

A Multi-Layered Dialogue: **Exploring Froebel's Influence on Pedagogies of Care with 1-year-olds across Four Countries**

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Abstract

Infant and toddler pedagogy has flourished as a specialized area of practice in early childhood care and education settings, yet it remains an under-researched area. There is also limited empirical research internationally that explores cultural meanings of meaningful provision for this young age group. This ethnographic study explored pedagogies of care with 1-year olds in four cultures—England, United States, New Zealand and Hong Kong—**guided by Froebel's education philosophy and a view of pedagogies of care** as embodiments of culture. The researchers employed sociocultural and ecological theoretical perspectives (Darling, 2016) to attend to cultural meanings at the micro, macro and temporal levels in relation to people, contexts and processes. This lens enabled the researchers to resist the positivist tendency to normalize and unify all children's experiences and maintain the integrity of diverse interpretations. Inspired by Tobin et al.'s (1989, 2009) cross-national research on preschool in three cultures, the researchers utilized a video-cued multivocal and layered interpretation approach to elicit the "voices" of 1-year-olds, their teachers/practitioners and families. **This paper focuses on each researcher's discussion of the ways Froebel's principles of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance* were seen to unfold. The nuances of how these principles were manifested in pedagogies for infants and toddlers is explored in relation to each country's curriculum and cultural ideals.**

Keywords

autonomy, culture, early childhood care and education, freedom with guidance, Froebel, infants and toddlers, pedagogy

Introduction

As more is understood about the potential for learning from birth, further attention is given to what can be learned from **sensitively observing children's autonomous actions**. Learning to be autonomous while experiencing a sense of freedom with guidance

was what Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) desired for all children as part of a self-determining education. Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt (2017) **acknowledged infants' autonomy by revealing that they have "the spirit of an inquisitive and creative human being"** (p. 17) and are instinctive experimenters who think and move with

curiosity. This image of a lively mind is one of engaging in conscious interactions, and being in tune with their environments as they experience pleasure through active discovery and build social understandings as autonomous subjects.

Despite this acknowledgement of infants' powerful capacities, few scholars have researched the application of Froebel's ideas to the care and education experiences of very young children. In this paper, we add to other scholars' efforts to reassert the relevance of Froebel's ideas in early childhood care and education (ECCE) (e.g., Elfer, 2019; Hargreaves et al., 2018; Powell & Gooch, 2019) by exploring his principles of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance*, in relation to pedagogy with 1-year olds in four cultures.

Background

There are evolving views of pedagogies for infants in ECCE based on different theories of learning and teaching. This is due to increased enrolments of infants and toddlers in childcare world-wide (Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation [OECD], 2020), along with the need for relevant research. The close examination of what pedagogy entails for children up to 3 years is due to a shift in thinking and moving away from the baby “minding” concept (Rockel, 2009) to an educational focus with a subsequent change in discourse (Recchia & Fincham, 2019). Fenech (2011) pointed out that research into meaningful provision should be regarded as complicated and be extensive to show a more nuanced view for practice. Research has emerged in such areas as neuroscience and philosophy broadening understandings of early learning, teaching and **curricula, such as Rayna's (2004) cross cultural research on children under 1 year in French and Japanese early childhood settings. However, there is limited empirical research internationally that scrutinizes cultural**

perspectives in relation to pedagogy for this young age group.

Nevertheless, researchers have recently explored how Froebelian ideas can be usefully applied to contemporary ECCE. English scholar Hargreaves et al. (2018), for example, involved ECCE practitioners and parents of children over 3 years in their study to explore the value of **Froebel's concept of ownership and autonomy in relation to early learning. The study led the researchers to shift focus from the cognitive aspects of creativity in relation to Froebel's notion of autonomy to social aspects including emotional and motivational aspects that emphasize children's wellbeing. Focusing on younger children, Elfer (2019) summarized research on the well-being of children up to 3 in English nurseries. Elfer clarified that while Froebel did not use the term well-being, the holistic nature of development was inherent in his philosophy. Elfer concluded that “in terms of emotional well-being, what matters most about nursery experience is children's opportunity to make warm and responsive attachments to one or two nursery staff” (p. 172).**

Powell and Gooch (2019) involved early years practitioners of children up to 2 years from private day nurseries to explore their views **of Froebel's principles and his Mother songs.** The practitioners embraced the connection between Froebelian ideas of the natural environment, singing and observation, and their own practices. However, it was revealed they had not heard of Froebel or his ideas before the study. Notably, the study led practitioners to redefine their roles and claim expertise in the **care of babies while appreciating Froebel's interest in promoting “women as teachers” (p. 163), his emphasis on the outdoor environment, his interest in singing and its benefits for babies and adults. Together, these few studies reveal an emerging interest in reclaiming Froebel's work**

for contemporary ECCE, including for children up to 2 years.

Relevant cross-country research on pedagogy spanning two decades and foregrounding culture is the video-cued multivocal ethnographic work of Tobin and colleagues (Tobin et al., 1989; Tobin et al., 2009). Tobin et al. (2009) sought to investigate **“cultural dimensions of early childhood education within a nation” (p. 9) in China, Japan, and the United States.** Their work focused on understanding how ECCE systems reflect and pass on cultural values while responding to the broader social pressures and expectations of children in terms of what they should learn, do, and be (Tobin et al., 2009). Children up to 2 years were not a main focus in the study, although were included in the video footage as participants or the subject of older **children’s play. Central to their research was not the researchers’ explanation for any changes, but the voices of ECCE teachers and directors themselves in articulating why they do what they do (Tobin et al., 2009).**

The current study and purpose

The current study aimed to address two research gaps. First, early group-based ECCE research with children up to 2 years has primarily promoted rather ubiquitous features of pedagogy with little regard for cultural context. For instance, sensitivity and responsiveness to **children’s physical and emotional cues have** been recommended in pedagogy for infants (Salamon et al., 2017). Additionally, a view of toddlers as competent has been promoted in pedagogy, and also challenged as an overgeneralization as toddlers can be competent *and* vulnerable at the same time in different respects (Kalliala, 2014). However, these and similar studies rarely accounted for nuanced

views on meaningful pedagogy across different cultural groups.

Inspired by Tobin et al.’s (1989)

pioneering work on comparing ECCE across three cultures, the researchers of the current study applied ethnographic principles to explore pedagogies of care with 1-year-olds in four cultures: England, the USA, New Zealand, and Hong Kong, seeking to foreground cultural dimensions. The decision to include researchers from the USA, New Zealand, and Hong Kong **was based on the English project lead’s (5th author) personal relationship with infant-toddler researchers in those countries.** Hence, the findings are based on the perspectives of those involved in the study, and are not intended to be generalisable to other settings or contexts.

The second aim was to enrich the discourse on pedagogies of care in relation to **Froebel’s philosophy. Evidence on attachment and emotional responsiveness suggests young children’s emotional needs are not always well attended to (Brace, 2020; Page & Elfer, 2013).** Bruce (2020) believed that while many adults **are responsive to children’s emotional needs and** are able to offer stimulating experiences for children, they struggle with granting children sufficient autonomy to play or learn deeply. **The researchers found Froebel’s principles of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance* particularly relevant in conceptualising pedagogies for 1-year-olds in this respect.** In this paper, these Froebelian principles are examined. We then discuss how they are interpreted in their respective cultures, and whether the principles were demonstrated in the pedagogies of care for 1-year-olds in their own contexts. This cross-cultural analysis was based on evidence from video recordings of daily happenings in 1-year-old rooms in ECCE **settings, the practitioners’ articulations of their pedagogies and parent contributions** cued by the

videos from their own and others' cultural contexts. The research question guiding this paper is: *What does **Froebel's autonomy in learning and freedom with guidance look like in a pedagogy of care for 1-year-olds in four countries - England, the USA, New Zealand, and Hong Kong?***

Theoretical lens

The study adopted a theoretical lens that draws on the educational philosophy of Froebel and contemporary pedagogical interpretations of **his work. Froebel's philosophy is holistic,** underpinned by a concept of Unity (see Werth, 2019). **In current discourse, Froebel's principled views of ECCE promote strengths-based constructions of babies' and young children's active and agentic pursuit of learning with guidance from responsive and sensitive companions; abstraction, regulation and symbolic representation of inner feelings and ideas; and sense of self in connection with animate, inanimate and spiritual worlds. Froebel's idea that education should enable the unfolding of young children's inner selves as part of the unity of all things helps to indicate his thinking about culture: namely, that all children embody and re-create culture, rather than simply mirroring its rules, traditions and artefacts. Froebel was highly critical of "extraneously communicated knowledge, heaped up in memory" and the practice of "stamping our children like coins" (Froebel, 1892, pp. 230-231). He referred cynically to such "mind-killing practices" as the opposite of development and education - "envelopment and induction" – believing that a child's active reinterpretation of "culture...implies the development of the mind, of the will of man" (Froebel, 1892, p. 280). Consequently, Froebel's pedagogical ideas were not intended to supplant cultures, and**

Froebelian approaches have been adopted and adapted in early childhood programs across the world (Arce Hai et al., 2020; Wollons, 2000).

The active role of a child in humanity's becoming, as Froebel saw it, not only rested on a **positive and productive view of children's agency,** but also an educational context that nurtured their autonomy. Bruce (2021, p. 30) **described this in Froebelian terms as, "knowing what you think, knowing what you need help with, and knowing how to find appropriate help that is needed without losing your *self* in the process" while in relation with others who value and help foster your ownership, responsibility and agency.**

Method

The study's design was influenced by the work of Tobin and his colleagues (1989, 2009). "The Tobin Method" is a video-cued multivocal ethnographic method used to study cultural differences in pre-schoolers (Tobin, 2019). In this study, researchers in England, the USA, New Zealand, and Hong Kong followed an agreed upon protocol to examine and describe how culture is embodied within pedagogies of care with 1-year-olds in ECCE in each country. Including insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives and a focus on systemic (macro and micro) influences of people, contexts, and processes lent richness to researchers' interpretations (Beals et al., 2020). Ethical procedures and ethicality of conduct were consistently observed.

Research sites and Participants

The researchers do not claim that the 1-year-old rooms in this study represent all centre-based ECCE in their respective countries. Rather, study participants agreed the sites were "generally typical" of practices, flow of the day, and overall "look," in each country. Participants

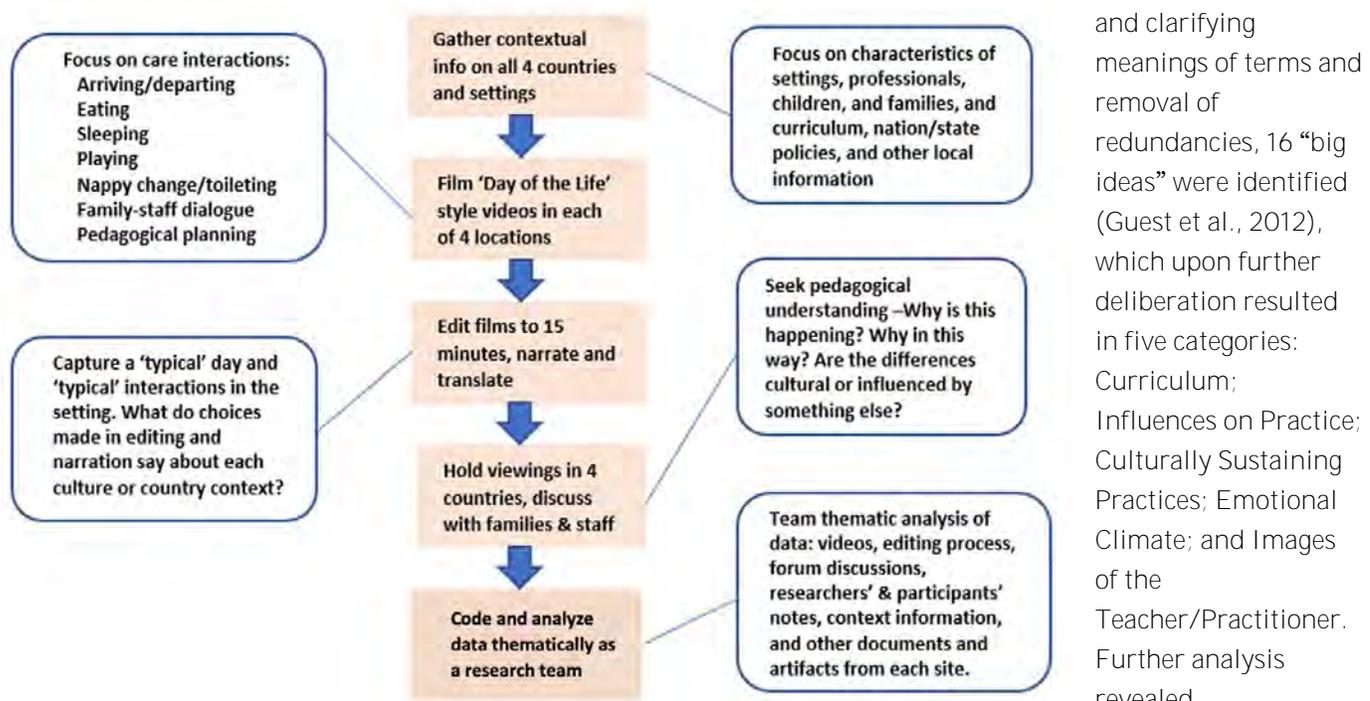
included: 1-year-old children; families who **attended viewings of all four countries'** 15-minute videos and participated in group discussions; practitioners from the 1-year-old rooms; centre leaders and administrators; researchers and their associates. Table 1 outlines the locations of research sites, type of setting and curriculum, and participating children and practitioners.

Location and City Population	Setting Type and Curriculum	Group Size, Child Ages, and Adult to Child Ratio	Practitioners and Qualifications
Auckland, NEW ZEALAND (1.657 million)	Privately owned centre National Curriculum: <i>Te Whāriki</i>	Eight 1-year-olds in group of 10 Mean age 20 months Ratio 1:3	Two co-lead teachers with Grad DipTchg (ECE) qualifications and third teacher or teacher aid
Hong Kong, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (7.5 million)	University-affiliated private centre Centre-based curriculum	Eight 1-year-olds in group of 14 Mean age 19 months Ratio 1:5	Two co-lead teachers, both with BEd (ECE) degrees; one teaching assistant BEd (ECE) in training
Bloomington, Indiana USA (85,000)	University-affiliated centre Developmentally Appropriate Practices	Seven 1-year-olds in group of eight Mean age 15 months Ratio 1:4	Two co-lead teachers with master's degrees (ECE) and teaching credentials; one teachers' aide, non-credentialed
Chester-le-Street, County Durham, ENGLAND (24,000)	Local Authority registered Community Nursery National Curriculum: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	Six 1-year-olds in group of nine Mean age 18 months Ratio 1:3	One lead with Level 5 qualification (diploma or foundation degree); two practitioners with Level 3 (Early Years Educator or equivalent)

Table 1. Setting locations, curricula, and study participants.

Procedures

Figure 1 shows a flow-chart highlighting the major procedural steps in this video-cued multivocal elicitation with layered interpretation approach. The procedure reflects the **researchers' valuing of a dialogic approach to making meaning of the data.**



Analysis

Widely-used qualitative thematic analyses were applied. First, working separately, researchers analyzed the entirety of the data from all four countries, noting initial overall impressions, coding inductively to identify patterns, and organizing them into themes, (Saldaña, 2015). Primary data included each **country's 15-minute video**; transcripts of group discussions held after video-screenings; and notes made by families and staff. Secondary data **that aided interpretation included: researchers' notes about setting visits and creating the videos; handouts from video-screening events**

with demographics of settings and descriptions of locations; photographs and sketches of **children's rooms; and documents and artifacts** provided by practitioners or publicly available.

Researchers from each country met in England in the Summer of 2019 to process the data together, generating a list of over 50 initial

themes. After debating and clarifying meanings of terms and removal of redundancies, 16 "big ideas" were identified (Guest et al., 2012), which upon further deliberation resulted in five categories: Curriculum; Influences on Practice; Culturally Sustaining Practices; Emotional Climate; and Images of the Teacher/Practitioner. Further analysis revealed

interpretations of Froebel's principles of *autonomy in learning and freedom with guidance* (Bruce, 2021; Tovey, 2020) within each country.

Recognized qualitative procedures were used to address validity and trustworthiness including investigator and within-method triangulation (Denzin, 2009), member-checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), and peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Central to this study was that multiple voices be heard; thus, members of the research team served as **critical readers and listeners of one another's** transcripts, notes, and interpretations from their respective contexts, and participating professionals were consulted to ensure accuracy.

The international team continued deliberating online on the meaning of their work using video-conferencing tools.

Findings

In the pedagogical examples (using **pseudonyms**) that follow, Froebel's principles of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance* form the focus for discussion. Cross-country analysis yielded terms that represented variations on these themes, such as "independence," or "self-determination." The examples illustrate shared concepts that were evident in all the settings with subtly different characteristics that reflected the contexts and embodiments of cultures in localized and personalized pedagogies of care. Differences are nuanced and judgement about what may be "good" or "better" is actively avoided.

While interdependent, the study of *autonomy in learning* allowed for close observation of 1-year-olds; and *freedom with guidance* directed attention to the practitioners' **role as "guide and mentor who by his [sic] participation in a child's play gives meaning and depth and breadth to a child's activities"** (Liebschner, 2001, p. 129). The discussion also **applies Froebel's ideas to nurturing care moments.**

The analytical spotlight on these concepts has two caveats: firstly, through his body of work, Froebel offered a holistic philosophy in which *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance* were connected to all other principles (see Tovey, 2020); and secondly, the practitioners had no specific training in Froebelian approaches prior to this **study. But Froebel's influence had permeated** their own education and early childhood curricula and pedagogies in each country.

England

England's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum has four principles. The first posits that every child is unique, "constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-**assured**" (Department for Education, 2017, p. 6). Positive relationships and enabling environments follow, indicating that the curriculum draws on sociocultural and ecological perspectives (Darling, 2016). Registered providers of ECCE must follow the EYFS, which includes a requirement that every child has a "key person" who is primarily (though not exclusively) responsible for their learning and wellbeing and for fostering a trusting relationship with the family.

Alfie (12 months) enters the baby room in Mum's arms; a stripey blanket rests on her shoulder. Alfie buries his face in the fabric, snuggling closer to Mum's body as Louise, his key person, welcomes him with a gentle but cheerful, "Good morning Alfie. Are you OK?" As the adults discuss his sleepover with a friend, Alfie's gaze shifts between his Mum, his blanket and Louise until he notices a teddy bear. Pointing he exclaims, "Bear!" and Louise validates his observation: "what have you seen? Oh, the bear. We'll get him in a minute." With this distraction, Mum lowers Alfie to stand on the floor. Immediately clutching her legs, he hides his face in the blanket, whimpering. Mum tries to move him away and Alfie begins to cry, his body stiffening. Noticing Mum's struggle, Louise responds by bending to Alfie: "Do you need your blankey for a little bit longer?" She picks him up to face her, the blanket on his arm. Alfie's cries become forceful, his back arching as he points towards Mum who has

gone to hang up his bag. Louise **narrates Mum's actions to Alfie and cuddles him, then turns their bodies and gaze towards four toddlers who are sitting together at a low table eating. Louise approaches the kitchen hatch and the tension in Alfie's body subsides as she asks, "Shall we have a look what's in here? Would you like some fruit?" Alfie stops crying and points into the kitchen. Louise acknowledges his recognition of her colleague, saying brightly, "There's Sandie, she's making your lunch today." No longer holding the blanket, Alfie's relaxed arm moves forward, and his fingers make a slight pincer movement as he watches closely while Louise pours a cup of milk. Louise carries Alfie towards the children at the table: "Would you like a drink of milk and to sit with your friends?" Alfie turns his head to look intently towards the little group, the blanket now hanging loosely from Louise's arm.**

This filmed observation was viewed by educators and families in all four countries. Opinions varied about whether or to what extent **the children's key persons should "coddle"** children in this way, signaling culturally **negotiated expectations of adults' roles** in care for infants (Guarnieri de Campos Tebet et al., 2020). Reflections from Hong Kong, USA and New Zealand revolved around contrasting views of: (1) a warm, sensitive and personalized welcome for each child providing a secure relational basis from which independent behaviors were possible (although not always observed); and (2) over-reliance on adults, which diminished opportunities for developing self-sufficiency.

In England, the scene was interpreted as physically and emotionally nurturing and

enabling; reflecting a dominant pedagogical perspective that, "Minds, bodies, hearts and spirits are all implicated in the process of teaching and learning" (Motta & Bennett, 2018, **p. 642**). **Louise attached importance to Alfie's blanket as transitional object, symbolizing his liminal embodied and affective relationships; helping him understand separation and connection (Arnold, 2009). Observing his distress, the blanket was offered "for a little bit longer" - named with familiarity as "blankey" - to help Alfie manage separation from Mum and enter into the community of the baby room. With a little support, he quickly relaxed to join his friends in their snack event – part of the setting's welcome ritual. Louise enabled Alfie to regulate his anxiety and have emotional autonomy in his transition. His active participation evolved from vocal and physical expressions of angst to multiple signals of interest in familiar people and objects, affirmed by Louise's sensitive guidance and responsiveness.**

United States

A relational-care philosophy guides daily life for children, families, and staff in this program, promoting deep knowledge of children and families, trust among relationship-partners, and sensitive-responsiveness in staff. Its practice of Continuity of Care (McMullen et al., 2015) keeps groups of children/families and teachers together throughout enrolment, typically three years. Although assigned primary teachers upon enrolment, as one teacher explained, over time **"children choose their own primary," depending upon their needs and preferences. One parent, expressing appreciation for this system and the "emotional support they receive from teachers," described these relationships as "organic."**

The United States has no national curriculum; rather Developmentally Appropriate

Practices (DAP) for birth-to-3-year-olds (McMullen, 2013) guides curriculum and **pedagogy, supporting: individual children's** development, interests, preferences, and learning needs; a holistic view of child **development and learning; and children's** identity as formed within families, communities, and cultures. Teachers are also influenced by dominant American values promoting individuality (everyone is unique/special), independence ("I can do it myself!"), and freedom understood as agency (ability to make choices) and autonomy (control over self and decisions) (Costa & McMullen, 2020).

American ECCE resonates with **Froebel's notions of unity, autonomous learning,** respect for relationships, and in particular, the centrality of play (Bruce, 2021). The 1-year-olds in this setting enjoy uninterrupted free-choice play most of the day when not engaged in routine care (mealtimes, diapering, etc.). Teachers believe learning and development **"unfold" through play, "in carefully planned environments."**

An American interpretation of Froebelian principles of *autonomy* and *freedom with guidance* is revealed as existing alongside and compatible with American values and practices. This is glimpsed in examples from the USA data, including short video vignettes.

In this scene from the video, the teacher initiates an activity, but soon takes on a secondary, supportive role:

A teacher leads two girls in a game of "Ring-around-the-Roses." After they all "fall down," as the rhyme directs, the teacher steps aside as more children join in, forming two small circles, spinning round-and-round and falling down as the teacher continues to sing.

Although teachers were often play-partners, as seen above and in other video scenes of them reading and singing with **children, they are sensitive to children's cues** about when to join in and when to remain silent but observant:

Isabella, who is bilingual, sits alone reading an animal-themed board book. Turning pages, she points to the pictures and labels them, switching between English, Spanish, and the American sign-language used in the program. Teachers occasionally glance her way but leave her to enjoy her reading.

After watching the video from the USA, a parent **noted how children were, "allowed to interact with all items and work things out themselves." He appreciated that risk-taking** and independent problem-solving were encouraged in this setting:

A teacher watches Nathan, new to walking, hesitate in front of a short wooden barrier. He drops to his knees and crawls over the barrier, clutching a toy shovel. Nathan stands, looks at the teacher who smiles and says, "You did it. You climbed over."

Letting children "work things out themselves" was considered important even when conflicts arose, as long as teachers remained observant and physically close to offer support as needed:

Standing nearby, a teacher keeps her eye on three children as they negotiate over the coveted middle seat of a three-seat rocker. After jostling about, they settle in and begin working together to

make the rocker move up and down.
The teacher says, “You got it.”

When teachers felt it necessary to intervene, they did so calmly, reinforcing lessons of safety and respect for one-another:

Seeing an escalating conflict between two boys on the climber, with one starting to push the other, the teacher steps in. Resting her hand protectively on the chest of the one nearly pushed, she says, calmly but firmly to the other boy, “Remember? A gentle touch. Do you need him to move?”

The use of positive guidance in the above example shows the respect teachers had for the children. This is further supported by their use of positive, non-directive, value-neutral and non-judgement language (e.g., “you did it,” rather than “good job”) to recognize efforts as seen in prior examples. Language choices and the supportive tone taken by teachers at this site is intentional and considered an essential element of their pedagogical practice; one teacher emphasized this, saying it was in **recognition of the “humanity of the children.”**

New Zealand

In Aotearoa-New Zealand, the national bicultural ECCE curriculum (for children birth-school age) “*Te Whāriki*” (Māori - the woven mat: Ministry of Education, 2017) sets out a vision of infants, toddlers and young children as: **“competent and confident learners strong in their identity, language and culture” (p. 2)**, foregrounding respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships. The principles of Empowerment; Holistic Development; Family and Community; and Relationships, are interwoven with strands of Wellbeing;

Belonging; Contribution; Communication; and **Exploration, positioning children as “21st century citizens learning how to learn” (p. 2) in a fast-changing and diverse world.** Pedagogical aspirations are linked to democratic values such as *manaakitanga* (Māori - mutual care and respect) and equity.

Te Whāriki’s inclusive stance honours **children’s active role in** relationships and play, starting with their interests, and understanding children holistically. Teachers draw on sociocultural and ecological theories (Darling, 2016) for resources and build on home **knowledge to support children’s thinking** further. These **ideas concur with Froebel’s strengths-based approach where children’s** interests, autonomy, and sense of freedom remain central to when and how teachers offer gentle guidance during play.

In one video scenario, teachers had **responded to toddlers’ shared interests** in the moon for over a month, creating moon photographs to hold, putting up projected images of the moon, giving lids (Jack, 21 months, initiated tracing around), and conversing with Jack about the moon shape he pointed out in books:

Jack sits in front of the blackboard with teacher Joanne, and says “Moon, moon.” He watches Joanne draw a chalk moon, then Jack uses his own chalk to add to the drawing without Joanne’s help. The other children join Jack. With warmth and verbal encouragement, Joanne supports Jack to continue his drawing. As the children squash in, Jack subtly adjusts his own position, strategizing to accommodate

his peers respectfully and continues to draw.

When the research video footage was shown to his family, Dad told of Jack's initial interest at home:

... when they were going to bed and it was dark we had this ritual. If the moon was full we would go out and look for it.
(Parent focus group)

This scenario illustrates how *Te Whāriki's* principles/strands were interwoven with home life. The teachers documented Jack's learning with a growing vocabulary of "real life" and environmental interrelationships. He was making connections between "people, places and things" in his world akin to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12) and Froebel's unity principle. Jack's desire was to be an autonomous learner and make decisions in conjunction with the subtle guidance of the teacher empowering him to fulfil his curiosity and inquiries.

The teachers had also been willing play-partners for the children for several weeks, in response to the children's shared interest in caring for dolls:

Sam, 21 months, sits in front of his teacher Leanne with his unclothed doll. Leanne lays out a doll's blanket on the floor, astutely aware Sam is observing her. "Like this, spread the blanket. Now you can put the baby on top" she says. Sam lays the doll on the blanket and completely covers it. Leanne observes, but does not intervene. She then holds her hand up and swiftly turns it over, imitating a folding action. Sam stands up, holding the wrapped doll against

his chest. He smiles and starts walking away from Leanne. Seemingly aware of Sam's intentions, his peer Andy, 19 months, waves at Sam: "Nigh-nigh." Leanne adds: "Say nigh-nigh baby, sweet dreams, have a good sleep." Sam smiles, continues walking, then waves back: "Bye!"

Here, the doll is used symbolically by Sam and his teacher to nurture Sam's desire to be the *one-caring* in play (Cooper & Quiñones, 2020). As they interact, the teacher learns about Sam's intentions, while Sam learns ways to express care. The teacher's interactionist approach is exemplified in their "give-and-take" exchange (Bruce, 2021, p. 67). Attuned to Sam's interest in caring for the doll, the teacher prompts his care actions using verbal and non-verbal cues, and supports Sam's active involvement in the play. In this way, she affords Sam full autonomy over his play, where he is free to decide how to take up her ideas without conforming to an adult's agenda (Bruce, 2021).

In response to these and other play scenarios, parents from all four countries commented positively on the "free flow" or "free choice play" of New Zealand 1-year-olds. One English parent identified that these children have "freedom to explore with support."

Hong Kong

Under the joint influence of Chinese traditional and Western democratic values, pedagogies for 1-year-olds in Hong Kong present a unique case, where Froebel's notion of balancing children's freedom with adult guidance is apparent.

Hong Kong has no curriculum for under 2-year-olds. Local childcare centers are recommended to provide developmentally appropriate activities through play to foster

young children's all-round development (Education Bureau, Hong Kong SAR, 2020). To this end, the Early Childhood Learning Centre (ECLC) has implemented the SIME program in its 1-year-old room. The center-based program is characterized by four intertwined elements - stimulation, interaction, motivation, and experience (Zhang & Chan, 2019). An integrated approach is used to provide toddlers with (a) a stimulating multisensory learning environment; (b) warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions between toddlers and teachers; (c) opportunities for motivated, autonomous exploration, all of which contribute to (d) meaningful learning experiences for whole child development.

The program emphasizes self-care activities where toddlers are given responsibility to care for themselves in the context of warm relationships with teachers and peers. Teachers and parents in Hong Kong often see self-care as remarkable learning moments during which **children's autonomy and self-esteem** are built up. **The following two episodes show children's engagement in self-care and teachers' guidance** in the process:

Upon arrival, Yvonne was rather tense about unfamiliar people and cameras in the setting. She seemed reluctant to enter the main room. Miss Ho verbally acknowledged her anxiety, did not hurry her, and encouraged her to work with her favorite stuffed penguin and her mother. At last Yvonne managed to take her indoor shoes from the cabinet and changed her shoes by herself.

Faced with the unfamiliar situation, Yvonne was given space to settle her tense feelings. Miss Ho responded sensitively by **accepting Yvonne's anxiety with warmth and** verbal encouragement. Miss Ho, however, refrained from doing the self-care task for Yvonne, but supported Yvonne to overcome the uneasiness and dress on her own.

At the breakfast table, Lydia was given her meal bag. Miss Ho supported Lydia to untie the bag, then stood back and let Lydia retrieve her towel box and cup from the bag by herself. Lydia arranged the items neatly and took pride in laying the table for breakfast. A moment later, Miss Ho realized Lydia was not wearing a bib, and so fetched one for her. Lydia heard, looked around, and found that Tiffany did not have a bib on either. She asked Miss Ho to fetch one more for Tiffany. Lydia continued to scrutinize the group to make sure everyone was well-equipped for the meal.

This episode again shows teachers' sensitivity to when children need adult guidance and when children need autonomy to learn on their own. Moreover, influenced by a mix of Chinese and Western cultures, children in Hong Kong are nurtured to be autonomous learners as well as responsible members contributing to the larger community. We see the beginnings of this cultural ideal in Lydia, who was autonomous in

having her meal while being helpful in caring for other children in the group.

Indoor and outdoor play are interspersed with self-care activities at ECLC. Free-play sessions are child-initiated and **uninterrupted. Teachers respect children's** decisions and choices for varying toys, activities, and environments. Guided play is also arranged:

*Child-size hurdles were laid on the playground. William and Helen were invited to have the first go. They were free to explore ways to approach the hurdles. Seeing Helen extend her hand to seek help, Miss Ho responded by taking her hand, supporting her to get over the first two hurdles. Miss Ho gradually withdrew her hand from **Helen's** and encouraged Helen to continue on her own (though still being near if support was necessary). Miss Lee also supported William to hurdle when seeing him lift his legs clumsily and seeking help.*

The teachers recalled that this gross motor exercise was meant to be slightly challenging, but still possible with adult support, to the toddlers. Children could then develop a sense of autonomy and independence after they struggled but finally managed the task. Both teachers were observant and sensitive in supporting **the children's attempt to be autonomous. They responded to the children's** desire to jump over the hurdles by offering physical and verbal support. This guided-play

scene resonates with Froebel's idea that freedom in learning is best supported with sensitive adult guidance.

Discussion

Guided by our video-cued multivocal approach, our multi-layered dialogue involved eliciting different “voices” regarding pedagogies of care for 1-year-old children in four countries through a Froebelian lens. This discussion **focuses on the researchers' dialogical** conversations about their country-specific examples and associated dialogues with participants. Our hermeneutic process revealed diverse interpretations of the Froebelian principles of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance*. We also identified similarities in practices that connect us across geographical boundaries, such as how all of the practitioners were considered professionals, took delight and enjoyment in being with children, and demonstrated great care for the children, but did so in different ways. For example, in Hong Kong, **the practitioners' guidance was borne out of a** “loving concern”, and in New Zealand, a **practitioner's guidance was in response to a child's** “caring concern” for the other (doll) (Cooper & Quiñones, 2020).

However, beyond the text, the examples are inherently unique, demonstrating the complexity of understanding pedagogical practices with very young children in contexts that are historically, politically, and culturally diverse. By paying attention to the micro, macro and temporal dimensions at play (Darling, 2016), we were able to “see” unique unfolding of *autonomy in learning* and *freedom with guidance* across cultures alongside associated complexities, such as play and development as cultural-specific; autonomy as time-bound; and subtle, yet critical differences in understanding “freedom” and “guidance.”

The study affirms that play is a ubiquitous term and means different things to different people. Acknowledging the wide-spread, yet under-articulated influence of **Froebel's ideas on play in education (Watts, 2021)**, our dialogue surfaced nuanced meanings of **1-year olds' play that were both surprising and enlightening** for us. For example, the New Zealand practitioners seemed guided by a view of **children's play as intrinsically motivated and choice-based**, while the Hong Kong practitioners seemed guided by a view of play as a means to educate young children (Rao & Li, 2009). Play for 1-year olds in Hong Kong thus involves more adult preparation and participation compared to other cultures.

The idea of giving 1-year olds opportunities to explore with support from attuned adults in cultural-specific ways, aligns **with Froebel's emphasis on the importance of supporting all children's curiosities and inquiries through access to a rich range of materials, open-ended play, and interactions with nature and people (Watts, 2021)**. Froebel's insistence that children problem-solve genuine issues in their own time and through creative play suggests an acknowledgement of the cultural specificity of play. Our study extends **this argument to include practitioners' pedagogies**, highlighting that through a cultural lens there are similarities in and unique ways of supporting play, learning, and development in 1-year-olds.

The significance of autonomy was also apparent to all of the researchers, but did not **resonate in the same way**. In contrast to Bruce's (2020) idea that some adults can struggle to grant children sufficient autonomy to play and explore ideas, the country-specific examples reveal both subtle and overt ways that practitioners afforded the 1-year-old children opportunities to be autonomous. For example, in

England, the welcoming practitioner demonstrated a subtle but vital ability to interpret **Alfie's emotional capital (Salamon et al., 2017)**, recognising the blanket as important for his emotional regulation and sense of emotional autonomy to "work through" his transition experience. In the USA the practitioners were more overt, choosing to be emotionally present but not directly engaged with a child during her book reading experience. For Froebel, autonomy was not about letting children do as they wish. Rather, he believed that autonomy was about having the time and space to think, analyse, discuss, and seek support when needed, while recognizing that children (and adults) are one part of a bigger whole (unity) (Bruce, 2012). Our examples **exemplify Froebel's ideas; these children were not left to their own devices, but supported to be autonomous in the context of their relationships with others**.

We pondered over the idea that autonomy can take on a temporal dimension, where people or a culture see it as something desirable in a child now in the present or as preparation for the future. This time dimension was evident when the New Zealand practitioners viewed and approached children as already competent to act on their own interests and inquiries, and when the USA practitioners **encouraged children's independent explorations**, whereas the Hong Kong practitioners saw children as having potential but needing adult mentorship to prepare them for self-sufficiency and independence. This temporal element of autonomy is not obvious in our readings of **Froebel's work, and suggests a cultural insight regarding autonomy that is more likely to be "seen" in cross-country analysis**.

We also uncovered subtle yet critical differences in how *freedom with guidance* is understood across cultures. Froebel argued that

freedom “cannot be given to children; rather, they have to attain it for themselves through **their own efforts**” (Tovey, 2020, p. 4). This idea of striving for freedom manifested in the Hong Kong example where children were learning to master the use of the hurdles with close attention and guidance from practitioners. In the USA example, the practitioner attentively waits for a child to problem-solve getting over the barrier, and then validates both his effort and sense of autonomy with positive feedback. This thread in our discussion led to another; how freedom can range from seeing freedom in **the form of a child’s use of agency; freedom to explore; and freedom to choose.**

The view of “freedom” that practitioners held seemed to inform their approach to “guidance.” For example, we discussed how the English practitioner played a guiding role in helping Alfie to separate from his mother while **being responsive to both Alfie’s and his mother’s** communicative and bodily cues. We noted how the New Zealand practitioners supported **children’s freedom to choose and explore by** providing gentle support for their interests and inquiries. We also examined how the Hong Kong practitioners guided children towards freedom by offering them a steady hand, and how the USA practitioners guided children in their freedom through verbal encouragement and gentle touch. Hence, *freedom with guidance* was manifested differently across the cultures. While guidance is generally practised as warm interactions and verbal encouragement in New Zealand, reflective of *Te Whāriki’s* emphasis on reciprocal and respectful relationships (Ministry of Education, 2017), guidance in the Hong Kong pedagogical context is reminiscent of the Chinese child-rearing concept of “guan” [管], meaning “to govern” but with deep concern and care, and high involvement of the caregiver (Chao, 1994; Tobin et al., 1989).

Conclusion

Our collective reflections and multi-layered dialogue have led us to acknowledge meaningful pedagogy with very young children as a culturally-specific phenomenon, and to appreciate the value in applying Froebelian concepts to enrich the discourse in this area. The involvement of families in our research dialogues also reminded us that very young children are not isolated beings, rather, they are always in a relationship with others.

The examples helped us reflect, revealing nuances of culturally imbued interpretations of pedagogies of care across different countries. A relevant metaphor is one of a kaleidoscope where colors change and blend as it is turned: each perspective that is brought forward in our dialogue is indicative of the ways the researchers are contributing to the connections from our collective observations of pedagogies of care. As a result of this study, we **support the idea of Froebel’s philosophy** influencing infant care and education and being considered in pedagogies of care with 1-year olds internationally to reflect the multiple ways this philosophy can be understood through a cultural lens.

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