

Back to school for nursery owner

Alison Hawkins who owns and runs Wester Coates Nursery School which she set up 34 years ago, has graduated with a Masters degree from the University of Edinburgh.

This is the second graduation for the early years' education expert as she first graduated in 1971 from Moray House Teacher Training College as it was then known. She better than anyone understands the need for learning at all stages of life, and has always undertaken continuing professional development learning throughout her career.

The need for learning led her to Froebelian practice which she first studied in 2010, meeting a group of like-minded educators who have learned together and supported each other. The first cohort signed up in 2019 for the MSc in Education, Early Childhood and Froebel course from which Alison has just graduated.

Alison said: "The catalyst was firstly to support the course, and get its name 'out there'; secondly to challenge myself and pull together a lot of threads – and thirdly to use the learning and experience to further spread knowledge of child development and appropriate early learning techniques.

"Through our studies we have had positive impacts on children through our collective and individual work. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my tutor Dr Lynn McNair – herself a knowledgeable and committed Froebelian whose interest in all

her students is vast.”

But on both occasions Alison has outshone her classmates winning first the Dickson Prize for best outgoing student and most recently achieving the MSc with merit.

Throughout the decades of running her own nursery “Mrs Hawkins” has campaigned for kindergarten education. She lobbied Edinburgh Council until they voted to fund all children who were eligible for a further year at nursery stage, something which has since become law in Scotland. As well as running a nursery somehow she found time to have five children of her own – all of whom were at the party after the graduation ceremony.

At Wester Coates Nursery School the ethos is to nurture, care for, challenge and support little ones on their first steps away from home and into education. With a staff to pupil ratio of one adult for every five or six children the aim is to “ensure a happy and confident transfer from home to nursery”.

Alison said: “This is achieved by a strong belief in the principles of Friedrich Froebel, regarding children as being competent, unique, curious and active...hence our focus on starting where the child is and taking their lead mostly through play, and often outdoors.

“Believing in the many benefits of fresh air, exercise and ‘space to be’ we spend most of our time outdoors where excellent facilities and equipment complement our indoor spaces, and provide motivating and challenging opportunities to develop skills, to explore and wonder, to grow in confidence and to socialise.”

Scotland’s national Froebelian hub is the council run nursery at Cowgate Under 5s which is an indoor/outdoor space in the heart of the city just off the Royal Mile. Friedrich Froebel was the pioneer of the kindergarten movement where learning is not predefined into compartmentalised goals or narrow

boundaries. The key principle which he embraced was “freedom with guidance”, believing that everything in the universe is connected and that this is to be fostered in children to deepen their understanding of themselves and others as well as the wider world.

Watch [a short film about the Froebelian leadership here](#) where Alison talks about the way she uses the principles at her nursery.



Alison Hawkins graduation photos 50 years apart



Alison with her classmates after her recent graduation