

# Seeking Froebel's 'Mother Songs' in Daycare for Babies

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## **Froebel and Singing**

Friedrich Froebel is a major figure in the history of educational philosophy thanks to his attention to early childhood education and care. In 1843 he became frustrated by a lack of attention to his ideas from his peers (who were men) and so began training women to become kindergarten teachers and published his book of songs and instructions for mothers of babies and very young children, 'Mutter und Koselieder' (Froebel, 1843). He believed that children should be the centre of family life and that their carers should be knowledgeable about the 'laws of development', which he located within divine law and connectedness to the natural world (Walsh et al, 2001). He argued that the act of singing to babies was a means to convey motherly feelings of love and care; that singing (his) songs could stir latent emotions, which he believed women were biologically predisposed to feel; and that the content of his songs helped both women and babies to understand their place, role and purpose in the world and connectedness to their surroundings and their (divine) creator.

*You long to nourish your baby's feelings, to stir the pulses of his heart. ....In some way, in some slight degree, you must make him feel the love which inspires all you do. Hence, as the little play goes on, you begin to sing; and love, the melody of the heart, is revealed in the melody of the voice. (From Froebel's Mottoes & Commentaries, 1895: 74).*

Froebel's philosophy has been particularly difficult to understand and consequently has been used selectively over time (Liebschner, 1992). But he remains an important figure to this day (see for example Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2013) and his ideas about singing proved to be an invaluable source for reflective discussion and debate throughout the pilot project work. The emphasis which Froebel placed on singing as a pedagogical tool and emotional conduit has been borne out by recent studies. For example, studies of 'IDS' (infant-directed speech/singing) have shown greater emotional expressiveness (Trehub and Nakata, 2002), complementarity (Zeedyk, 2006; Trevarthen and Malloch, 2000) and responsiveness (Shenfield et al, 2003) than non 'IDS'. The sing-song versions of language known as 'Motherese' has been found to be a universal human practice to the extent that Chinese mothers break the rules of their tonal language in order to convey the tune (prosody) of Motherese rather than the correct meaning of words, which are indicated by specific tones (Mithen 2005). For example, in Mandarin mā [妈, high, flat tone] = mum whereas mà [骂, falling tone] = to curse.

In other studies, singing has been proposed as a means to improve emotional connectedness (bonding/attachment; Bargiel, 2004) and can help parents to relate to their child (Edwards, 2011). Neurologically, music has been shown to activate and stimulate the parts of the brain that deal with emotional processing, with the effects of music on these areas similar to other forms of emotional stimuli (Trainor & Schmidt, 2003).

Although Froebel's songs were originally devised for the home, they were also used in the kindergarten and singing remains a regular component of contemporary early years practice. The underlying intent or purposes may not necessarily concur with Froebelian principles and may vary from one person or context to another. Set against a national framework for early education and care, which (only) positions singing as a means to facilitate musical expression and creative development (DfE, 2012), the pilot study set out to explore how and why practitioners who work with babies use singing in their everyday practice.

### **The Pilot Study**

The motivation for this pilot study originated from a finding from the Baby Room Project that concerted efforts could be made to improve the amount and nature of talk: between practitioners and babies/colleagues/ parents/carers/ other professionals and could include opportunities to engage in professionally challenging, relevant dialogue that draws on and critiques theory, research evidence and policy (Goouch and Powell, 2013). In terms of talk interactions between practitioners and babies, there were numerous reasons for not talking to babies. Key barriers seemed to be the routinisation, functionality and busy-ness of baby room days coupled with a lack of awareness about the prime moments for talk that could be grasped, for example while changing nappies, feeding or helping babies to settle for a nap (Goouch and Powell, 2013a). Incidences of time invested in attuned conversation were scarce compared with the frequency of monologues akin to Halliday's (2003) regulatory (controlling) or representational (telling) functions of language. However, singing as part of the caring dimension for babies appeared to be an enduring consideration, even though it was found to be variably enacted in caring for the babies. If, as many scholars have claimed, singing is developmentally facilitative and inherently affective, it could play a vitally important role in baby room practice and merits close examination.

### **Design and Methodology**

The pilot study had three overarching research questions, which were:

- What do practitioners sing with / to babies (birth to c.18 months)?
- How do the practitioners theorise their singing practices?
- Does today's baby room practice resonate with Froebel's beliefs about singing?

While a series of fieldwork activities was designed to explore the first two questions, the third was initially addressed by a review of Froebel's writings, which suggested some key areas for exploration and which were broadly translated into four propositions:

- Singing can facilitate intimacy between babies and their carers
- Singing supports babies' language development
- Singing can improve relationships with families and intercultural understandings
- Singing can enhance practitioners' wellbeing.

Seven full daycare settings were recruited on a voluntary basis to take part in the study. Six were PVI day nurseries and one was a nursery unit within a LA managed children's centre. The recruitment strategy was sequential: first managers and / or owners of setting were approached. If they agreed to take part, baby room practitioners were approached separately and individually; if they agreed, permission was sought from the parents of

babies attending the setting. At each stage, information was provided about the study's aims, methods, what participation would involve, how to withdraw and how findings would be shared and disseminated. Attention to the ethics of the work was paramount, including particular sensitivities concerning research involving babies and discussions about attachment and affect.

The design for the pilot was based on Cresswell's (2008) argument that studies should be framed by and make explicit their underlying philosophical, methodological, logistical/practical and ethical considerations, beliefs and decisions.

The ontological and epistemological orientation was social constructionism. Principally, interest lay in the ways that practitioners understood and enacted singing with babies and how their personal experiences could be interpreted and conveyed authentically.

An exploratory case study design was adopted in which the phenomenon at the centre of the enquiry was the purpose, practice and underlying philosophy involved in singing to babies in ECEC settings. For pragmatic reasons the case study was geographically bounded and was completed within nine months of the grant being awarded by the Froebel Trust.

The methodology was predominantly qualitative, although some descriptive statistics were generated from the Song Audit (see below). But this was intended to provide the basis for discussion with the practitioners involved rather than for generalising findings to groups beyond the study.

Data were collected through:

- informal research conversations with managers and practitioners,
- an online self-completion survey called the 'Song Audit' that required largely text box style responses (rather than having closed questions),
- naturalistic filmed observations in the baby rooms,
- semi-structured discussion groups in each setting using film clips from the observations as prompts for reflection and dialogue,
- and a workshop where all participants came together to review and discuss the preliminary findings.
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The aim of these methods was to try to capture how participants constructed meaning through action and interaction. Consequently, the questions were deliberately broad but still in line with the overarching enquiry concerned with how baby room practitioners engage in singing with babies and the reasons for doing so.

Twenty-three participants took part in these activities; twenty-one were baby room staff and two were managers.

Data analysis followed an iterative process (see e.g. Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009) in which the themes and categories of analysis should emerge from the data rather than being predetermined.

The themes that emerged through the first rounds of analysis were discussed with the practitioners at the workshop and their responses helped to strengthen the reflexive aspect and to co-construct the main findings.

### **Summary of Findings**

Analysis of the data suggested that:

1. Singing is employed in a variety of ways in the baby room

On the whole, singing was performed as an upbeat activity. The analysis of the song audit, the filmed observations and subsequent discussions at the workshop confirmed that the majority of singing consisted of lively children's songs that were usually accompanied by hand actions and/or props. The songs form the basis for the actions, rather than an accompaniment. Less than 1% of the songs constituted anything resembling a lullaby, although this was observed in one setting and the practitioners reported singing softly to the babies sometimes.

2. Singing is used for a range of purposes and functions

The practitioners' responses in the survey and the discussion groups showed that they all believed that singing could be a means to an end. It was used for different purposes within the baby room but these could be described predominantly as a means to manage rather than meet babies' needs. Examples included singing to distract and quieten a baby, to bring everyone together into a group or to signify that it was time for a particular activity or event, such as home-time. But sometimes group singing was described as a way to encourage participation, particularly for babies who did not talk but responded to singing with movements such as bobbing up and down, waving their hands, smiling and laughing or squealing.

3. Opportunities to think about and discuss the reasons for singing are rare and so the theorising of singing practice was limited among practitioners

During the discussion groups, the practitioners involved all said how useful the activity was and how they hadn't really thought much about singing. None knew much if anything about Froebel's life and work or about the research relating to singing with babies. The workshop, which was held on a Saturday, was well attended and participation was lively. When prompted to think about what they sang and why, the practitioners – who were mostly interviewed in groups of three – engaged in discussion and debate amongst themselves as well as with the researchers. The topic clearly interested them and they were eager to observe and explore their own practice and to try to articulate why they did what they did.

4. All four of our propositions were supported to a greater or lesser extent

Although the study did not set out to confirm or refute the propositions there was some evidence that each was at least a consideration for the practitioners. Their responses suggested that, when given the opportunity to do so, they regularly theorised the purposes of their singing practices in terms of enhancing relationships. For example, while watching film clips they recognised how babies' responses to their singing were 'more engaged' than when they were talking. They discussed how little they knew about any singing that the babies experienced at home and wanted to undertake a range of their own enquiries to find out more. They talked about how singing could make everyone feel better in the baby room

and all of them said they sang because it was 'fun' or 'enjoyable'. And everyone noticed and described how different babies used sounds or signs to indicate their song preferences or to join in with singing and said that this was a form of communication that was pre-verbal.

5. Practitioners believe that singing leads to qualitatively different interactions with babies from other encounters and particularly referred to comparisons with talk.

As mentioned briefly above, all the practitioners were interested in comparing the ways that the babies responded to them when they sang and when they talked. They described this as babies being 'more engaged' which consisted of more / more prolonged eye contact, responding with movements and noises / words, looking happy and interested, spending longer involved in an activity, initiating singing by offering words, actions or toys that conveyed a particular message about wanting to hear a song. However, while they were quick to articulate the nature of the babies' 'engagement', they found it profoundly challenging to say whether and in what ways their own behaviour might be 'more engaged' except to say they believed that their attention was usually focused on an individual baby while they were singing. The implications of this finding are significant (see later).

6. Some songs or types of singing are privileged and described as 'good' songs to sing with babies, leaving us to ask, 'Which songs / whose songs are excluded from the baby room and why?'

Given the lack of knowledge about singing in babies' homes, it was perhaps unsurprising that the practitioners' repertoires of songs were extremely similar across all seven settings and included virtually no songs that had been introduced by the babies' families. The analysis of the song audit data showed that most of the songs had been learned during the practitioners' childhoods (mainly from their mothers). Two respondents whose first language was not English said they had had to learn new songs – the right songs – to sing with the babies in their work and by implication had discarded those from their own childhoods. Although CDs including children's TV themes were played and sometimes sung, there was little evidence of popular culture making inroads into the baby rooms. A notable exception – since it was the only example - was one practitioner who described (without prompting) singing hip hop because he had made a visit to a baby's home and knew her parents played this kind of music to her at home and that she enjoyed it (as did he).

## **Discussion**

Perhaps the most striking findings were concerned with the practitioners' realisations that the babies were 'more engaged' when they sang and that this was probably because they got the practitioners' individual attention at this time, enjoyed it and responded with enthusiasm. It was unclear whether the singing conveyed more emotion than talking (as was Froebel's suggestion) but descriptions of enjoying singing and doing so to enliven the mood in the baby room suggest a shared, social event that incorporated mutual feelings of happiness. The increased eye contact, communication and interpreting babies' subtle signs about their preferred songs also imply moments of attentiveness. While this does not necessarily reflect 'intimacy', which was a much debated subject across the participants in the project, it may nevertheless provide evidence of companionship that is invested with emotional complementarities. In a context where emotionally compatible relationships between practitioners and babies in their care seem to be the received wisdom at the basis of what constitutes 'good practice' (Brazelton and Greenspan 2001), but where 'love' and

'intimacy' can be troublesome or even taboo for some practitioners (Powell and Gooch 2012) and parents (Page 2011) in the contexts of some daycare settings, understanding what nurturing relationships encompass is extremely important. The practitioners' explanations about what was going on while they were singing were reminiscent of the following passage by Reis and Shaver (1988: 387-8), which sets out their definition of intimacy:

*... an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become "close"....*

None of the baby room practitioners in this study was well-versed in Froebelian principles and none knew any of his thoughts about singing or his 'Mutter und Koselieder' prior to this project. Although Froebel's ideas about the innate capabilities of women to express love for babies and nurture them through song do not sit easily in 21<sup>st</sup> century English society, his views about singing as a medium for emotional expressiveness appear to resonate with the baby room practitioners who took part in this study. Froebel emphasised both the act of singing and the songs' content, whereas the practitioners placed little emphasis on content except in terms of the relatively narrow canon of songs they sang with the babies, relying instead on the act of singing to convey emotion. This finding is consistent with some research about Motherese, which suggested that for very young babies, prosody is more important than subject matter and is the basis on which babies respond to the talker (see Mithen, 2005). In baby rooms where words do matter as well as the tune that is adopted to convey meaning and symbolic representation to babies, singing may be a helpful addition to practitioners' repertoires with which to engage with babies in emotionally companionable exchanges.

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