

A Froebelian-inspired vision of professional learning in early childhood education and care

Journal of Early Childhood Research

1–13

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1476718X251406875

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr**Kayla Halls¹**  **and Mona Sakr¹** 

Abstract

This article presents a vision of professional learning specific to the early childhood sector. To do this, we draw on interviews with 40 Froebelian-inspired early childhood leaders from around the world. Our findings are presented as follows: (1) Professional learning is continuous, and continuous learning is enabled by time; (2) Professional learning involves reflection, and reflection is prompted by playful and critical connection; and (3) Professional learning takes place in community with others, and learning in community is enabled by cherishing differences and supporting agency. We offer this vision as a starting place for collaborative dialogues focused on generating dynamic models of professional learning that are responsive to the nuances of the global early childhood sector.

Keywords

Froebel, professional learning, workforce, early childhood professionals, professional development, Froebelian education

Introduction

Recent research into leadership and organizational culture across early childhood education and care have highlighted the need to develop more sector-specific models of these phenomena (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015; Nicholson and Kroll, 2015). There are elements of professional learning that resonate across the education sector such as the importance and rarity of opportunities for collaborative professional learning (Johannesson, 2022; Woulfin and Jones, 2021), the difficulties of accessing ongoing, sustained professional learning (Bittner et al., 2020; Woulfin and Jones, 2021), and the effectiveness of contextualized, job-embedded professional learning (Margolis et al., 2017; Von Esch, 2021). We also see these phenomena across other sectors such as health care, where the effectiveness of job-embedded professional learning that engages with patients as

¹Middlesex University, London, UK

Corresponding author:

Kayla Halls, Middlesex University, The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, UK.

Email: k.halls@mdx.ac.uk

opposed to only reading about them is commonly discussed, and indeed a key component of most modern healthcare programs (Bell et al., 2009; Salam et al., 2011). While these ideas from the wider education and health care sector resonate with ECEC, in this article, we argue that a distinction needs to be made when it comes to visions and frameworks of professional learning for early childhood educators. This is because the values of ECEC are distinct from other tiers of the education system, with the young child and the family placed firmly at the center of the work we do. Furthermore, the practical realities of working in ECEC have a distinctive policy context, whereby much of the ECEC workforce around the world are employed by private providers and not by the state. As a result, there are specific challenges relating to recruitment, retention, remuneration, professionalization and the status of the workforce. All of these issues impact on how professional learning operates and what effective professional learning looks like (Rogers et al., 2020).

Stemming from a wider project focused on what it means to be a Froebelian-inspired leader, this article presents and examines the views of Froebelian-inspired leaders in relation to professional learning. This article contributes to an ECEC-specific vision of professional learning by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of Froebelian-inspired leaders in ECEC around the world. Our focus on Froebelian practice and principles stems from a recognition of the importance of the influence of the Froebelian tradition on ECEC more broadly. Froebelian roots run deep in ECEC and help define a distinctive legacy for the sector. As such, we can develop insights into professional learning for early childhood educators by drawing from this tradition and those who align with it. Our findings are organized as three two-part threads that combine characteristics of effective professional learning with the necessary conditions for such professional learning to take place. The threads are that: (1) Professional learning is continuous and continuous learning is enabled by time; (2) Professional learning involves reflection and reflection is prompted by playful and critical connection; and (3) Professional learning takes place in community with others and this is enabled by cherishing differences and supporting agency. The overarching vision and the individual strands are intended as starting points for dialogue in the sector about the nature of professional learning in ECEC and how best to support it. We are not presenting this vision as the only or best way to implement professional learning, but rather as a starting point for a more conscious and collaborative approach to professional learning across the global ECEC sector.

Professional learning in early childhood education and care

Professional learning opportunities and experiences in ECEC are diverse. There is generally a recognition that continuous professional learning is an important part of attaining high-quality provision in ECEC, an idea which resonates across sectors (Douglass, 2019; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019; Rogers et al., 2017). However, there is also recognition that the amount and type of professional learning that educators have access to in ECEC depends on the segment of the workforce to which they belong. In the UK context, there is an awareness that those who are employed in maintained and school-based ECEC provision (i.e. employed by the state) have more consistent access to high-quality professional learning opportunities. On the other hand, those educators who work in private and voluntary provision, which makes up the majority of provision in the UK, have a much less consistent experience of professional learning. To increase consistency, the UK government have introduced free professional learning initiatives, such as the 'National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership' which is available to all leaders in ECEC, regardless of the segment of the sector for which they work. However, it is not just the cost of the professional learning that can be a barrier for those working in private provision; research shows that issues with staffing make it difficult for managers to release their employees for high-quality professional learning opportunities which require time (Ceeda, 2019).

Around the world, professional learning has been shown to be important to those working in ECEC. Jovanovic (2013: 535) found that Australian ECEC professionals working in long-day care felt that professional learning was essential for their work as a way to avoid ‘feelings of stagnation’ and grow motivation. Without this, staff felt that they were more likely to leave their setting or the sector altogether. The professionals who were interviewed most valued intensive and process-based forms of professional learning, such as coaching, which was tailored to their specific needs and experiences. Jovanovic notes that this kind of professional learning is less likely to be supported at the organizational level because it was seen as too intensive, expensive and difficult to carry out.

While professional learning is broadly recognized as influencing quality of ECEC provision, the Professional Learning in Early Years Education (PLEYE) review highlights the need to be discerning in determining what professional learning is effective when it comes to supporting process quality day-to-day (Rogers et al., 2017). The PLEYE review examined studies that attempt to show a direct and measurable impact of a professional learning intervention on children’s outcomes, which only accounts for a small body of published research in this field. From these studies, the review concludes that professional learning is most effective when it comes with a chance to implement the new learning and reflect on its integration into everyday practice. This might occur through a combination of workshops and coaching for example. The study stresses that one-shot professional learning opportunities, where there is no or little follow-up, do not appear to be effective, which resonates with research conducted across the broader education sector (Bittner et al., 2020; Woulfin and Jones, 2021). The PLEYE review also aligns with the findings from qualitative research focused on professional learning, which highlight particularly the importance of reflection and connecting theory with practice (Nolan and Molla, 2018; Thornton and Cherrington, 2019).

The more professional learning is situated in and connected to the workplace, the more blurred the lines become in defining what it is. Qualitative research has shown how professional learning can occur day-to-day without being ringfenced or labeled as such. Clark’s (2012) theory of catalytic leadership envisions professional development as a shared movement in practice toward improvement, spurred on by ‘catalytic leaders’ who do not necessarily have a formal leadership role but are inspired to prompt deeper levels of reflection day-to-day. In this model of professional learning, the emphasis is not on specific opportunities and experiences but instead focuses on the need to create an organizational culture founded on continuous learning through collaborative and critical reflection (O’Sullivan and Sakr, 2022). It may be that, in an ECEC-specific vision of professional learning, interactions embedded in the organizational culture are seen as the main vehicle through which effective learning occurs.

Froebelian-inspired early childhood education and care

In contemporary approaches to ECEC, Froebel and Froebelian principles and practice continue to be influential around the world. While it is rare to find Froebel’s own writings in ECEC qualifications and training, many initial training pathways will reference Froebel and describe the legacy of the ‘kindergarten’, which was introduced by Froebel in Germany in the 19th century. Froebel’s legacy is generally equated with particular values, such as trusting children’s instinctive creativity and relationship with the natural world (Blackburn, 2020; Strauch-Nelson, 2012) and therefore allowing them the space and time to unfold as people with little intervention and interference from adults. This has been picked up in contemporary debates as a way of challenging school-readiness discourses that position ECEC as a preparation of the child for school and see the learning through a purely developmental lens (Smedley and Hoskins, 2022). In addition to this positioning of children, Froebel’s legacy is typically associated with a conceptualization of women, including

mothers, as the first and most important educators of the child; Froebel's messages came alongside the call for women to take up public roles in the administration of new ECEC systems (Bakker, 2013). Froebel's legacy also lives on in particular activities that take place in ECEC, such as singing games (Blackburn, 2020), woodwork (Moorhouse, 2021), clay modeling (Parker, n.d.), weaving (Froebel Trust, n.d.) and tending to allotments (Razzall, 2023).

When drawing Froebelian-inspired practice into the discussion of professional learning, it is essential to distinguish between Froebel the man and 'Froebel' as a concept that has been revised and added to continuously since the dissemination of Froebelian ideas around the world. Nawrotzki (2006) documents carefully some of the ways in which Froebel's messages have been changed and shaped depending on the contemporary needs of generations of ECEC educators. Sometimes, these shifts have been so radical that one could argue that what has been attributed to Froebel in fact goes against the original writings he produced. Rather than lament these contradictions – or often see them as contradictions – Nawrotzki suggests a more open approach in which we see Froebelian principles and practice as constantly changing. In previous research, we have built on this idea by explaining Froebel as a 'web of encounters', drawing inspiration from Barad's (2007) concept of entanglement and intra-action (Sagr and Kaur, 2024:926):

'Froebel' is an illusion that we allow ourselves only as a result of the underlying reality, which is in fact an endless and ever-changing web of connections. Froebel is not a single man's life and/or writing. Instead our identification of something we wish to call 'Froebel' comes about only through dynamic, spiralling and ever-changing intra-actions.

For this project and article, Froebelian practice works as a point from which we can jump off in order to re-imagine and re-envision professional learning in ECEC. We do not self-identify as Froebelian educators, but rather as reconceptualists seeking to re-examine and re-imagine the frameworks we employ in ECEC, in this case, relating to professional learning. In this approach, we identify with the work of the 'pedagogista', as put forward by Vintimilla (2018) among others.

Research design

The research presented in this article sits within the pragmatism paradigm (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019; King, 2022), whereby the aim of the research is to generate findings that are useful and relevant to early childhood educators. It is not our aim to obtain insights that represent an objective reality, but rather to prompt helpful dialogues and frameworks for action that can be used by individuals and organizations within the ECEC sector. The research we present in this article was part of a bigger project that focused on what it means to be a Froebelian-inspired leader in the ECEC sector, and sought to develop working models of Froebelian leadership through a process of democratic collaborative reflection. The wider project involved a desktop review, interviews and workshops with sector leaders. In this article, we draw purely from the interview research to further explore a particular strand of our wider findings focused on how Froebelian-inspired leaders envisioned professional learning.

We carried out interviews with 39 individuals, and a further participant offered a written response to our interview questions. The interviews therefore involved a total of 40 individuals from around the world, all of whom identified as taking inspiration from Froebel in terms of their early childhood practice and how they lead. Our understanding of what constituted a Froebelian-inspired leader was purposefully broad. Twenty participants were categorized as 'early childhood leaders' because their experiences were framed by day-to-day formal leadership and management responsibilities, such as head teachers, ECEC setting managers, or head of operations. Fourteen participants were academics

at the time of the interview; however, all the ‘academics’ were involved in the direct provision of ECEC before becoming an academic and understood their academic roles in terms of supporting others with direct provision. We categorized the final six participants as ‘community leaders and pedagogues’ as they had responsibilities in the ECEC sector, but did not carry out formal leadership roles; Four were pedagogues who advised and consulted with ECEC settings, one managed an ECEC charity, and one led ECEC provision in a pediatric hospital ward.

We sought a global perspective on Froebelian-inspired leadership. We recruited participants through personal and professional networks, using social media and email. The Froebel Trust and other international Froebelian organizations advertised the opportunity to participate and put us in touch with key individuals in particular parts of the world. We have no claims that the participation in the project from around the globe was representational. However, we are proud of the range of participants who offered their perspectives and experiences; it was a fundamental part of opening up the discussions in the project. In the end, we had 18 participants from the UK (2 from Wales, 7 from Scotland, 9 from England); 8 participants from New Zealand; 3 participants from the USA; 2 participants from India; 2 participants from China; 1 participant from Taiwan; 1 participant from Ireland; 1 participant from Germany; 1 participant from Ghana; 1 participant from Nigeria; 1 participant from Australia and 1 participant from Chile.

As well as diversity in terms of geography and organizational context, our participants were diverse in terms of how they connected to the Froebelian tradition. Some participants readily identified themselves as ‘Froebelian’ and were entrenched in the principles and practices of the Froebelian legacy. Other participants used Froebel as a reference point and took inspiration from aspects of the legacy, but did not identify themselves as ‘Froebelian’. Some participants actively deconstructed the Froebelian philosophy or the emphasis on Froebel that is part of the contemporary ECEC landscape. We welcomed such critical approaches as our understanding of Froebel is a revisionist one, as described in the background section of this article. We see ‘Froebel’ as a discourse that can help open up new conversations, rather than as a dogma that constrains thinking and practice.

All interviews were conducted online and lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. We asked open questions about the participants’ experiences of leadership, how they understood their own leadership, how they saw Froebel in relation to their practice, how Froebel was important to their leadership, and how they saw the future of Froebelian leadership. The questions focused mostly on leadership because this was the overarching topic for the wider research project. However, many of the conversations related to professional learning, which is the focus presented in this article.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained through the Middlesex University ethics committee. We anonymized all the participants and used informative identifiers rather than pseudonyms (e.g. Early childhood setting leader in Nigeria) to offer more context for the quotes that are part of our findings.

Following the process broadly outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021), we carried out a bottom-up thematic analysis on the interview transcripts and written response. Both authors completed a round of coding on paper, familiarizing ourselves with the transcript, identifying keywords and building up a thematic map of the responses. We then met and exchanged our interpretations and categorizations, working together on a collaborative map of the data and a final set of codes. We used NVivo to generate reports on the relevant quotes. Elsewhere, we have presented seven themes from across the interview responses. We then continued our discussions of how these themes are expressed in day-to-day practice. One of the themes was around ‘continual learning’; that is, Froebelian-inspired leadership was characterized by continual learning. We wanted to explore this further and ask how leaders envision this continual learning taking place, resulting in this article on professional learning.

Findings

In this section, we describe a vision of professional learning put forth by Froebelian-inspired leaders composed of three strands. Each strand of this vision for professional learning is composed of two parts: a characteristic and a condition. The characteristic is a quality or feature of the professional learning, and the condition explicates what is required for professional learning to occur in this way. The three strands are as follows:

- Professional learning is continuous; continuous learning is enabled by time.
- Professional learning involves reflection; reflection is prompted by playful and critical connection.
- Professional learning takes place in community with others; learning in community is enabled by cherishing differences and supporting agency.

Professional learning is continuous; continuous learning is enabled by time

Leaders described professional learning as an ongoing and never-ending journey, running parallel to the wider education sector's hopes for continuous professional learning (Bittner et al., 2020; Woulfin and Jones, 2021). Professional learning was associated with a sense of renewal and dynamism in that continuous learning was important to prevent stagnation and to keep refreshing practice:

I'm always learning and seeking out how to improve for myself and for others, and I think that sort of permeates through how I lead. (Early childhood setting leader in England)

It's really important to have continuous training. It's not always easy to find the time to do it, but there is always a way to keep renewing your knowledge. (Early childhood setting leader in Chile)

Continuous professional learning was explained by the leaders we interviewed as a strand of professionalism. Rather than professionalism being something that could be acquired once and for all, for example through a particular qualification, professionalism required an ongoing commitment to develop knowledge and skills.

We have to connect with other Froebelians. I think as leaders and practitioners we need to stay together and continue to support one another because it's really easy to fall back into what was easy. We need to be there to support each other and to grow our leadership practice because it doesn't come naturally. The more you learn, the better leader you can be. (Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand)

You don't just say, 'This is how we did it 10 years ago, so we're going to continue to do that.' You know. . . evolving and checking in to see if your practice is having an impact on children or the experiences that you provide for children and families. (Early childhood setting leader in Scotland)

This leads us to the condition for continuous professional learning, which is the allocation of sufficient time to this process. The ongoing practice of professional learning was described as intentional and slow, unfurling over moments where professionals can attune to what is happening around them and in their practice.

The time to repeat actions, the time to wallow, being enabled to keep your work aside and return to it at a later date. All of those things are about taking time and relearning, really connecting with the learning, and making connections between everything that you're doing. (Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand)

Taking time to immerse oneself in ongoing learning also invites in curiosity and wonder. In cultivating this sense of slowing down and finding wonder, the Froebelian-inspired leaders took inspiration from the children they worked with:

And we can learn from them, and we do learn from them. Absolutely. I mean, if you've been with a 2-year-old looking at a snail, I mean, wow. Actually, hang on a minute, let's forget everything else and let's stand here for 20 minutes and notice absolutely everything. (Early childhood setting leader in England)

The leaders we interviewed repeatedly raised the lack of time available for professional learning as a barrier to access. Leaders discussed the need to intentionally carve out that time and space for themselves and practitioners to engage in learning.

I worked for two years in a nursery [where] the children stayed until late and it was really hard to have time for the team to discuss or share ideas, talk about the things we're observing in the children, to meet and reflect and learn. I think it's a challenge to have the time, but it's so important. Now, in the nursery that I'm working in, we finish early and every week we have one day for planning, making materials and time for the team. We always have to renew ourselves. (Early childhood setting leader in Chile)

Professional learning involves reflection; reflection is enabled by playful and critical connections

The Froebelian-inspired leaders we spoke with positioned reflection as an integral part of professional learning, and the leader below specifically describes how people need time to reflect:

I now give more time to reflective practice than I possibly did when I started. And that's, sort of development for me as well. But again, looking at those Froebelian principles and the importance of us all reflecting on what we've done and are doing, and how we improve. But you can't expect people to reflect if you don't give them time. (Early childhood setting leader in England)

Asking questions and having curious and critical dialogues was seen as a fundamental part of Froebelian-inspired practice, running through how we interact with children, families and professionals. Professional learning works through questions and authentic curiosity, reflecting wider work around professional inquiry and curiosity in the education sector (Bittner et al., 2020; Segal et al., 2024), as described by this leader in New Zealand:

I think that doing lots of reflective practice [is important]. So [asking], 'What happened to the children's creativity when you said they couldn't have red paint? What did you notice?' We want children to be curious, and for me as a leader, I want teachers to be curious as well. (Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand)

We heard an emphasis on ongoing critical dialogues where professionals were confident to ask and receive questions about what is working well and what could be done better. Leaders were passionate about a vision for professional learning where colleagues worked together to inspire, challenge, and celebrate practice.

We're challenging each other on a peer level and saying, 'I can see why you've done this, but thinking about this in a Froebelian way, how could that be more autonomous? Or what could we do to ensure that we're still focusing on creativity with symbols? How could that be better?' We're at that stage where we're being that critical friend to one another. (Community leader/pedagogue in Scotland)

If we think about play, it's that higher-level thinking and higher-level learning. How are we doing that with the team? . . . I'm thinking about how I can help support you, because ultimately we're on this journey together, and we want to get to the same place together, but we need each other to get there. (Early childhood setting leader in England)

A feature that stood out in the interviews was the playful approach that some leaders were taking to building a culture of reflection in their teams, citing the power of playfulness in sparking higher-level thinking. Froebelian-inspired leaders described play as a space where people can explore their ideas, ambitions, and reflections in a tangible way.

When children are doodling or when they're playing, you can really see their inner coming out, and how they're drawing on their experiences, or whatever it is. But that's really difficult with adults because we don't sit and draw, or we don't sit and play with blocks, or play with clay. I mean, sometimes we do when we have the opportunity, but it's rare. So, you have to put people in those kinds of environments that allow them to be their best selves. (Early childhood setting leader in England)

We've interpreted that principle of play for us as adults. We play with ideas. We try things out. And that is playing, isn't it? (Early childhood setting leader in England)

When we bring playfulness to reflection, we can explore the diverse ways reflection can take place and how it can look. Reflection does not just occur through words. The interviewees suggested that it can happen as we connect with others in more playful, multimodal expressions as described by the leader below.

It's very much about democratic engagement. So, I see myself very much as a drama teacher, and teaching involves facilitation. It also involves inculcating values, fostering beliefs and beliefs around play and drama. And I really believe in the value of modelling those as well as talking about them, and having, not children, but those teaching children, identify their own identity and their own values as they're developing and emerging as a professional. So I think there are a number of ways around that, but most of them are through a variety of active methods, from talk and discussion, walking debate, right up to role-playing, improvisation, that kind of thing. (Academic in Ireland)

Professional learning takes place in community with others; learning in community is enabled by cherishing differences and supporting agency

The Froebelian-inspired leaders in our study discovered that creating a culture of ongoing, reflective professional learning depends on involving the whole community.

In the beginning of my kindergarten, I thought my focus was supposed to be on children, but I realised, 'Oh, you know what? It's not just limited to children but it's with staff and the parents and everybody that's involved.' So, I started training my teachers and all of our staff, our cook, our driver, everybody. Then I realised, 'Oh, it's not just the staff who needs training, but it's also parents who need to have this conversation.' (Early childhood setting leader in China)

Professional learning is about drawing people in to think together and decide ways forward. Leaders discussed the importance of not making unilateral decisions, but gathering in everyone's voices, reflecting together, and moving forward as a team.

We know how valuable it is to listen to children and to include their ideas in our planning. So, it's not a huge leap to say, 'Let's include everybody around the table in these decisions.' I've had teachers be really surprised by that, because they haven't had that experience of being asked, rather than being told. (Early childhood setting leader in Australia)

Leaders explained that community-building depended on cherishing differences and supporting agency. Leaders recognized that both the children and adults in their settings were unique, and that each person needed to be met where they were:

When you look at those children, they're all different; when you look at your staff they're all different, so, you have to start where they are. (Early childhood setting leader in India)

Not only did leaders see themselves as responsible for noticing these differences, they also assumed the duty of celebrating them to build a stronger community.

. . . let him [the child] surprise you with his discoveries, let him surprise you when he wallows in whatever play he's involved in, or whatever he's doing. . . We will all dance when we find the music that we love, and so children are like that: they will do different things when you strike the right chord in them, and when they see what really interests them. . . (Early childhood setting leader in Nigeria)

Leaders described developing insights based on these differences in order to empower community members to do what they do best, holding space for them to exercise agency. Supporting professionals to share their skills, passions, and experiences was seen as helpful in bringing dynamism and momentum to the setting, thereby enriching everyone's learning.

Each teacher will have different strengths or passions. . . So one [educator] might be really, really amazing with Maori and that side of things. She might interview some of our Maori families and find out how they communicate orally at home. What sort of storytelling they do, you know, what's their culture and how can we bring that into our centre? Others might work more technically and develop word banks and displays around word banks. Each teacher is expected to play to their strengths depending on what it is they like to do. (Early childhood setting leader in New Zealand)

Discussion

The findings highlight a vision for professional learning composed of three parts. The leaders described professional learning as a continuous, never-ending journey that enabled individuals and the whole setting to avoid stagnation in practice. The continuity of professional learning was enabled by having time to slow down and approach their practice from a reflective lens. Critical reflection was conceptualized by the participants as a fundamental facet of professional learning; high-quality professional learning involved the workforce and other key stakeholders coming together to reflect on practice and the potential for change. The leaders found that higher-level reflection often occurred in playful conditions and encounters and valued reflection that unfolded through multiple modes, not just verbal articulation. The final strand of the vision presented in the interviews emphasized that professional learning takes place in the context of community. The leaders in this study were adamant that we learn in community, and we can only build a sense of

community that supports learning when we cherish the differences of each person in our setting, meeting individuals where they are in terms of their interests, experiences and perspectives on the work they do. These differences should be celebrated, with each person being provided the space they need to share their interests and skills, thereby enriching the community.

We envision that the relationships that emerge between the characteristics and conditions in this vision of professional learning produce a series of entanglements, taking the shape of a web as opposed to a neat diagram. We are not proposing a directly causal relationship between each characteristic and condition, but instead see a more complex series of connections between all the characteristics and conditions presented. Having time for professional learning does not necessarily beget continuous professional learning, and time can support more than just continuous professional learning – it can also enable reflection and community-building. Similarly, encouraging playful and multimodal encounters does not necessarily beget critical reflection, and it may also be linked with continual learning or community-building. Thus, what we are suggesting is that a Froebelian-inspired vision of professional learning places an emphasis on all these characteristics and conditions as necessary parts of an environment where professional learning flourishes. We have organized them in the way presented in our findings to more easily prompt dialogues among leaders and teams in ECEC, rather than suggesting that this organization corresponds perfectly with the lived reality of practice on the ground.

Our findings contribute to a growing body of literature that aims to construct a vision for professional learning that, while holding some similarities to professional learning across education, is responsive to the early childhood sector. The leaders in this study made connections through their approach in working with colleagues, staff, children, and families as they discussed professional learning. This vision of professional learning reflects relational coordination where professionals intentionally foster communication and relationships across stakeholders to integrate their work as they move toward a common goal (Bolton et al., 2021). Instead of seeing the professional learning process as siloed, the leaders embraced how their relationships with one group influenced their work with others (Douglass and Gittell, 2012). We saw how playfulness with children can spill over into playful reflection with adults, how slowing down in practice with children can mimic the professional desire to take time to learn, and how professional learning is a community building process that gathers multiple stakeholders in.

Moreover, the findings show how important it is to think about professional learning as an integrated aspect of what happens day-to-day in ECEC, rather than something distinct from day-to-day processes. This builds on research that emphasizes the need to integrate professional learning into day-to-day experiences, so that professional learning is not a ‘one-off’ experience, but something that is transformative in everyday contexts (Clark, 2012; Jovanovic, 2013; Rogers et al., 2017). The findings also build on research focused on enabling reflection as a fundamental part of professional learning, and creating a reflective bond between theory and practice (Nolan and Molla, 2018; Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). The findings though go beyond what we already know by suggesting how work-based, reflective and community-oriented professional learning can manifest. For example, our interviews suggest that playfulness is an important supportive dimension for critical reflection. Leaders described the playful ways in which they crafted productive spaces for professional learning. They learned from how we support children’s inquiry and reflection through play, and suggested how play and playfulness can be relevant for adults’ professional learning in work-based contexts.

Our research also emphasizes the need for professional learning communities, but within this is highlighted the possibility that such communities can be forged and maintained by drawing inspiration from legacies and traditions within ECEC. That is, Froebel – even just the idea of ‘Froebel’ – can play an important role in connecting educators with each other and helping to foster a space

between them in which democratic critical reflection can unfold. Legacies can be a reason to gather, share and open up with each other, and the impact of this cannot be underestimated. It need not necessarily be the Froebelian tradition that creates this foundation for shared professional learning, but there needs to be a supportive frame around collaborative, community-based professional learning. Once communities have gathered, the different experiences, ideas, and skills that people bring should be celebrated, and affordances should be made for people to contribute in meaningful and unique ways to their nurseries. Community flourishes when people are given space to exercise their agency in ways that align with the nuances of who they are.

Future research could explore further the design and implementation of particular strands of this vision. For example, we need to know more about the playful, multimodal ways early childhood leaders, Froebelian-inspired or not, can invoke more critical reflection day-to-day among teams. Through richer accounts of what this looks and feels like, research can support practice by sharing possible ways of realizing a Froebelian-inspired vision of professional learning. The research landscape would also benefit from closer consideration of the barriers that need to be overcome to implement the vision presented here. For example, previous research on professional learning in ECEC has suggested that making time for professional learning is a particular issue and that this limits the depth of the learning that occurs (Sakr et al., 2023). By exploring the constraints on time and how to alleviate them, we can offer a more detailed framework on how professional learning can be supported at different levels, including at the setting-level and through government regulation and monitoring. Finally, we present this vision as a dynamic ‘working model’ of professional learning and one that is not necessarily specific to Froebel. It is not intended to be rigid, static or exclusive; instead, it is context-dependent and enriched through – rather than dependent on – the connections with Froebelian-inspired practice.

Conclusion

In this article, we propose a three-stranded vision of professional learning that is specific to the early childhood sector. This vision emerged from conversations with 40 Froebelian-inspired leaders from across the world. The three strands of this vision were presented in the article as follows: (1) Professional learning is continuous, and continuous learning is enabled by time; (2) Professional learning involves reflection, and reflection is prompted by playful and critical connection; and (3) Professional learning takes place in community with others, and learning in community is enabled by cherishing differences and supporting agency. This vision contributes to an early childhood specific model of professional learning that is responsive to the specific dynamics of the sector globally. We present the strands as a starting point for discussion and reflection around early childhood specific models of professional learning and hope to spark further dialogues about professional learning for early childhood professionals, both for those inspired by Froebelian principles and others.

ORCID iDs

Kayla Halls  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5105-8793>

Mona Sakr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3057-2758>

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Middlesex University Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 24731).

Consent to participate

All participants completed a consent form before participating in this study.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was funded by the Froebel Trust.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

There is no archived data associated with this publication.

References

- Bakker N (2013) Cylinders and séances: Elise van Calcar and the spirit of Froebel. *History of Education* 42(2): 147–165.
- Barad KM (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway : Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bell K, Boshuizen HP, Scherpbier A, et al. (2009) When only the real thing will do: Junior medical students' learning from real patients. *Medical Education* 43(11): 1036–1043.
- Bittner K, Hadley F and Waniganayake M (2020) Practitioner inquiry as a professional learning strategy to support technology integration in early learning centres: Building understanding through Rogoff's planes of analysis. *Professional Development in Education* 46(1): 49–64.
- Blackburn C (2020) “The people in the purple shirts”: Froebelian insights to a singing medicine project in a children's hospital. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 18(3): 287–305.
- Bolton R, Logan C and Gittell JH (2021) Revisiting relational coordination: A systematic review. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 57(3): 290–322.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport Exercise and Health* 11(4): 589–597.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2021) One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18(3): 328–352.
- Campbell-Barr V and Leeson C (eds) (2015) *Quality and Leadership in the Early Years Research, Theory and Practice*, 1st edn. Sage Publications.
- Ceeda (2019) About early years: Early years sector skills survey. Available at: <https://aboutearlyyears.co.uk/our-reports> (accessed 31 March 2022).
- Clark RM (2012) ‘I’ve never thought of myself as a leader but. . .’: The early years professional and catalytic leadership. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 20(3): 391–401.
- Douglass A and Gittell JH (2012) Transforming professionalism: Relational bureaucracy and parent–teacher partnerships in child care settings. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 10(3): 267–281.
- Douglass AL (2019) Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Education and Care. *OECD Education Working Paper No. 211*. December.
- Froebel Trust (n.d.) Froebel's Occupations: Sewing, threading and weaving. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/training-and-resources/froebels-occupations/sewing> (accessed 02 June 2025).
- Johannesson P (2022) Development of professional learning communities through action research: understanding professional learning in practice. *Educational Action Research* 30(3): 411–426.
- Jovanovic J (2013) Retaining early childcare educators. *Gender Work and Organization* 20(5): 528–544.
- Kaushik V and Walsh CA (2019) Pragmatism as a research paradigm and its implications for social work research. *Social Science* 8(9): 255.

- King R (2022) The utility of pragmatism in educational research. *Creative Education* 13(10): 3153–3161.
- Margolis J, Durbin R and Doring A (2017) The missing link in teacher professional development: Student presence. *Professional Development in Education* 43(1): 23–35.
- Melhuish E and Gardiner J (2019) Structural factors and policy change as related to the quality of early childhood education and care for 3–4 year olds in the UK. *Frontiers in Education* 4: 1–15. DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2019.00035
- Moorhouse P (2021) A Froebelian approach: The wonder of woodwork. Froebel Trust. Available at: https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT_Woodwork-Pamphlet_INTERACTIVE_AW.pdf (accessed 15 August 2025).
- Nawrotzki KD (2006) Froebel is dead; Long live Froebel! The national Froebel foundation and English education. *History of Education* 35(2): 209–223.
- Nicholson JM and Kroll L (2015) Developing leadership for early childhood professionals through oral inquiry: strengthening equity through making particulars visible in dilemmas of practice. *Early Child Development and Care* 185(1): 17–43.
- Nolan A and Molla T (2018) Teacher professional learning through pedagogy of discomfort. *Reflective Practice* 19(6): 721–735.
- O’Sullivan J and Sakr M (2022) *Social Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care an Introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Parker L (n.d.) A Froebelian approach: Exploring clay. *Froebel Trust*. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Exploring-Clay-Pamphlet.pdf> (accessed 15 August 2025).
- Razzall K (2023) Getting down and dirty with Froebel on the allotment. In: Bruce T (ed.) *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel*. Bloomsbury, pp.181–186.
- Rogers S, Brown C and Poblete X (2017) A systematic review of the evidence base for professional learning in early years education (the PLEYE review). https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10053553/1/Rogers_PLEYE_A%20SYSTEMATIC%20REVIEW%20OF%20THE%20EVIDENCE_Nuffield.pdf
- Rogers S, Brown C and Poblete X (2020) A systematic review of the evidence base for professional learning in early years education (The PLEYE Review). *Review of Education* 8(1): 156–188.
- Sakr M, Halls K and Cooper K (2023) Advancing leadership development in early years education via digitally mediated professional learning: final project report. Available at: <https://developingearlyyearsleaders.co.uk/final-project-report>
- Sakr M and Kaur V (2024) Re-imagining the Froebelian influence on early childhood education as a dynamic and ever-changing web of encounter. *Pedagogy Culture and Society* 32(4): 923–940.
- Salam A, Siraj HH, Mohamad N, et al. (2011) Bedside teaching in undergraduate medical education: Issues, strategies, and new models for better preparation of new generation doctors. *Iranian journal of medical sciences* 36(1): 1–6.
- Segal R, Merzel A and LeHAVI Y (2024) Improving the professional awareness of mathematics teachers and teacher instructors using video-based curiosity-driven discourse—a case study. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education* 22(5): 1083–1106.
- Smedley S and Hoskins K (2022) Exploring the role of Froebelian theory in constructing early years practitioners’ sense of professionalism. *Early Years* 42(2): 217–231.
- Strauch-Nelson W (2012) Transplanting Froebel into the present. *International Journal of Education through Art* 8(1): 59–72.
- Thornton K and Cherrington S (2019) Professional learning communities in early childhood education: A vehicle for professional growth. *Professional Development in Education* 45(3): 418–432.
- Vintimilla CD (2018) Encounters with a pedagogista. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 19(1): 20–30.
- Von Esch KS (2021) Identifying professional dissonance: Teacher learning in job-embedded contexts and English-learner (EL)-focused teacher leadership. *Language and Education* 35(4): 337–356.
- Woulfin SL and Jones B (2021) Special development: The nature, content, and structure of special education teachers’ professional learning opportunities. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 100: 103277.