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ABSTRACT

The idea of a special type of education for young children emerged in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, with the kindergarten movement. The kindergarten was created by Friedrich Froebel, the German educator whose ideas, although no longer popular, can be traced to contemporary early childhood education. Froebel explicitly rejected the Lockean environmentalist view that a child at birth was a moldable lump of wax or clay and instead viewed children as seeds planted in a garden, which would gradually unfold their inner nature. He attached importance to what originated from children and saw the educational value of play and the use of non-book materials in the school. He also provided a theoretical basis for early childhood education that recognized stages of intellectual growth. Each new interest, activity, or learning grew out of an interest or activity already there, and a child moved from one stage to the next, gradually. Play was the most important phase in the spontaneous development of the child. These concepts developed by Froebel continue to resonate in early childhood education today. Contains 11 references cited in the notes. (SW)

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FRÖEBEL AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AMERICA

by Stephen J. Sniegoski

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The idea of a special type of education for young children emerged in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century with the kindergarten movement. The kindergarten was the creation of the German educator, Friedrich Froebel. Many of the salient ideas in contemporary early childhood education can be traced to that education visionary.

From the time of America's colonial beginnings into the nineteenth century, Calvinism had provided the intellectual underpinning for the education of young children. Calvinism's central tenets were that God's power was absolute and that man was totally depraved as a result of Original Sin. Since the child was born with a corrupt nature, it was necessary for external authority to change the child's nature by inculcating him with correct information and habits, especially related to religion. The emphasis was on restraint rather than freedom; autonomy or self-assertiveness in the child had to be suppressed.

Although the religious doctrines of Calvinism were moderated in

the latter part of the eighteenth century, its educational method was given support by the psychology of John Locke, which became popular among the educated. Locke perceived the child's mind as a blank slate that teachers should imprint with a rigorous rational education. Children were viewed as incomplete adults who required the work of teachers to bring them out of ignorance.¹

By the mid-nineteenth century, Evangelical religion had largely replaced Calvinism. And America's intellectuals were affected by the literature of European Romanticism. No longer was the child's nature regarded as sinful or incomplete, but was being looked upon as innocent and pure. This changed intellectual milieu provided fertile soil for the spread of Froebelian education ideas from Germany.²

Friedrich Froebel was born in the mountainous village of Oberweissbach in the southern German principality of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt in 1782. His mother having died before his first birthday, Froebel received little attention as a child from his father and stepmother. This unhappy upbringing made Froebel deeply introspective and tending toward mysticism. Deprived of parental affection, he turned to nature for companionship.

Between the ages of ten and fourteen, Froebel went to live with a maternal uncle, who supplied some of the emotional warmth lacking at his home. At fifteen, he was apprenticed to a forester where he could be close to his beloved nature.³

Froebel entered the University of Jena in 1799 to study science and mathematics, but he left for financial reasons after two years. For the next few years, he drifted about in search of a suitable occupation. In 1805, he went to Frankfort to train as an architect, but soon left to begin teaching in a school administered by a follower of the renown Swiss educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi, who advanced a theory of education through the systematic use of the senses. In teaching, Froebel found his life's vocation. Froebel associated with Pestalozzi himself at Yverdon, Switzerland from 1808 to 1810, and then studied at the universities of Gottingen and Berlin.⁴

From 1816 and until his death in 1852, Froebel devoted his time to founding and directing several innovative schools and to developing and promoting his educational methods. In 1826, Froebel published his major work, The Education of Man, which dealt with the education of children. In 1837, he opened the first kindergarten in the village of Blankenburg, Germany.⁵

Basic to Froebel's philosophy and kindergarten program was his conception of the essential unity of all things. As he wrote in his autobiography: "All is unity, all rests in unity, all springs from unity, strives for and leads up to unity, and returns to unity at last."⁶

Froebel saw unity stemming from God. "The Unity is God. All things have come from the Divine Unity, from God, and have their origin in the Divine Unity, in God alone. God is the sole source of all things. In all things there lives and reigns the Divine Unity. . . . The divine effluence that lives in each thing is the essence of each thing."⁷

To Froebel the purpose of everything was to realize its essence. Man's purpose was to gain awareness of the divine essence in everything.⁸

Froebel explicitly rejected the Lockean environmentalist view that the child at birth was like a "a piece of wax or a lump of clay, which man can mold into what he pleases."⁹ Instead, Froebel looked upon the child as a seed planted in a garden, which would gradually unfold its inner nature. "All the child is ever to be and become, lies--however slightly indicated--in the

child, and can be attained only through development from within outward."¹⁰

Froebel, however, did not hold that a child left alone would automatically develop properly. It was the business of education to provide the proper environment in which the individual could bring to maturity that which was present but latent at birth. Education would enable the individual to comprehend the divine essence of the world.¹¹ To Froebel, "education should lead and guide man to clearness concerning himself and in himself, to peace with nature, and to unity with God; hence, it should lift him to a knowledge of himself and of mankind, to a knowledge of God and nature, and to the pure and holy life to which such knowledge leads."¹²

Education to Froebel consisted of self-activity, which implied that the learner essentially would educate himself. Education had to be based on the interests and spontaneous activities of the child. The teacher's function was to create an environment that would stimulate and further the child's development, shielding the child from anything that would warp this process. It was essential, however, that the teacher carefully refrain from hindering the free play of the child's

individuality. "Education in instruction and training, originally and in its first principles, should necessarily be passive, following (only guarding and protecting), not prescriptive, categorical, interfering."¹³ The purpose of teaching thus was not to impart knowledge. As cultivation created nothing in plants, so the teacher created nothing in the child, but merely facilitated the unfolding of inborn faculties.¹⁴

Development took place in orderly stages. Each new interest, activity, or learning grew out of an interest or activity already there. The child moved from one stage to the next gradually. It was imperative that parents and teachers allow each stage to develop fully before helping the child move on to the next one. To Froebel, "the vigorous and complete development and cultivation of each successive stage depends on the vigorous, complete, and characteristic development of each and all preceding stages of life."¹⁵

Although Froebel wrote of unfolding, this did not mean that he regarded one stage of life as superior to another. Childhood was not merely preparation for adulthood but had value in itself. Therefore, adults should not interfere with the natural

conditions of childhood but should combine guidance with the capacity of waiting and understanding. The improper effort of adults to impose views on the child would only act to deform the child's development.¹⁶

For Froebel, play was the most important phase in the spontaneous development of the child. Play was "the highest phase of child-development--of human development at this period. . . . Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole--of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good."¹⁷ It was the teacher's responsibility to provide the widest opportunity for such play.

For the first years of life, Froebel pointed out, children were wholly dependent upon their mother and other members of their immediate family. The mother was the chief educator. Froebel believed that children between the ages of four and six had outgrown the limits of the home, but that they were not yet ready for the discipline of the school. Thus, he called for the

creation of a new institution, halfway between the home and the school--the kindergarten or child garden.¹⁸

The kindergarten would have a pleasant physical environment. Froebel recommended the use of an adjoining garden or at least a brightly painted, sunny room filled with plants, animals, and pictures. Instead of the traditional books, the kindergarten would teach by the use of geometrical playthings of different shapes, sizes, and colors.¹⁹

Froebel believed that symbolism played a major role in the development of the child. Moreover, he held that certain objects by their very nature were symbols of cosmic truths. And to Froebel, the real understanding of any thing had to begin from perceptions by the senses. If children, at an early age, played with particular objects, which he called "gifts," ("gifts" because they were divinely given to meet the needs of children), they would be helped toward understanding fundamental truths. Thus, Froebel held that a ball, which had no edges, symbolized the unity of the universe. The cube, with its many sides, symbolized the diversity of the world. The cylinder symbolized the reconciliation of opposites, of diversity within unity.²⁰

In addition to "gifts," Froebel created many "occupations" for kindergartners, which gave children the opportunity to modify malleable materials. Clay modeling, paper cutting, picture coloring, weaving, sewing, sandpile play, drawing, and cardboard work were among the "occupations" through which kindergartners would achieve their optimal development.

Not only did Froebel devise gifts and occupations, but he described with great precision the manner in which children were to play with them. Such instructions had to be strictly followed if the correct impressions were to be perceived by the child's mind. By carefully planning and ordering the play of children, Froebel believed he had found "the progressive course of the development and education of the child in a logical sequence."²¹

The kindergarten achieved its greatest influence in the United States.²² Brought to America by Germans after the European revolutions of 1848, kindergartens began to appear wherever there was a high concentration of German immigrants. Henry Barnard introduced Froebel's kindergarten into American educational literature in the 1850's. Barnard was America's foremost educator of the time and editor of the prestigious American Journal of Education. As the first United States

Commissioner of Education Barnard continued his promotion of the kindergarten. Barnard even recommended to Congress the establishment of a public school system for the District of Columbia that would include kindergartens.²³

In 1860, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody opened the first English-speaking kindergarten in Boston with the encouragement of Henry Barnard. Peabody spread Froebelian ideas throughout the United States. William Torrey Harris, the superintendent of the St. Louis school system from 1868 to 1880, established the first public school kindergarten in the United States with the help of Susan Blow. Harris, who had succeeded Barnard as America's leading educator during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, continued to lend his prestige to the kindergarten movement as United States Commissioner of Education from 1839 to 1906. Harris viewed Froebel's gifts and occupations as "the best instrumentalities ever devised for the purpose of educating young children through self-activity."²⁴

To Harris, the Froebelian program served to discipline the young child. Kindergartens, wrote Harris, were not designed as a "paradise of childhood" but as a check on the "gushing hilarity" of childhood in order to prepare the way for future intellectual

development.²⁵ Although there was no consensus behind Harris' view of the disciplinary purpose of the Froebelian program, the great majority of American Froebelians looked upon Froebel's detailed program as virtual dogma.²⁶

There were, however, a few heterodox Froebelians who held that the rigid application of the Froebelian kindergarten program actually stifled the very creativity Froebel had sought to promote. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, this view was given support by new intellectual trends, especially Darwinian evolutionary naturalism, which undercut the teleological idealist underpinning of Froebel's philosophy of education. John Dewey best expressed the naturalist critique of Froebel, while acknowledging Froebel's contributions to modern education. As Dewey wrote in Democracy and Education, "Froebel's recognition of the significance of the native capacities of children, his loving attention to them, and his influence in inducing others to study them, represent perhaps the most effective single force in modern educational theory in effecting widespread acknowledgment of the idea of growth. But his formulation of the notion of development and his organization of devices for promoting it were badly hampered by the fact that

he conceived development to be the unfolding of a ready-made latent principle. He failed to see that growing is growth, developing is development, and consequently placed the emphasis upon the completed product. Thus he set up a goal which meant the arrest of growth, and a criterion which is not applicable to immediate guidance of powers, save through translation into abstract and symbolic formulae."²⁷ Dewey believed that the practices advocated by Froebel stifled, rather than enhanced, the child's creativity. "Froebel's love of abstract symbolism," wrote Dewey, "often got the better of his sympathetic insight; and there was substituted for development as arbitrary and externally imposed a scheme of dictation as the history of instruction has ever seen."²⁸

Froebel's idealist philosophy and his detailed kindergarten program for children have been abandoned by modern early childhood educators. Yet much of Froebel's thinking looms large in current educational thought. As his recent biographer, Robert B. Downs, writes: "Twentieth-century educators apparently are in general agreement that much of Froebel's thought is outmoded and perhaps even discredited. In fact, because of obscurity of expression, a great deal of it has never been fully understood by

kindergarten teachers. On the other hand, the value of Froebel's long, careful sympathetic study of children remains of inestimable importance, for it opened a new world in childhood education."²⁹

It was Froebel who attached importance to what originated from children, not merely what adults gave them to do or learn. Froebel saw the educational value of play and the use of non-book materials in the school. He provided a theoretical basis for early childhood education that recognized stages of intellectual growth. These concepts developed by Froebel continue to resonate in early childhood education today.

1. Michael Steven Shapiro, Child's Garden: The Kindergarten Movement from Froebel to Dewey (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 1-17.
2. Ibid., 6-7.
3. Robert B. Downs, Friedrich Froebel (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 11-18.
4. Ibid., 17-26.
5. Ibid., 27-85.
6. Friedrich Froebel, Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel, trans. Emilie Michaelis and H. Keatley Moore (Syracuse: C. W. Bardeen, 1889), 69.
7. Friedrich Froebel, The Education of Man, trans. by W. N. Hailmann (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887), 1-2.
8. Downs, 55-56.
9. Froebel, Education of Man, 8.
10. Ibid., 68.
11. Genevieve M. Watson, "The Educational Philosophy of Froebel and Dewey Compared and Evaluated," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1931), 16.
12. Froebel, Education of Man, 5.
13. Ibid., 7.
14. Ibid., 5-10.

15. Ibid., 28.
16. Ibid., 5-10.
17. Ibid., 55.
18. Froebel held that all German educational institutions should take the kindergarten approach. Shapiro, 22.
19. Evelyn Weber, The Kindergarten: Its Encounter with Educational Thought in America (New York: Teachers College Press, 1979), 10-17.
20. Robert Rusk and James Scotland, Doctrines of the Great Educators, 5th edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 190-91; Weber, 10-17.
21. Friedrich Froebel, Pedagogics of the Kindergarten, trans. by Josephine Jarvis (New York: D. Appleman and Company, 1900), 146.
22. Downs, 93.
23. Ibid., 94.
24. William T. Harris, "Kindergarten in the Public School System," in Henry Barnard, Kindergarten and Child Culture Papers, 630, quoted in Weber, 29.
25. Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools For the Year Ending August 1, 1876 (St. Louis: Slawson, 1877), 95-96.
26. Shapiro, 45-63.
27. John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), 58.
28. Dewey, 59.
29. Downs, 96.