

EDITED BY  
TINA BRUCE, LYNN MCNAIR  
AND JANE WHINNETT

# **PUTTING STORYTELLING AT THE HEART OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTICE**

A Reflective Guide for  
Early Years Practitioners

# Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice

*Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice* is a brilliantly engaging and practical book that highlights the essential nature of storytelling in all walks of life and how to best cultivate this in the early years classroom. The authors use a compelling Froebelian approach to explore the role of storytelling not just in the development of literacy but also in the development of communication and language and for maintaining good mental health and well-being.

Drawing on primary and contemporary research, and presented by a range of experienced authors, this book covers the following important topics:

- The benefits of regularly practising storytelling
- Storytelling during play activities
- Group dynamics in constructing narratives
- The roles of props and fantasy concepts in storytelling

This accessible guide is ideal for all early years practitioners looking to encourage literacy, communication and well-being in a supportive and creative environment, and for policymakers looking to develop best practice in the early years classroom.

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## **A Reflective Guide for Early Years Practitioners**

Edited by  
Tina Bruce, Lynn McNair  
and Jane Whinnett



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This book is dedicated to much-loved and respected tutor Sheena Johnstone, who led the Froebel training courses and trained teachers at Moray House College (now part of the University of Edinburgh). Her legacy of committed work with children and their families continues in taking forward a Froebelian approach.



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# Foreword

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Dr Sacha Powell is Chief Executive of the Froebel Trust, who have supported the development of the book.

*It is a joy to see this unique and original book come to fruition, and I am delighted that the Froebel Trust was able to play a small part in supporting its creation. Storytelling is such an integral thread in the fabric of human existence. Many of our earliest memories will be of stories heard or told, and we reassemble those recollections as new stories. They help us to make sense of the world; our environments, roles, relationships, hopes, challenges, disappointments and sorrows. As young children are drawn into and embellish the storying landscape, we are all the richer for their contributions that narrate their own lived and imagined experiences and teach us much about our own. This book, written by and for practitioners, dives deeply into the world of early childhood literacy and educators' collaborative, reflective practice through careful observation and thoughtful dialoguing. Reading this book will help us to 'live happily ever after' (The End)!*



# Acknowledgements

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The Editors would like to thank Manjula Devi Subramanian and the team at Cenveo for their marvellous work with us.



# The flourishing of the Edinburgh Froebel Network ‘Players and Storytellers’ project

*Jane Whinnett*

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## **Belonging to and participating in a group who work daily with children and their families**

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What makes this book different from other edited books on storytelling is that it is written for practitioners by practitioners. Each practitioner developed their own lines of enquiry, and the data they collected is rich in embedded meanings. Participating in their settings every day facilitated the responsive nature of the enquiries, with observation happening as and when it occurred and not on set dates and times. This participant enquiry flourishes spontaneously as it occurs and is understood in the context of the well-established relationships and shared experiences of the children and staff.

The group members are participants in the Edinburgh Froebel Network and include teachers, practitioners and lecturers from a variety of settings in the voluntary, private, independent, maintained and further and higher education sectors. One member travelled from Aberdeenshire to take part in the group. They worked with 2-year-old children at playgroup through to children in their first year of primary school. Many of the settings embraced the diversity of the population of Edinburgh, valuing the rich cross-pollination opportunities that children from bilingual learning backgrounds contributed.

The Edinburgh Froebel Network celebrated its 11th year in 2019. The story of its origins and emergence is well documented in the *Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice*, edited by Bruce, Elfer, Powell with Werth (2019). In that publication, Tina Bruce described the circumstances that brought together a group of heads who shared an interest in a principled approach to early childhood education and continuous professional development. Rather than the story of the Edinburgh Froebel Network beginning with a pre-set plot, the author of this chapter described it in the horticultural terms of strawberry runners. This aptly captured the way the group made connections, ventured into new fertile ground and grew new plants.

Edinburgh was a fertile seedbed for the germination of a Froebelian approach to early childhood education through shared training. There were five nursery heads who had already worked collaboratively for some time and who now articulated their practice as being based on Froebelian principles integrated with Froebelian practices. After two successful Edinburgh Froebel Network conferences, Lynn McNair and Jane Whinnett approached the University of Edinburgh to reinstate a Froebel course. Professor John Davis championed the course, and the convenor of the City of Edinburgh Council, Marilyne Maclaren, supported the link between the Edinburgh settings and the university. The inaugural course began in September 2010 with 27 students.

## **The re-establishment of Froebel training courses**

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In 2011, the first cohort completed the course Froebel in Childhood Practice at the University of Edinburgh. After 2 years' intake of the established course and well-attended annual conferences, former students expressed a desire for further continued professional development based on Froebelian approaches. They had developed strong professional relationships and were keen to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice in new areas. They gathered together as a masterclass and invited Tina Bruce to lead some opportunities for professional reflection and support practice development. Initially, the group considered separate themes at each session – observation, Froebel's movement games, schema, symbolic representation. Gradually an interest in Froebelian approaches to literacy emerged.

## A Froebelian approach to literacy

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Specific references to the development of literacy were scarce in accessible readings written by Froebel. He described the child who is a natural storyteller, able to draw in his peers and sustain their attention while he tells a story (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). He also describes in some detail how a child named Lina learned to write and read in *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* (Froebel in Brehony, 2001), focusing on the role of her mother in building on her daughter's interest and motivation to write a letter to her father. However, although there are few explicit references, it is possible to extrapolate from Froebel's principles an approach based on play, holistic experiences and an innate urge to self-activity including the need to make the inner outer and the outer inner.

After several meetings, Tina Bruce introduced a chapter describing research by Nicolopoulou (2007). This research explicitly linked play and storytelling in a kindergarten in the United States. It was an approach that could be replicated through cross-pollination across different cultures. Each local setting was a cloche for the growth of its own project. The bed for the ideas was a strong belief in the value of reading stories to children and giving an introduction to the canon of literature (Bruce, 2019). Booker (2004) identifies seven main plots in stories. These themes are often found in traditional tales, such as the rags-to-riches theme in Jack and the Beanstalk, also prominent in Cinderella. Other stories include six plots dealing with the quest, voyage and return, comedy, and tragedy and rebirth.

## Study groups where there is a focus followed through by busy practitioners

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Interest in sharing Froebelian approaches through participation and involvement in a local group is not new in Edinburgh. In 1881, Froebel's nephew Karl lived in Moray Place and ran a small independent school. His wife hosted a visit and evening lecture given by Eleanor Heerwart in their drawing room. Gathering in a Froebelian host's home is typical of the Froebelian tradition. She was a pupil of Middendorf who worked closely with Friedrich Froebel, and she became the principal of



the Stockwell Kindergarten Training College. In a letter following the lecture, Heerwart recorded, 'There is a great deal of interest in Froebel in Edinburgh'.

There is a long tradition of Froebel-trained educators coming together to deepen their understanding. Many of the Free Kindergarten staff refer to summer courses and the themes of these in their writing. Hardy (1912) from St Saviours Child Garden in Edinburgh mentions her experience in *Diary of a Free Kindergarten*. It seems likely that these summer schools sustained teachers who were working in difficult areas (and feeling they were on their own) and helped them to feel part of a like-minded community. Hardy refers explicitly to the support she received from other kindergarten teachers in Edinburgh.

Froebel himself refers to the way gatherings of this kind create a sense of unity. The German editor Hermann Poesche describes the dissemination of Froebel's ideas as 'Propagation and Extension' in the introduction of the Michaelis and Keatley Moore (1890) edition of Froebel's letters on the kindergarten.

From time to time Froebel would call together his colleagues, teachers, and friends, in 'Teachers' Meetings' to examine and further develop his system, as in 1848 at Rudolstadt, and 1851 at the Liebenstein Spa. Thither would come the kindergarten teachers to interchange their knowledge, their experience, their observation, under learned and highly placed educationalists...and to work diligently together and enthusiastically for several days together under the eye and personal direction of the master himself. Could there be a more intensely powerful means than this for the propagation of his educational system? (Poesche, 1890:179)

## **A sense of belonging and tackling feelings of working in isolation**

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As early as 1874, Froebel teachers working in isolation in different parts of the country were alarmed about conditions in school. They came together to form the Froebel Society for the Promotion of the Kindergarten System (Liebschner, 1992). Some of the early pioneering women set up charities such as the Nursery School Association

(1923), which later became the British Association for Early Childhood Education. These promoted high-quality experiences for young children as well as affordable training. Margaret McMillan was the first president, herself a Froebel-trained teacher. In 1935, the Froebel Society Summer School was held in Edinburgh.

In recent times, collegiate working has been promoted by national and local government in associated school groups, cluster working and working on the improvement agenda to close the attainment gap identified for children living in poverty. This collegiate activity time is negotiated annually with teachers in Scotland. There is also a requirement for all staff to register with the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) or Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and to undertake a minimum number of hours of professional development to maintain that registration.

The Edinburgh Froebel Network, and in particular the group of storytellers who are authors of this book, aligns more clearly with collaborative culture, defined by Hargreaves and Dawe, rather than collegiate working:

Collaborative cultures comprise evolutionary relationships of openness, trust, and support among teachers where they define and develop their own purposes as a community. (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990)

Just like strawberry plants, groups of like-minded people can grow almost anywhere. However, a strong root system is essential to develop and support healthy growth. When developing any new project, establishing healthy roots is essential. The group of players and storytellers involved in this publication have studied together and through having the shared experience of the course became supported by an already established Froebelian network. Through attendance at regular meetings, it was possible to continue to share practice, learn from others and read more widely on topics. The meetings took place in the evenings, sometimes in settings but more recently in the drawing room of a large Edinburgh house that is currently a guest-house. Each time they met, all members of the group brought food to share, and there was a social aspect to the meetings. This is a strongly Froebelian tradition.

Walter and Briggs (2012:1) provide evidence from 35 evidence-based studies of teacher professional development. They identify seven features that make the most difference. Professional development is most effective when it

1. is concrete and classroom based,
2. brings in expertise from outside the school,
3. involves teachers in the choice of areas to develop and activities to undertake,
4. enables teachers to work collaboratively with peers,
5. provides opportunities for mentoring and coaching,
6. is sustained over time and
7. is supported by effective school leadership.

All these features are present in the players' and storytellers' projects. The projects were very effective continuous professional development. They are also enjoyable, which gives participants the courage to come out of their comfort zones and to innovate.

## **Relationships are of central importance for children, their families and those who work with them**

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The majority of the group work directly with the children on a daily basis. They know them well and have had long-standing relationships with them and their families. These relationships have brought richness to the storytelling project and allowed the authors to reflect deeply on the meanings they ascribed to the observations they made. In her chapter, Lynn McNair identifies her research method as ethnographic. She highlights relationships as an essential component of the method but also recognises the unconscious bias the method can bring. Ethnography, she proposes in support of James (2002), is the most natural method to research early childhood (McNair, 2020). For others in the group, ethnography is a method that most naturally corresponds to their daily practice of observing children and recording what they see and hear. One author did not know the children as she was based in a further education college, but she overcame this potential obstacle using

the character of an owl puppet as a conduit to access the children's play and thoughts and to be accepted as part of the community. Her chapter illustrates the potential challenges that conducting research in early childhood settings can encounter.

On further analysis of the group, it emerged that very often pairs were evident in the settings with one of the pair being in a senior position. This combination seemed to be productive. As well as the mutual support that this gives, each could act as a sounding block for the other, and having management commitment and support was more likely to ensure success.

## **Scotland has a long tradition of oral storytelling and folk tales**

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The skills and structure of those stories are passed from storyteller to storyteller, often through generations of the same family. Some are never written down and can develop in different ways in different parts of the country. This is so throughout the world. Different cultural contexts produce different well-loved stories which identify groups and their sense of belonging and traditions. For this storytelling group, being in the natural environment and using the affordances of nature as provocations has resulted in the stories most closely linked to the oral storytelling heritage found throughout the world of humanity.

From birth, children are surrounded by oral stories. Engel (1995) identifies the importance of the adult's role in describing the child's experience as it happens and beginning to set that in the context of the present, past or future. By telling the story of the child's life as it happens with references to the past, the adult is modelling the internal voice of the child, helping to re-present experience in language. This kind of storytelling is intensely personal and happens within a close relationship with a significant adult. The baby has an active role in it, using eye contact, gesture, movement and sound to take turns in the conversation. The story structure is innate. Recordings of interactions made by Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) and mapped visually demonstrate the introduction, development, climax and resolution of very young babies' communications.

## Telling stories that are in books

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It is worthy of note that almost all the case studies in the project start from the reading of a story in a book. A few have their beginnings in props, popular culture or embodied experience. Perhaps because of the industrial world inhabited by the group together with the political priorities of early childhood education in the Western world, there was always a clear link in the projects between the telling of stories and literacy.

When children are in a group setting, ways of continuing to work with and value the role parents have in children's developing language and narrative skills need further investigation. Parents can feel marginalised or deskilled. The approach used by Chris McCormick illustrates how the whole nursery community can be involved and be generators of the initiative as equal partners. This is evident, for example, when developing questions for the higher-order thinking skills ribbons which are described in the chapter.

The traditional stories read to the children have universal themes that reach across cultures, both in the values they espouse and the development of the plot. From focusing on one episode of the story, children, in their retellings, begin to link events and use some of the language of books in their own narratives. They become aware of and then use the conventions of the genre. Beginning with 'Once upon a time' and closing with 'They lived happily ever after' signals the start and end of their stories.

Alison Hawkins and Moira Whitelaw worked together, taking an approach which initially focused on providing a rich literacy environment that promoted an interest in poetry as well as storytelling. Further examination of their observations revealed to them different levels of engagement and participation depending on the group size. They questioned how effective their storytelling sessions were and considered the best seating arrangements for children so that all could be actively involved in the stories. The reflexive practice that they describe gives clear suggestions which offer guidance for others to try out. Using long narrative poems, such as the Pied Piper, gave children an insight into their poetry heritage. How much more effective is their spontaneous contextualised rhyme generation in providing an insight into their understanding of phonology than a standardised test of non-words? Every decision we make as educators reveals our philosophical standpoint.



Several of the case studies began by practitioners telling traditional tales to children. As well as having several copies and versions of the book available, the children had access to dressing up, props and small-world toys. Children enjoyed acting out the stories as they were read or told. They also engaged with playing out stories using the props.

Sharon Imray worked with a member of her team, Karen Clements, beginning with the traditional tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. What emerges from their work is the power of a familiar story to support individual children in times of change and transition. The story becomes the children's own vehicle to express themselves and work their way through new and challenging experiences. Cooper (2017) and Gussin Paley (1990) both believe young children use stories to fit in and to create a sense of belonging. The combination of storytelling and playing with related props allows children to retell the story and retell their own story in different ways.

## **Meet the authors – key themes in the chapters in this book**

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The research by Nicolopoulou (2007) identified the contribution of play to support children's understanding of character. In her 12 features of play, Tina Bruce (1991; 2015) highlights the importance of first-hand, real experiences that children draw on in their play. Rhian Ferguson uses an observation of a child engaged in deep sustained play in the water tray and the resulting analysis of this play as the inspiration for her case study. As well as documenting the child's scientific interest in floating and sinking, she links his play to a real experience he has shared with his family. The availability of resources that children can access or request is an essential element in the development of the child's thinking to make sense of what has happened and gain some control over the strong feelings he experienced.

Each of the practitioner-enquirers was self-motivated, having an intrinsic interest and passion for their work. This translated into an urge to find out more about the aspects that interested them the most. For Rosemary Welensky and Lucy MacFarlane, this was the outdoors. Both were trained in forest school. The focus for topics of enquiry emerged from these passions. Their case study grew from an enduring

interest in one particular story that caught the children's imagination when they were out in nature. It related well to the children's own experience, had a strong repetitive structure and encouraged symbolic thinking through playing with open-ended materials outdoors. The resulting joy in language through playing with the familiar words and format in storytelling is inspiring.

In many cases, it is the power of the child's interest that compels the practitioner to find out more. Deirdre Armstrong reflects on her lack of knowledge about young children's popular culture, particularly superheroes, as a provocation for her own learning. Her case study illustrates how finding another author's work just at the right time can support teachers in developing their thinking and approaches. Penny Holland's book (2010) *We Don't Play with Guns Here: War, Weapons and Super-hero Play* was that book for her. What is refreshing about Deirdre's writing is her questioning and being comfortable and okay with not having all the answers. By positioning herself as not knowing, she was able to find out more from the children as the experts.

Listening to the deeply meaningful stories that children tell is fundamental to Elaine Fullerton's approach. As a play therapist and a teacher, Elaine's training gives her a unique insight into the child's world as they experience it. Helping children to tell the story that they want to tell and, in that story, being able to make sense of their experience and resolve some of their powerful feelings creates stories that are far more than a literacy exercise. These stories are a reflection of children's fundamental being and their lives. It is so very often the quirky, atypical children who illuminate the way for our understanding of all children.

It would be easy to headline the stories of children with additional needs in the editing of this publication, but that would not reflect the ethos of inclusion that is evident in the authors' practice and writing. Flewitt (2017:8) illustrates the relevance of multimodality for understanding early literacy, its compatibility with sociocultural theories of learning and its potential for celebrating diversity and difference in the classroom. In recognising the uniqueness of each child, we are seeing them as part of the whole, a truly Froebelian principle. The stories collected here show the very positive impact of diversity and difference on practitioners' understanding and the whole nursery community.

Chris McCormick and Shauna McIntosh demonstrate a similar approach to that originally developed by Vivian Gussin Paley. As well

as acting out stories, the children began to tell stories to be scribed. The careful documentation of these stories and the reflection on them reveals detailed evidence of each child's progress – in vocabulary, characterisation, plot, developing a writing voice in standard English and the conventions of spelling and writing. This qualitative evidence supports the conclusions Nicolopoulou (2017) reaches using her quantitative approach employing seven measures of narrative development. The stories are distinctive, individual and show a growing awareness of audience. 'Authoring is a socially situated act of meaning making' (Cremin, 2017:5). Some children learn how to entertain and demonstrate meta-cognition in the commentary they give about writing the stories. The stories themselves are joyful.

The penultimate chapter of the book, by Catriona Gill, focuses on the development of writing in a play-based classroom for children in their first year of primary school. Catriona is their teacher and has worked with them in nursery and across the transition into primary 1. A government agenda with a focus on closing the socioeconomic attainment gap leads a drive to evidence-based practice, which in turn can lead to prescriptive approaches. Shannon (2000) describes this as 'an efficiency model of education'. This can lead to conflicted practitioners where the political agenda does not necessarily concur with the philosophy and approaches they uphold. Catriona demonstrates that it is possible to be true to your principles and use data in a way that informs practice and demonstrates the efficacy of an approach while at the same time supporting children through play.

Resources play a role in each of the approaches described in the projects. These vary dramatically from commercially produced toy characters to the very open-ended found objects in nature, like sticks. There is no right or wrong resource. Financial and ethical considerations influence practitioners' judgements about what resources they buy or provide. The simplest, most sustainable resource can be transformed in the imagination of a child. Children also make choices about what they use and often use what is to hand.

Practitioners making choices about the books that they use look at the quality of the writing and illustrations. Avoiding stereotypical images in traditional tales can be a challenge, but there are publishers who are very aware of gendered images and the lack of diversity in characters in books (CLPE, 2019). It's important that all children can see characters who

resemble themselves in books (Kruse Vaai, 2018; CLPE, 2019). Dual-language books in the child's first language as well as English can be useful when text directions are the same (e.g., English/Spanish but not English/Arabic or English/Chinese, where one language text reads from left to right and the other from right to left, or up and down rather than across the page). The key is to help the child understand the language of the story. However, the cultural context of the story may still be difficult to understand. Reading these stories at home with parents can make all the family members feel part of the nursery community and allow the child to understand more at story time. However, the story-telling and story acting approach supports children very well. Flewitt and her colleagues note that:

Even if the child's home cultures and languages vary, the symbolic play and learning spaces offered in early education can lead to a sharing of conceptual tools and systems of meaning making. (Flewitt, Cremin and Mardell, 2017:37)

Throughout this book, the authors have drawn on different approaches used by others, for example in the storytelling and story acting approach of Vivian Gussin Paley (1990) and Tricia Lee (2016) or questioning based on Bloom's taxonomy of higher-order thinking skills (1956) or story grammars (Shapiro and Hudson, 1991). It is important to emphasise that these approaches were not the starting point for the case studies. The practitioners began by observing the children and using their professional knowledge to develop approaches that made sense to the children, families and colleagues in that setting's community.

## **Funding**

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The Edinburgh Froebel Network applied for a grant from the Froebel Trust to continue to support practice development. The grant allowed settings to buy in cover to release staff from ratio to observe and write up their field notes. In this case, it was only £500 per setting. Sometimes even a small amount of funding can help settings to make change happen, and the group are most grateful to the Froebel Trust for enabling this process. Funding from another source can augment the setting's

own budget and increase the commitment that the senior members of the leadership team and the whole staff feel towards the project. The resulting learning more than repays the investment and benefits for the children's experiences accrue exponentially.

## **The seed cast abroad...**

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The players and storytellers presented their work at the Edinburgh Froebel Network annual conference in 2017. There were five parallel afternoon seminars with two projects presented in each session. Feedback in the evaluation forms from delegates was very positive with several respondents wanting to hear more. The storytellers themselves were keen to hear each other's presentations. This required a substantial time commitment at 30 minutes for each project! The author of this chapter, as lead organiser of the masterclasses with Lynn McNair, devised a plan to showcase the cornucopia of projects in the most suitable venue in Edinburgh. In the heart of the Royal Mile, sharing the footprint of John Knox's house, Edinburgh has its own storytelling centre. The Scottish Storytelling Centre is a vibrant arts venue with a focus on promoting a traditional programme of live storytelling, theatre, music, exhibitions, workshops, family events and workshops. The centre describes its ethos as summed up nicely by the old Scottish proverb:

The story is told eye to eye, mind to mind and heart to heart.

It was the perfect venue to share the players' and storytellers' projects.

As well as a 100-seater auditorium, the centre has a café and interactive gathering space. The timings for the day allowed the audience to come and go, creating their own programme with time for refreshments and discussion. The day was a resounding success! Unanimously positive feedback included the call for a publication.

No one started the project thinking about writing a book or even presenting at a conference. The process of pruning and grafting to create a presentation by selecting the main themes of their work was a necessary step towards this tangible end-product. Some authors were more comfortable than others to present their work. All have grown in confidence, and some chose to present at the Froebel Trust conference