

# **Health, Nature and Wellbeing: A critical analysis of Froebel and McMillan's values in the outdoors, alongside current practice.**

## **Abstract**

This exploration of Froebel and McMillan's original writing draws on ideals and values based on nature, health and wellbeing. This is compared with contemporary practice which may have been disillusioned by a range of external drivers. We plead with practitioners and policy makers to embed Froebelian principles and support the reunion of nature with today's children in order to remedy the current crisis in mental health.

## **Introduction**

When speaking to early years practitioners about their own childhood and favourite play memories, they may remember their experiences of outdoors. Their memories take them back to exploring the natural world through their senses. Why do we have a romantic view of nature and the outdoors? Is there an underlying primitive attachment? Do we intrinsically know that it is important for our own health and wellbeing?

Rousseau made romantic links to nature and childhood as well as writing about 'the three places education comes from: nature, men and things' (Lascardides & Hinitz, 2000, Rousseau, 1762, Taylor, 2013). These viewpoints may cement the ideas of a nostalgic and romantic childhood and outdoor play, which maybe what has continued today.

In this analysis we explore the value of health, nature and wellbeing to Froebel and McMillan. What do we mean by values? And how can these be interpreted? Critical analysis and contrasting arguments to examine meaning from a variety of viewpoints will be supported by a range of authors.

Scrutinising today's practice alongside the values of the pioneers helps us to see which principles have remained, and consider why these have lasted. We explore whether the same ideas apply now, or if we have moved on, transgressed and

adapted. Alternatively, have we regressed? Have the underlying values in outdoors and nature disappeared from our narrative as educators and become lost in the top down drivers of education?

### **Froebel and nature**

Froebel had a romantic view of childhood (Froebel, 1893). He was curious and interested in children's purity and innocence. This, paired with the already romantic view of nature based on Rousseau's interest in the outdoors as suggested in Lascardides and Hinitz (2000) and Taylor (2013), may have influenced Froebel's interest. It is important to also remember Froebel's context in rural Germany. Perhaps we can assume that the outdoors was a normal part of culture, therefore a factor as to why Froebel valued the natural world.

To understand why Froebel valued nature, we can look at Froebel's childhood in Lascardides and Hinitz (2000) where they write about Froebel's surrounding of nature and how he used this as a solace. This idea is supported in Froebel's own autobiography where he writes:

"Nature, with the world of plants and flowers, so far as I was able to see and understand her, early became an object of observation and reflection to me."

(Froebel, 1915)

This affinity with nature permeates throughout his life and educational philosophy. In his original writings, Froebel (1912) alludes to his idea of connectedness and unity with God. He believed that nature was God's way of expression – using the analogy 'a true work of art to the artist'.

Through nature, Froebel intended to develop children's understanding of themselves in the world. He believed that through close study of plants and animals children would intuitively be learning about the laws of nature and physics – developing curiosity of the natural phenomena as well as understanding how to care for their world (Froebel, 1912). He outlines the need for individual gardens for

children to tend to their plants as well as being surrounded by the common garden. His ideas here were to show the relationship of the 'part to the whole' and therefore symbolising 'child in the family' and 'citizen in the community' deepening his philosophy around unity and connectivity (Froebel, 1912).

It needs to be remembered that Froebel regarded nature as a broad range of natural phenomena not just plants and animals – his own interest in nature stemming from scientific interests in minerals and crystallography (Taylor, 2013). In Froebel's 'Education of Man', he writes about 'the period of the earliest childhood'. Within these sections, the statements are based on the notion that children intrinsically explore the world around them within these precious years through their senses. Every moment is an opportunity to subconsciously embrace the connectedness and unity that Froebel talks about (Froebel, 1885)

### **Froebel, health and wellbeing**

From Froebel's original writing, it could be suggested that Froebel references health and wellbeing when he writes about the respect and cultivation of the body and the spirit (Froebel, 1885). Here he emphasises the importance of physical health in recognising the 'inner reciprocal active connection of all parts of the body', continuing with his philosophy of education and unity through the body and the spirit (Froebel, 1885). The spirit could be perceived as mental health and inner wellbeing. Reflecting on Liebschner's (1992) discussion of 'man's need to be creative and his desire for freedom to achieve this', could this be interpreted as the need for mental freedom? It is unlikely that Froebel in his time would have come across mental health as it is interpreted and acknowledged now, but it is implied in his work that he would have understood it through his ideas of nature, unity and freedom.

Froebel was influenced by Pestalozzi through Rousseau, their ideas on developing the whole individual and allowing the natural goodness of the child to unfold are based on the active nature of learning (Liebschner, 1992, Goddard Blythe, 2005).

### **McMillan and nature**

McMillan's ideas of education and nature seems to have less of a romantic view and more of a medical viewpoint. Based on her own background and interests she maintained the idea that 'health was the only capital that most men possessed' (Lascardides & Hinitz, 2000) and therefore her educational philosophy was based on healthcare. It is important to remember McMillan's input was influenced by polluted cities and between wars. Social change was occurring and all these factors may have influence on McMillan's value of outdoors and education.

To understand further why McMillan valued nature and the outdoors, we can look at her childhood and background. Joyce (2012) writes about McMillan's childhood coinciding with the start of Darwin's theory around evolution and other biological discoveries. Perhaps we can assume these would have naturally influenced McMillan. Could the idea of becoming a healthy individual and the notion of 'survival of the fittest' have been present in society then? Could McMillan's values about nature come from this? (Moriarty, 1998).

Knowing about McMillan's history, we can look at her writings about The Camp School, and The Nursery School and extrapolate her values and influences. She dedicates chapters to describing and detailing the importance of the garden; 'the garden is the essential matter' (McMillan, 1930, McMillan, 1917). Joyce (2012) writes about McMillan's introduction of teaching, which included nature study as part of the curriculum.

### **McMillan and health and wellbeing**

McMillan writes about the positive advances of science, noting the social divide worsening with the very poor children and the privileged (McMillan, 1917). Her views and ideas may have continued to adapt based on socialist ideals, and what she witnessed working in Park Lane; but interestingly, she also believed that wealthy families also needed help nurturing their children (Joyce, 2012). Can we use McMillan's idea of nurture to signify health and wellbeing? McMillan writes:

“Not merely a few children, here and there, but hundreds and thousands are in dire need of education or nurture in the first years”

(McMillan, 1919)

The idea of nurture is prevalent through McMillan’s writings. It could be argued that McMillan feels the need to ‘save’ children through her clinics and the Nursery School (Read, 2011). Around this time reforms were established to support children’s diet and education which, as well as the divide between poor and wealthy, could have prompted McMillan’s initiatives for nurture in early education:

“They, being children, need that very important kind of early education called *Nurture*”

(McMillan, 1919)

McMillan was an advocate for children’s wellbeing, coupling her ideas of physical health and mental health with the romantic notions of the outdoors and garden and the impact these would have on each other, and therefore her values in these areas (Moriarty, 1998).

### **Nature in today’s practice**

Today’s context is influenced by government policies and choices of society. In different areas in England there are different issues – we focus on London.

Outdoor spaces in urban cities are scarce and government policies for outdoor play can support children’s accessibility to nature.

The EYFS framework (2017) requires settings to provide access to outdoor space, which could be seen as government noting the importance of outdoors. One of the seminal government strategies for outdoors is the Play Strategy. This ten-year strategy outlined a large investment in the safe play spaces for children and the importance of child centred communities (Department of children, schools and

families, 2008) . On 19<sup>th</sup> February 2011 the documents for this policy were archived along with a note on the website stating;

“This publication has been archived. It has been made available for reference use but should not be considered to reflect current policy or guidance”

Embedding the play strategy (Dept. for Children, Schools and Families, 2010)

The statement along with the removal of the long-term strategy could depict the value the current government have of outdoor play.

Contrary to this, there is a rise in outdoor play advocates through Forest Schools and different local projects. Forest School ethos has bloomed in London with more schools taking on the challenge to provide natural space in an urban setting. Michelm (Knight, 2011) writes about the concern around children’s health in terms of obesity and access to space due to crowded homes. This would suggest the physical and health benefits in nature are the focal point. This is also evident in the Newham Outdoor Project, where shocking obesity rates motivated the borough to tackle the problem with physical and active learning opportunities (Early Education, 2017).

These local projects are positive for the children they are accessible to, but without the universal philosophy of valuing the outdoors and nature through government policies, many children are not included in these movements.

Technology is as an important factor when looking at the influences of values in nature. Taylor (2013) writes about ‘nature-deficit disorder’ blaming technology for creating a world in which children don’t have experiences in nature (Taylor, 2013). Louv (cited (Taylor, 2013) asks for parents and those working with children to ‘save’ children by ‘effecting a ‘nature-child reunion’. The writing and plea to practitioners describes the importance of outdoors and the value that is seen in nature.

## **Health and wellbeing in today’s practice**

There is an increasing concern for children's mental health and wellbeing; in today's practice this is publicised through non-government organisations such as charities and outreach programmes. *Place 2 Be*, a children's mental health charity, can be found in some select schools and relies on donations which some schools are unable to access (Roche, 2012). Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are also a 'buy in' option for schools through the NHS; if schools cannot afford this service children must rely on parents and carers to refer them for support (NHS, 2016).

Practitioners might be aware of Ferre Leavers wellbeing and involvement scale which is increasingly popular through assessment tools such as Tapestry and Early Excellence (Foundation Stage Forum, 2012, Early Excellence, 2016). This is a useful indication for practitioners to identify and target children's needs and put into place 'action points' to support children's wellbeing and involvement (Laevers & Declercq, 2002). However, this is not statutory and practitioners are not required to assess these.

Although there is access and reference to support for children's mental health and wellbeing, it begs the question, how available and well known are these services to those working with young children? It is also up to the individual or the setting to value health and wellbeing, and support the children they work with. Could the issues in adult mental health in society be prevented through ease of access and availability for all children?

### **Comparing and contrasting: nature**

Now that the values of Froebel, McMillan and today's practice in nature, health and wellbeing have been extrapolated and analysed, comparison of values and what resonates with today's practice will now be considered.

We revisit Froebel and his romantic views of nature compared with McMillan. It is clear to see that McMillan is influenced by Froebel through her own writing about

his work (McMillan, 1917, Cooter, 1992). Her writing suggests using nature as a teacher like Taylor (2013), who compares Rousseau and Froebel's work using the 'method of nature', showing their values align when it comes to using the outdoors and nature as a place to learn.

Unlike Froebel, who viewed nature through a romantic and pure lens, McMillan's focus on nature is based on her context of the slums in Deptford, therefore the values that she has is through a physical health and wellbeing lens evident in her writing about the Camp School (1917). McMillan's ideas of outdoors and nature is akin to today's practice, which is focussed on the health and wellbeing. Today's practice is expressed in broad notions of child-initiated, experience based learning – not always nature-based (Taylor, 2013).

It is important to remember context and timelines, like now, McMillan was part of social change – the movements that McMillan was part of were similar to the movements now based on the reaction to 'nature-deficit disorder' (National Trust, 2012, Taylor, 2013). Could this uprise in nature play create change that is much needed towards the reunion of nature and child?

Reeves (Reeves, 1913) describes the cramped and crowded homes in London; 'a family of eight persons using three rooms', whilst this is shocking, it can be compared to today's practice where Milchem (Knight, 2011) writes about the characteristics of living in London – including crowded housing and high levels of child poverty. Those who work with children and witness these situations are often part of the movements to support the 'nature-child reunion' – presenting the values that key groups in early childhood have on the outdoors. These housing situations are common to inner London schools and could be a factor as to why the Newham Outdoor Project was commissioned (Early Education, 2017).

In the same vein that McMillan opened the Nursery school – to get children out of the slums and into safe places to play, today, settings open their doors to welcome children into their safe places. The idea that 'practitioner knows best' is something that can be insinuated from McMillan's writing and the views today, even though the EYFS (2017) uses the terms 'partnership working' in practice, this may look different

in a variety of settings. Likewise McMillan posits the idea that children need to be 'saved', and education and nursery schools will do it (McMillan, 1930, Read, 2011). The EYFS also writes about 'good parenting' which suggests there may be 'bad parents?' (Department of Education, 2017) These ideas are contrasting to the Froebelian principles and Froebel's own ideas around community and unity. He writes,

"Father, Mother and child, form a triune, life-whole – a family"

(Froebel, 1895)

While there are some aspects that McMillan takes from Froebel, she has her own ideas about family and the children she works with. What does it mean to be a Froebelian? Is it fair to call McMillan a Froebelian, even though it could be argued that a fundamental principle of being a Froebelian is to value family?

Which ideas have resonated in contemporary practice, based on Froebel and McMillan? Forest schools were discussed previously, and the ethos of this practice can be traced to Froebelian values. Knight writes about the links between Froebel and Forest school, saying

"... '*kindergarten*' (my emphasis), a term which originated with Froebel and which translates as 'children's garden', again emphasising the links with nature."

(Knight, 2011)

The EYFS (2017) insists children have access to an outdoor space, how this is used can be up to settings and individuals. Froebelian authors write in ways to support practitioners in bringing the Froebelian pedagogy to contemporary practice (Tovey, 2017, Taylor, 2013, Bruce, 2012). Government policies such as The Play Strategy sets the tone for what is valued in early education and this is then filtered down to practitioners who embed the agenda. When these policies are axed, this message is also permeated into the educational landscape. It is then up to individuals, or groups to ensure these values are not forgotten, and find ways for outdoors and

nature to be accessed by all (Department of children, schools and families, 2008, Voce, 2015, Early Education, 2017).

### **Comparing and contrasting: health and wellbeing**

We gathered ideas on how to interpret Froebel's ideas of health and wellbeing through his writings on the spirit, and we could find McMillan's values through her ideas on nurture. Can we continue with these ideas of spirit and nurture today? If we take the fundamental ideas of the spirit and nurture can we apply this to today's practice? Goddard Blythe (2005) discusses the scientific, physical and psychological impact that outdoor play and nature has on children. This aligns with Froebel's ideas about children exploring the world with their senses, and thus learning about the laws of nature through sensory exploration (Froebel, 1893). In the EYFS framework (2017) the only mention of well-being is through safeguarding and not around the children's mental health, nurture or spirit.

Whilst there were reforms starting to occur during McMillan's time, which supported children's education and welfare, it is currently being debated whether the governmental reforms happening today are beneficial to children's health and wellbeing. The introduction of the baseline testing seems like a regressive step when comparing to the struggle that McMillan and other educational pioneers had fought for (Berliner, 2018). The lack of governmental support in today's practice insinuates their values in children's mental health and wellbeing –charities, groups and individuals are being left to pick up the pieces. These ideas conflict with the practices that Froebel and McMillan have passed down.

However, it is also often argued that Froebelian principles and McMillan's beliefs are embedded in our mainstream practice (Bruce, 2012, Tovey, 2017). The prime areas in the EYFS framework are respected as important areas and these are based in children's health and wellbeing, with some links to outdoors and nature (Department of Education, 2017, Early Education, 2012). Does current framework provide a clear message for practitioners? Are these governmental reforms and nature movements creating ambiguous guidance for practitioners? If these are

subjective viewpoints, do we create more of a divide between nature and non-nature? How do we join Froebel and McMillan's principles with today's practice when it appears they are at opposing ends?

### **Conclusion and implications for practice**

Comparing the values between today's practice and these pioneers have enabled me to make my own judgements on what was valued then and what resonates with today.

Even though Froebel, McMillan and contemporary practice have different reasons to value nature, they all have some link to the romantic view of nature and the health and wellbeing aspects of this (Taylor, 2013).

A range of drivers and pressures from global and local authorities often take charge of the priorities in nature and wellbeing, and it is crucial that practitioner's find ways to keep the fundamental ideas in place. Tovey (2017) writes about Froebel's approach being part of mainstream thinking, there are overlaps but there are also contradictions that can alter the priorities of settings. Can we do our best despite these pressures? This essay implores whether we all value the outdoors the same? A frontline colleague may value nature and outdoors different to how politicians and policy makers value it.

An implication of practice from this essay has been to keep the Froebelian principles in mind and use this approach to centre our pedagogy (Bruce, 2012, Tovey, 2017). This means being open to critical reflection of our practice and continuing to find ways to improve our role as practitioners. Tovey (2017) writes about the roles of the adult and their relationship with children, if this is centric in practitioners minds, using this to enable outdoor play, nature and support wellbeing and 'spirit', we can keep these fundamental parts of practice at the forefront.

Further practical implications could be:

- Ensuring the outdoor space offers natural resources and engagement with the natural world

- Ensuring the garden is a valued extension to the classroom and practitioners can see the value in the experiences children have in the space
- Strengthening parent – practitioner partnerships will allow for deeper understanding of the children in care and how practitioners can support their wellbeing in settings

(Tovey 2017)

Practitioners can use the resources available to promote the ‘nature-child reunion’ as described by Louv (cited in (Taylor, 2013) however ultimately, there needs to be policy change that advocates outdoor and nature play. Policies need to value children’s mental health and wellbeing and see this as an investment for the future that takes a preventative stance at supporting society’s current crisis in mental health.

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