<br/>To initiate and model involvement, interaction, awe and excitement</p> <p>To support curiosity in our learning community</p> <p>To allow time to provide enriching and challenging opportunities and use real experiences for children's learning.</p> <p>To support and facilitate the child's self-initiated learning</p> <p>To ask meaningful and appropriate questions</p> <p>To wonder aloud with children to encourage their questions</p> <p>To build up a knowledge and understanding of the needs and interests of the individual child and to value and respect these</p> <p>To provide time, space and resources for exploration at the child's individual pace</p> <p>To sustain shared thinking through flexible use of the environment</p> |

## Playfulness

| What this means in terms of children's learning  | What the adult does to support this   |
|--|---|
| <p>Being completely absorbed in their play (like a fish in water)</p> <p>Being a 'tuned' in playful partner</p> <p>Exploring opportunities for imaginary pretend play with a range of materials and found objects</p> <p>Observing positive and mutually respectful relationships</p> <p>Actively taking risks in playing and developing self-management e.g. physical or emotional</p> <p>Being completely absorbed in the play experience</p> <p>Developing the ability to reflect and respond to their play</p> <p>Reading and using non-verbal and verbal play signals</p> <p>Expressing humour and experimenting with what will amuse themselves and others</p> <p>Extending the boundaries of their individual creativity</p> <p>Evolving and transforming imaginary ideas and materials</p> | <p>To model and facilitate role play</p> <p>To provide a secure environment with opportunities for reflection, challenging and risk taking</p> <p>To model playfulness and fun</p> <p>To be a playful partner with an individual child or group of children</p> <p>To recognise, respect and value playfulness</p> <p>To protect time for play and learning</p> <p>To learn to stand back and respect children's autonomy</p> <p>To provide continuity and consistency in the learning environment</p> <p>To be aware of our own and the children's cultural, environmental and social backgrounds</p> <p>To commentate and articulate the value of play and record playfulness</p> <p>To celebrate the children's own games and to use them as models</p> <p>To model using one person or object to represent a different person or object</p> <p>To support children to express their emotions and feelings</p> |

# Appendix 4:

## Earlham Early Years Assessment Procedure

Earlham Early Years Centre makes a commitment to assess each child's learning and to plan from this how to support the further development of that learning.

Each child has a key person and if the child stays for an extended day, they may also have a co-person. It is the key person that assesses the child's learning against the dispositional curriculum.

An initial assessment is made after six weeks and the key person completes a Settling In Record which identifies the child's strengths and how to build on them. This is shared with the parent.

The child's progress is monitored each term by the room using the Individual Assessment Summary. This summary is structured by the four types of learning goals identified by Katz (1993) – knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings. It incorporates the five learning dispositions that frame the centre's curriculum and the seen Areas of Learning from the EYFS. It also shows emotional development to reflect the impact of the Forest School and SEAD initiatives that are implemented by the centre.

Each child has a profile which contains the assessment evidence collated under dispositional curriculum areas and filed in chronological order.

The evidence takes the form of Learning Stories (long, narrative observations), critical moments (Post-Its), photographs and children's work.

Learning Stories are narratives that describe play over an extended period of time and include an assessment of Involvement (Laevers) and Well-being (Laevers and EEYC) and a record of any special interests and dominant schema that are demonstrated. They also record which elements of the dispositions have been covered (recorded in the left-hand margin) and the Areas of Learning from the EYFS that have been evidenced. They are usually written by the key person and undertaken about every eight weeks. They are filed in the profile at the end of each term. If the child comments on their learning, this is documented. Learning Stories are shared with the parent and ideas for continuing the story at home and in nursery are recorded as well as the parent's comments on the observation.

The critical moments record a significant achievement or learning strand to follow for an individual child. They can be made by any member of staff but need the date and the child's name on before being collated by the key person, who will add the disposition element and relevant Area of Learning.

Photographs can be taken by any member of staff but should be dated and annotated (if appropriate) before being collated by the key person.

Photographs and critical moments are filed in the profiles in chronological order. Photographs in particular should be annotated to clearly show the child's progress towards skills and concepts. It is useful to use the Development Matters part of the EYFS to assist in this. Photographs and critical moments are referenced to one of the elements of a dispositional area and to an EYFS Area of Learning.

Evidence of the extension activities are cross-referenced to the original observation by recording the date, either on the Learning Story or next to the original observation.

Achievements of Play plan targets (for those with additional needs) should be noted on the Play plan and cross referenced to the profile.

Team planning meetings should be used to share children's achievements and discuss ways of supporting and extending learning. These should be logged on a Weekly Planning Record. In addition, a monthly audit of children's well-being and a termly audit of those with special and additional needs should be made at these meetings.

## Appendix 5: Dispositional assessment grid

| Rich and Flexible Communication   | Co-operation  | Persistence  | Curiosity  | Playfulness  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Immersing themselves in sensory experience.<br>1                        | Building self-esteem to support constructive and positive relationships with familiar adults and children.<br>1 | Being comfortable with themselves, proud of what they can do.<br>1               | Exploring by using their senses and their bodies.<br>1   | Being a tuned in playful partner.<br>1   |
| Observing and imitating others.<br>2                                    | Starting to be aware of a range of emotions and developing an understanding of what might cause them.<br>2      | Returning to things and activities, rebuilding and modifying.<br>2               | Feeling safe and confident enough to investigate.<br>2   | Exploring opportunities for imaginary pretend play with a range of materials and found objects.<br>2     |
| Listening and responding to others.<br>3                                | Identifying the beginning of sharing and taking turns<br>3  | Gaining knowledge about themselves as individuals.<br>3                          | Sharing their discoveries with others.<br>3  | Observing positive and mutually respectful relationships.<br>3   |
| Exploring the many forms of communication.<br>4                         | Beginning to see the uniqueness of themselves and others.<br>4  | Observing others as role models to help them to persevere.<br>4                  | Making real discoveries based on first-hand experiences.<br>4                                    | Actively taking risks in playing and developing self-management e.g. in physical or emotional play.<br>4 |
| Using their bodies to show their emotions, ideas and thinking.<br>5     | Learning to understand that their actions can impact on others.<br>5  | Sustaining involvement to support understanding.<br>5                            | Making connections using previous understanding and experience.<br>5                             | Being completely absorbed in the play experience.<br>5   |
| Using their voices and bodies to communicate.<br>6                      | Caring for others, living things and the environment.<br>6  | Overcoming challenges and persisting through difficulty with determination.<br>6 | Questioning in a non-verbal and/or verbal way.<br>6  | Developing the ability to reflect and respond in their play.<br>6  |
| Becoming aware of symbols and images.<br>7                              | Developing an understanding of belonging to a group or a community.<br>7  | Being purposeful and self-motivated.<br>7  | Actively observing other people and objects.<br>7  | Reading and using verbal and non-verbal play signals.<br>7   |
| Being able to express and communicate their own needs.<br>8             | Observing, imitating and responding to others' needs and expectations.<br>8                                     | Having the ability to become self-absorbed in a learning experience.<br>8        | Making sense of experience by representing it in a variety of ways, e.g. movement, drawing.<br>8 | Expressing humour and experimenting with what will amuse themselves and others.<br>8                     |
| Expressing their individual thoughts, ideas and activities.<br>9        | Developing the confidence to share.<br>9  | Asking for support to complete a chosen task.<br>9                               | Revisiting experiences over time to deepen understanding.<br>9                                   | Extending the boundaries of their creativity.<br>9   |
| Exploring and representing through symbolic and imaginative play.<br>10 | Being appropriately assertive.<br>10  | Demonstrate resilience by showing the ability to "bounce back".<br>10            | Fascinated by the unknown and motivated to explore the world around them.<br>10                  | Evolving and transforming imaginary ideas and materials.<br>10   |
| Sharing and communicating their own unique culture.<br>11               | Having the flexibility to be a leader and to be led.<br>11  |  | Finding out things from other children, adults, books and other media.<br>11                     |  |



# Appendix 6: Earlham Early Years Centre Assessment Documents

## Individual Termly Assessment

Child's name..... Age ..... SEN..... M/F AM/PM  
Key Person..... Class..... Home  
Languages.....

Key: 0 Never 1 Rarely 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Consistently. N November M March J June

| Knowledge  | N | M | J | Skills   | N | M | J | Dispositions to learn   | N | M | J | Well-being  | N | M | J |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Mathematical concepts</b><br>Does the child demonstrate a developing interest in mathematical concepts?                                 |   |   |   | <b>Physical</b><br>Does the child demonstrate increasing physical control and co-ordination?                   |   |   |   | <b>Co-operation</b><br>Does the child understand the perspective of others and respond to others' needs?                    |   |   |   | <b>Healthy choices</b><br>Does the child show a developing understanding of how to keep healthy and safe?   |   |   |   |
| <b>Materials and objects</b><br>Does the child demonstrate an increasing understanding of how objects, materials and living things behave? |   |   |   | <b>Self-Care</b><br>Is the child self-sufficient and able to manage their personal needs?                      |   |   |   | <b>Curiosity</b><br>Does the child actively explore and investigate the world around them?                                  |   |   |   | <b>Managing feelings and behaviour</b><br>Is the child able to express emotions appropriately and adjust their behaviour to different situations? |   |   |   |
| <b>People and Events</b><br>Does the child talk about their life and show an understanding of similarities and differences between people? |   |   |   | <b>Expressive Communication</b><br>Is the child able to initiate communication and interact confidently?       |   |   |   | <b>Persistence</b><br>Is the child independently able to become deeply involved and engrossed in activities and challenges? |   |   |   | <b>Attachment</b><br>Does the child demonstrate a sense of belonging and attachment to other children, adults and their own community?            |   |   |   |
| <b>Art and Design</b><br>Does the child know how to use their own body and other media and materials to express their ideas and feelings?  |   |   |   | <b>Receptive Communication</b><br>Does the child actively observe, listen and respond to others appropriately? |   |   |   | <b>Playfulness and Creativity</b><br>Does the child show a capacity to think and act with creativity and imagination?       |   |   |   | <b>Resilience</b><br>Does the child succeed or bounce back after setbacks, hindrance or frustration?  |   |   |   |

# Earlham Early Years Centre Individual Assessment for Physical Development

Child's name..... Age ..... SEN..... M/F AM/PM  
 Key Person..... Class..... Home  
 Languages.....

| Knowledge  | N | M | J | Skills   | N | M | J | Dispositions to learn  | N | M | J | Well-being  | N | M | J |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Concept of physical self</b><br>Does the child have an awareness of their own body? Do they understand where it starts and finishes and how it can change shape?  |   |   |   | <b>Whole body gross motor</b><br>Is the child able to use their whole body in terms of gymnastic movement e.g. Walk, run, climb, hop, skip, balance, use high equipment confidently?   |   |   |   | <b>Co-operation</b><br>Is the child able to move as part of a team such as in paired movement, parachute, Lycra and traditional circle games and dances?         |   |   |   | <b>Physical well-being</b><br>Is the child able to challenge themselves with their physical development?  |   |   |   |
| <b>Bodily movement</b><br>Is the child aware of the many and various ways they can move their bodies or parts of their body?   |   |   |   | <b>Manipulating: gross motor</b><br>Does the child show increasing skill in throwing, catching, kicking and using a variety of tools?  |   |   |   | <b>Curiosity</b><br>Is the child curious about how s/he uses their body and are they inventive in their movement?  |   |   |   | <b>Personal well-being</b><br>Does the child show pride in her/his physical achievements?   |   |   |   |
| <b>Interaction with space and people</b><br>Is the child able to move through space without impeding others?   |   |   |   | <b>Bodily: fine motor</b><br>Is the child making marks with fingers? Can they use hands to thread, use peg boards or other things which require the use of a fine pincer grip? Is the child able to use construction toys effectively? |   |   |   | <b>Persistence</b><br>Is the child able to persist with challenging physical activity in terms of both large and fine motor challenges?                          |   |   |   | <b>Care of others</b><br>Is the child able to help others with physical support such as doing zips for others or caring for and dressing dolls? |   |   |   |
| <b>Size and place</b><br>Can the child move in and out of their own body space understanding that they can move on different levels and in various shapes and sizes? |   |   |   | <b>Manipulating: fine motor</b><br>Is the child able to manipulate tools, objects and materials to make two and three dimensions in pictures and structures?   |   |   |   | <b>Playfulness and Creativity</b><br>Is the child able to move rhythmically to music? Are they able to be creative and playful in the way they use their bodies? |   |   |   | <b>Resilience</b><br>Is the child able to recover from physical hurt to continue their learning?  |   |   |   |

Key: 0 Never    1 Rarely    2 Sometimes    3 Often    4 Consistently  
 N November    M March    J June

# Earlham Early Years Centre Individual Forest School Assessment

Child's name.....Date of session 1.....Age at session 1.....

SEN ..... M/F AM/PM Key Person.....Class.....

| Knowledge   | Wk1 | Wk6 | Skills  | Wk1 | Wk6 | Dispositions to learn  | Wk1 | Wk6 | Well-being   | Wk1 | Wk6 |
|---|-----|-----|---|-----|-----|--|-----|-----|--|-----|-----|
| <b>Plant life</b><br>Does the child demonstrate some knowledge of indigenous trees and plants?            |     |     | <b>Physical</b><br>Does the child use tools with increasing skill and confidence?                           |     |     | <b>Co-operation</b><br>Does the child follow the rules and routines of Forest School?      |     |     | <b>Self-esteem</b><br>Is the child confident to talk in a group?                         |     |     |
| <b>Animal life</b><br>Does the child demonstrate some knowledge of indigenous birds, animals and insects? |     |     | <b>Observational</b><br>Does the child actively observe living things and features of the natural world?    |     |     | <b>Curiosity</b><br>Does the child show an increasing interest in the natural world?       |     |     | <b>Resilience</b><br>Is the child able to take risks and face challenge?                 |     |     |
| <b>Use of materials</b><br>Does the child use natural materials in creative and role play?                |     |     | <b>Communication</b><br>Does the child join in with action rhymes and songs and contribute their own ideas? |     |     | <b>Persistence</b><br>Is the child able to concentrate for longer periods?                 |     |     | <b>Independence</b><br>Does the child demonstrate confidence in the outdoor environment? |     |     |
| <b>Environment</b><br>Does the child show awareness of temperature, weather and the seasons?              |     |     | <b>Attention</b><br>Does the child demonstrate listening and attention skills?                              |     |     | <b>Playfulness</b><br>Does the child replay and re-present Forest school sessions in play? |     |     | <b>Empathy</b><br>Does the child demonstrate positive relations with others?             |     |     |

Key: 0 Never 1 Rarely 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Consistently

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