

Revitalizing a Humanizing Vision: Contesting GERM Policies with Froebel

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Abstract

For early childhood educators, few individuals have more historical significance than Friedrich Froebel. Froebelian approaches traveled across the Atlantic and inspired early childhood educators in the United States during the progressive era. Although early childhood professionals in the United States still celebrate the inventor of kindergarten, his vision for early education is inevitably altered when it is interpreted within alternative linguistic, cultural and historical contexts. Authored within this American context, this article aims to recognize Froebel's unique influences and contributions to early childhood education. The article has three parts. First, we resituate Froebel within his original context considering the other influential educational theorists and philosophers in 19th century Europe. We contrast continental, human science pedagogy with the many-sided progressive educational movement in the United States. Secondly, we imagine Froebel in dialogue with a contemporary director of an American early childhood center. This dialogue puts Froebel's philosophy of education in reciprocity with contemporary discourses of policy and practice. We advance an American interpretation of Froebel that considers him much more than a precursor to progressive education. We suggest Froebel provides a uniquely humanizing perspective that is desperately needed within conditions currently dominated by GERM policies.

Keywords

Continental pedagogy; Progressive education; Froebelian Pedagogy; Froebelian Philosophy; GERM policies

Introduction

Contemporary educational practice is besieged by the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). Pasi Sahlberg (2012) originally coined the term GERM to describe international trends toward neoliberal approaches to educational policy and practice. Characteristic effects of GERM policies include, “increased standardization, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects/knowledge, the growth of high stakes accountability and the use of corporate management practices as the key features of the new orthodoxy” (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019, p. 1).

Public schooling, in the United States, is besieged by bipartisan educational reform policies that align with GERM. Social efficiency ideology, which has been predominant in American curriculum reform since the early decades of 1900s (Null, 2016), has rendered kindergarten to 12th grade schooling particularly susceptible to the effects of GERM. With its own historical and philosophical foundations early childhood education and care (ECEC) has an extensive record of resistance, nonetheless ECEC has not been and is not immune to these trends.

The direct influence of GERM is intensifying in early childhood contexts. Hatch's

(2002) warnings about “accountability shovedown” have become quite evident in early childhood settings. The effects of “accountability shovedown” are especially apparent in kindergarten classrooms (Brown, 2016). An intensified focus on academic content is transforming kindergarten curriculum, turning **kindergarten into “the new first grade” (Bassock et al., 2016).** Decades ago, Kessler (1991) cautioned that notions of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) were insufficient justifications for the child-centered approaches to curriculum widely cherished by early childhood professionals. In the most recent National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement, developmental appropriateness continues to be mediated with concurrent interests in academic outcomes (NAEYC, 2020). Moreover, as pre-kindergarten is increasingly incorporated into k-12 systems of education, discourses of **accountability are overtaking “child-centered” traditions of ECEC (Graue et al., 2017).**

The unique historical and philosophical foundations of ECEC, particularly those contributed by Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), substantiate a basis for resisting acquiescence to GERM policies. However, ideas are transformed when they are applied to new contexts.

Therefore, Froebel’s innovative conception of early education and his enduring influence on early childhood curriculum and pedagogy have to a large measure been obfuscated in the United States. In English speaking contexts, the sustained influence of Froebelian approaches to ECEC are becoming increasingly indirect and implicit (Bruce, 2016). Explicitly articulating **Froebel’s conception of ECEC as a derivative of German traditions of educational theorizing reveals important aspects of Froebel’s contributions that have been lost in translation.** These uniquely German ways of thinking about

education strengthen the efforts of early childhood educators in the United States endeavoring resistance of GERM policies.

Aiming to more closely approximate how Froebelian insights were understood in their original contexts and revitalize them in contemporary Anglophone educational discourse, this article has three parts. The first part contrasts the continental pedagogical **tradition which contextualized Froebel’s** theorizing with the various progressive educational theories that have influenced Anglophone educational discourse. Second, we **highlight Froebel’s enduring influence by** interpreting commonplace practices in American ECEC classrooms through a Froebelian lens. Third, we will conclude with a discussion of how returning to the Froebelian roots of ECEC fortifies a humanizing vision for meaningful early childhood curriculum and pedagogical relations.

Contextualizing origins and interpretations

For early childhood educators in the **United States, Friedrich Froebel’s profound influence on curriculum and teaching is difficult to exaggerate.** His perennial influence is obscured, because the philosophical and cultural context from which the Froebelian approach to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy emerged is very different from the philosophical and cultural conditions of the United States in the mid-1800s and today. However, the incommensurable conceptual, cultural and linguistic qualities of two distinct traditions of educational theorizing renders translating continental pedagogy to English-speaking educators an extremely challenging endeavor. Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have nonetheless deemed dialogue between German Didaktik and North American curriculum theory

a worthwhile and mutually beneficial pursuit (Westbury et al., 2000).

The implications of this sort of cross-Atlantic dialogue are especially germane to early childhood curriculum pedagogy. An appreciation of the complimentary aspects as well as the potential incommensurability of these two traditions of educational theorizing provokes multiple important lines of inquiry. How have **Froebel's ideas been reformulated within** the contexts of Anglophone educational theorizing? **Froebel's ideas have been interpreted and then** reflectively or tacitly practiced in the United States, since early proponents of his methods, like Mary Mann and Elizabeth Peabody, sought to bring kindergarten into American education (Kohl, 2007). Thus, comparing and contrasting the conceptual orientations emanating from continental pedagogy and those derived from progressive educational reform movements in the United States will be the focus of this section.

Situating Froebel

Friedrich Froebel developed his approach to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy in the context of the German Enlightenment. Key enlightenment philosophers **unquestionably influenced Froebel's work** (Bruce, 2016). Present-day scholars, especially proponents of critical and postmodern theories, commonly scrutinize enlightenment thinking as a source of the Eurocentrism, and technocratic rationality. However, Susan Neiman (2016) argues otherwise. She asserts that embracing the intellectual contributions of Immanuel Kant and Jean Jacques Rousseau is a preferable alternative to pre-modern structures of authority or post-modern skepticism. Perhaps it is these roots in the German enlightenment that appealed to progressive American educators leading the kindergarten movement. Therefore,

highlighting notable tenets of this intellectual heritage is worthwhile for at least two additional reasons. Firstly, highlighting enlightenment **roots may shed light upon why Froebel's** approaches have enjoyed perennial appeal amongst early childhood educators in the United States. And, secondly, resituating Froebel in his original philosophical context and considering the varying cultural milieus in which his work has been interpreted and applied may bolster important aspects of Froebelian approaches that have been altered or forgotten in the United States.

There is perhaps no figure of the German Enlightenment more towering than Immanuel Kant. Philosophically speaking, **Kant's transcendental idealism advanced the** notion that practical reasoning derived from mature human rationality ought to guide human affairs (Ryan, 2011). For Kant, human reason developed through education, replaced the pre-modern authority of moral codes enforced by church or state. Education was fundamentally a process of human liberation, where gaining maturity meant becoming able to think for oneself. Thus, Kant considered enlightenment a process of education, a coming of age journey (Neiman, 2016).

Kant's notion of what it means to grow up and become educated or cultured remains a key concept of continental pedagogy. This liberating educational commitment to self-formation determination, was more explicitly **developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767-1835)** conception of *bildung*, but it is not easily translated in Anglophone settings. Moreover, it **is not the only facet of Kant's philosophy that** was later elaborated for the purposes of educational endeavors. The primacy of practice **was another salient feature of Kant's philosophy** with immense educational implications. In contrast to theoretical questions that aim to

uncover understandings of truth, practical inquiries focus on what can and should be done. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), F.D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Johann Herbart (1776-1841) were other leading intellectuals of the era who shaped continental educational theorizing. Their ideas contextualized the advent of Froebelian approaches to ECEC.

In his famous book on education, *Emile*, Rousseau (2019) put forth a fictional account illustrating an alternative approach to education. Like Kant, Rousseau was distrustful of the edicts of established authorities. Providing practical guidance with much greater degree of specificity than Kant, Rousseau advanced a view of education, where childhood is best spent protected from society. Rousseau is often credited as the initiator of an educational philosophy called romantic naturalism where children learn through encounters with the natural world, rather than the transmission of an **adult's knowledge (Hlebowitsh, 2005)**. Such an education, Rousseau believed, would eventually prepare young people to freely and critically interact with culture. These ideas countered strict discipline that only trained children to conform to existing cultural expectations.

Pestalozzi who was greatly influenced by Rousseau and directly influenced Froebel (Adelman, 2000), further developed and applied this child-centered vision of education. Several perennial ideas in early childhood education are rightly credited to Pestalozzi. He gave rise to holistic images of children (Pestalozzi, 1898). In his reflections on his work educating children in an orphanage he developed and operated in Stans, Pestalozzi illustrated intimate teacher-child relationships that accounted for children's physical and emotional well-being as critical components of their mental and moral

development (Friesen, in review). Additionally, object lessons were originally conceived by Pestalozzi (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Object **lessons involved "the observation**, description, naming and classification of objects. By presenting children with a series of objects and asking increasingly complex questions, teacher **could cultivate a 'natural' path of a child's** mental development from lower to higher levels of perception" (Sengupta, 2003, p. 96).

According to Pestalozzi, children's observations of natural objects was an ideal method for teaching children to become more sophisticated thinkers, capable of abstract reasoning (Carter, 2018).

F.D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Johann Herbart (1776-1841) are two additional education theorists whose ideas contextualized **the development of Froebel's approach to early** childhood education (Friesen, in review). They both conceptualized education as an academic discipline in its own right. At the onset of modern schooling, in his 1826 lectures of education that are widely unknown to English-speaking audiences, Schleiermacher advanced the primacy of practice, observing that educational practice has long preceded efforts to systematically theorize it. Therefore, in order to theorize education, Schleiermacher first defined it as an ethically interested enterprise that happens between the older and younger generations, addressing what the older generation actually wants from the younger (Friesen, 2020).

Herbart, Kant's successor as Chair of Philosophy and Education in Konigsbert (Friesen & Osguthrope, 2018), was also incredibly influential in Continental educational theorizing. Like Rousseau and Pestalozzi, **Herbart's notion of "perfectability" understood** children as having innate developmental capacities that unfold by interacting with the

natural world (English, 2013). In addition, like Schleiermacher, he did not rely upon theory to inform educational practice. Rather, for Herbart, theory allows teachers to become more discerning and intuitive when mediating **children's interactions with the world. This is called pedagogical tact, which involves "quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform, but [adapting to] ...the true requirements of the individual case"** (as cited in Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018, p. 256). Pedagogical tact appreciates the irresolvable tensions within any educational situation. It implies dialectical, hermeneutic, existential ways of thinking now commonly represented by the image of the pedagogical triangle (Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018).

This is the intellectual landscape that contextualized the origins of Frobelian approaches to early childhood education. One of the ways educational theorizing continued to develop in Germany was as a *Geisteswissenschaft*, or human science. Considering education a human science discipline in its own right, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) **carried on Schleiermacher's legacy and echoed Froebel's commitment to teacher training.** During a time of rapid industrialization and social change, Dilthey was deeply concerned about the predominance of theoretical lenses that mirror the natural sciences. Education, he insisted, is a human science discipline precisely because it constitutes historically, culturally, and socially situated pedagogical relationships (Friesen, 2020). Hence, in Germany hermeneutics, phenomenology, and biographical narrations have endured as holistic and humanistic ways of appraising educational experiences.

Americanizing Froebel

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was one of the most influential educators of early America, **and he was a contemporary of Froebel's and other originators of the continental pedagogical tradition** (Kendall, 2010). Interested in creating a uniquely American culture, Webster was best known for publishing textbooks designed to introduce children and illiterate adults to the essential rudiments of the English language. For Webster, language was the foundation for establishing a uniquely American culture (Kendall, 2010). Directly quoting Webster from the preface of *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking*, Walker (2003) **brings to light Webster's ultimate curriculum aims "to refine and establish our language, to facilitate the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and diffuse the principles of virtue and patriotism" (p. 25). This was done through strict discipline and rigid recitation lessons that starkly contrasted Froebel's inclination to design activities that were fulfilling for young children and honored their creativity.**

Throughout most of the 19th century many elite educational reformers in the United States studied at European universities and found inspiration in continental educational theories. Hence, in the early stages of the American system of public education, several influential educators were enthused by the more gentle and humane forms of educational theory and practice they were exposed to in Europe (Walker, 2003). The liberalism that pervaded the enlightenment, continental theories of education, as well as the curricular and **pedagogical practices advanced in Froebel's innovative schools resonated with the democratic sensibilities of numerous influential American educators.** For instance, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Mann traveled to Germany to **visit one of Froebel's closest friends and**

colleagues, Bertha von Marenholtz-Bulow. They were so enamored with her approach to educating young children, they brought her to the States to help them make a case for kindergarten in the United States (Kohl, 2006). **As Bruce (2016) observes, Froebel’s “followers inevitably interpreted his work according to the pressures and atmospheres- political, economic, and cultural- dominating and pervading the times in which they were operating” (p. 21).** Bertha von Marenholtz-Bulow’s interpretation of **Froebelian methods “focused on the manual work and the virtue of practical work involving the hands as something which could lay the foundation for the possibilities for future employment and work” (Bruce, 2016, p. 21).** Although this constitutes a subtle departure from Froebel’s actual approach, it clearly coincided with the visions of progressive education reformers in the United States. Broadly speaking, between 1890 and 1930 progressive educational reform in the United States embraced the innovations of industry and science (Walker, 2003).

In the early twentieth century, just leading up to the emergence of curriculum as an academic field of study in the United States, two leading intellectuals of the day, John Dewey and Edward Thorndike, had incompatible views of educational science (Eisner, 1994). Contrasting Dilthey’s insistence that pedagogy is a human science discipline, American educators were quite comfortable with educational theorizing that mirrored the natural sciences. Consequently, instead of preserving the primacy of practice imbued in continental educational theorizing, educators in the United States commonly consider curricular and pedagogical practices to be applications of theories derived from the social sciences. Thus, a subtle pragmatism is often infused in Americanized

(mis)interpretations of Froebel’s approach to ECEC.

This undercurrent of American pragmatism comes in two polemic varieties. The **first variety is represented by John Dewey’s** experimental approach to educational theory and practice. Dewey possessed a deeply abiding faith in the capacities of teachers. Moreover, he framed the overarching aim of developing human capacities through educational experience through the ethical lens of democracy as a way of living (Dewey, 2013). For Dewey, scientific thinking was a natural part of human experience. Thus, the scientific method structures the natural process through which all people, young and old, intelligently engage in personal, social and political problem solving (Dewey, 2013). As such, Dewey (2013) envisioned educational science as a participatory process, most effectively carried out by individuals with close proximity to the problems and contexts at hand.

On the other end of the spectrum, Edward Thorndike was advancing a view of **educational science very different from Dewey’s** perspective. Whereas democratic living inspired **Dewey’s educational philosophy, the prevalence of scientific efficiency shaped Thorndike’s** underlying worldview. Furthermore, Thorndike **did not share Dewey’s adoration for teachers’** intellect. Instead, from his point of view, teaching was more of a mechanical endeavor of transferring knowledge. From his perspective, educational science was an academic task, where experts discern principles and laws of efficient **and effective practices. Thorndike’s prescriptive** tone was clearly stated in the opening issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, where he (1910) boldly proclaimed,

A complete science of psychology would **tell every fact about everyone’s intellect**

and character and behavior, would tell the cause of every change in human nature, would tell the result which every educational force- every act of every person that changed any other or the agent himself- would have. (pp.6)

These two competing views of educational science were highly influential in the development of American curriculum during the early 1900s and for years afterward. Nearly fifty years ago, Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) argued that development is the ultimate aim of education. As leading psychologists of their day, **Kohlberg and Mayer aligned with Dewey's view** of educational science. Accordingly, they **emphasized children's interactions with the social and natural world as the key tenet of educational experiences that stimulate progression through a hierarchy of developmental stages. They eschewed Thorndike's view of educational science,** considering behavioral modification and ideologies of cultural transmission extraordinarily limiting as educational aims. Kohlberg and Mayer conveyed what would become a mainstay tenet of professional discourse among early childhood educators, who **favor "child-centered" curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices over adult-directed activities and standardized learning outcomes.** Unfortunately, the foundational article did not mention human science pedagogy as an alternative.

In the next section, the enduring value of Froebelian approaches to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy in American classrooms is explored. The following vignette imagines Friedrich Froebel joining a tour of a modern-day early childhood classroom. The vignette is presented through the words of a school director and highlights how contemporary professional language of early

childhood education reinterprets Froebelian principles. It illustrates how a contemporary American program director might explain the activities in developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms to parents visiting the school. We contend contemporary discourses of developmental appropriateness often mediate the pragmatic elements of GERM, while also attempting to sustain key elements of Froebelian inspiration. Aspects of continental pedagogy that were part of the original landscape of Froebelian approaches to curriculum and pedagogy are advanced as a unique contribution that support **English-speaking early childhood educators'** resistance of GERM policies.

A present-day school director meets Froebel

Oftentimes in my role as school director, I lead parents or caregivers of young children on **a school tour as they consider their child's early education opportunities.** As we watch, I proudly showcase play-based learning, watching children learn through beautiful, awe-inspiring exploration where curiosity and wonder lead to increased knowledge and understanding. And then I grow frustrated when the adult beside me, seeing a full classroom of children actively engaged, experimenting with their own hypotheses and making their own meaningful **discoveries, asks "But when do they learn anything?" As I prepare to explain the educational value of play to this earnest parent, I think of Froebel. I imagine him standing beside me, and hear his words: "If three hundred years after my death my method of education shall be completely established according to its idea, I shall rejoice in heaven" (Froebel, as cited by Marenholtz-Bülow, 1877).** With another century yet to go, I think he would be proud of what we see today of his philosophies in high quality ECEC today. However, it also occurs to me that many aspects of my school as well as my way of

describing children's educational experiences would be unrecognizable to Froebel. Our tour continues to the next classroom, and I imagine Froebel is now walking alongside us.

I begin by explaining that the educational environment has been intentionally created in a way that honors and respects children. At the sign-in table every child has a name plate they post to the magnetic board when they enter, a way to recognize and welcome those present while including those absent from the physical classroom community. Photos of the children and their family members **adorn one wall, while others display children's** artwork alongside works of art from around the world depicting cultural diversity and unity. **Open shelves within the children's reach entice** the children to take charge of their own education as they create, connect, and commune through play and self-activity. Children gather art supplies to create their own projects. Bins contain loose parts and manipulative toys for **children's solitary or communal exploration and** dramatic play. On this day the block area contains bins with farm animals; the teacher intentionally set these in place because one child has new chickens at home, and this provides an opportunity to create a home-school connection that includes all children. The tactile table, filled with dirt, trowels and dried corn and beans for planting, provide connections to nature and the thematic concept teachers hope to promote. Colored cardstock paper, glue, dried beans and bird seed are neatly arranged on a table where children can create mosaics that are as unique and diverse as they are. Children move freely about the classroom, choosing their activities and the amount of time they spend with each. One group of children spends their entire morning in the block area, creating an elaborate story that guides their construction. This is different from other occasions, when their

construction may lead their imagination and shapes their stories, or when children create with no plan or end product in mind. Another student concentrates her efforts on a large floor puzzle, apparently unaware of the noisy activities of those around her. Choosing books from the library shelf, children cozy up to a teacher on the couch, listening to her as she reads, questions, and invites conversation. Going outside, I find teachers and children on a playground rich with natural materials, loose parts, and structures encouraging big body movement, risk-taking, and fantasy play. Children with magnifying glasses inspect milkweed pods, while others push a decaying log over searching for termites and sow bugs in the exposed dirt. Children climb, run, ride trikes, climb *up* or slide down the slide, and dig in sand. One teacher, handed a book by a small group of children, sits beside them on a blanket and begins to read. Another teacher joins a child picking baby spinach leaves from one of the raised planters that pepper the yard. Activity abounds.

As the tour continues, I reference **Froebel's ideas as well as contemporary** cognitive scientists to rationalize these practices. **Connection and unity, I'd explain to the parent, is "the governing force in Froebel's philosophy and pedagogy and the broad foundation for all his developmental concepts" (Brosterman, 1995, p. 32). For Froebel, play was "the first means of development of the human mind" (Brosterman, 1995, p. 12), and he presumed the development of human minds to be part of a spiritually unified connection between children and the natural world. In time, Froebel's sense of spiritual unity was overridden by the presumed empirical objectivity of modern social sciences. The social sciences have advanced children's play as a crucial part of high quality ECEC, but departed from the governing force of Froebel's**

philosophical perspective. Cognitive scientists, for instance, have reconstituted play as an efficacious instrument for learning. According to Hassinger-Das, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2019), play contains the four ingredients necessary for learning: being mentally active, engaged, socially interactive, and building connections that **hold meaning to one's lives**.

These technical-scientific ways of framing early childhood education would not have occurred to Froebel in his historical **context. Moreover, the cognitive scientists'** instrumental perspectives are reflect a discourse of education that has been influenced by the GERM. After referencing Hassinger-Das et al.'s (2019) idea of the necessary ingredients for **learning to justify children's play, I notice my companion's reactions. The skeptical parent** looked satisfied, but I notice Froebel was a bit perplexed by my description. Seeing children moving throughout the classroom joyfully engaging with materials, peers, and caring adults, I was certain that Froebel would recognize at least some remnants of his beliefs and approaches in our present-day classrooms. Elements of play-based learning supported by **Froebel's educational philosophies can be found** in the active learning through free-flowing play and caring teacher-child relationships of contemporary classrooms. I presume, he would be pleased to observe children actively engaged in their own process of learning, evidence **supporting his belief that "through activity man creates himself. In activity he reveals himself"** (Froebel, as cited by Bultman, 2008, p. 12). As children move about the classroom following their own interests, they participate in activities of their own choosing, making meaning from both solitary and social interactions. They employ all their senses within a social setting that supports their role as architect and mastermind of their own learning. Their self-

activity is supported and valued by teachers **who, like Froebel, see children's play as an asset** to their self-development (Brosterman, 1995; Froebel, 1887).

But again, contemporary professional discourse reframes Froebel's **key principles**. Perhaps, cotemporary discourses diverge from a true Froebelian approach to the extent that the discourse is infected by the GERM. Bev Bos (1934-2016), a well-known and highly regarded early childhood educator, advocate, and speaker from California espoused another contemporary perspective on early childhood pedagogy that tainted by the influence of the GERM. She frequently shared the idea that the early **childhood professional must "do what is right for kids,"** saying, **"If it hasn't been in the hand...or the body...it can't be in the brain"** (Rosemont Community Preschool, n.d.). Though Froebel **would not conceive of consciousness as being "in the brain," one can see how Bos' commitment to** hands-on activities finds its roots in Froebel. **After all, Froebel adopted Pestalozzi's idea of teaching using 'object lessons' in which children** directly engage with physical objects as a way to understand and connect to abstract thoughts, language, and ideas (Froebel, 1887). Today, children play with toy cars, dolls, and dress-up clothes to create scenes from their own life, and learn about control, power, and social roles. Whether constructing puzzles or block towers, they learn spatial skills while developing a sense of efficacy. Of course, these materials are very **different from Froebel's Gifts. Nonetheless,** **hands-on learning expands children's concrete** experiences, expanding their knowledge of the world around them. When young children derive meaning from hands-on, active, developmentally appropriate play experiences, we are indebted to Froebel.

Froebel might not consider modern toys and learning materials to be improvements of

his Gifts, though he would appreciate seeing children using their imagination and creativity, which is a foundational principle of his philosophy of education (Brosterman, 1995; Tovey, 2017). **Froebel's kindergarten showcased** his gifts and occupations which children used to create forms of beauty, knowledge, and life. Remnants of those Gifts are found in the presence of blocks and parquet tiles, along with variations amid classroom materials, supplies, and manipulative objects children use to creatively express themselves. Whether sharing written, spoken, or dramatized stories, constructing playscapes from blocks and classroom materials, expressing ideas through **visual arts, or taking physical risks, children's** creativity and imagination emerges as they play and connect their own abstract ideas to the concrete world around them.

As a patient advocate for play, Froebel would likely appreciate positive attributes of discourse and practice observed during the tour of the contemporary school. He would see a learning environment intentionally planned to **captivate and respond to children's interests**. Extending beyond the classroom walls to include the outdoors, children make discoveries of delight as they interact with the natural world, communing with nature and others with delight and wonder. Froebel would appreciate observations of children finding connections as they move freely about, interacting with nature, literature and language, movement and music, and sharing their sense of wonder as they play with peers and teachers beside them. In the posted daily schedule, Froebel would also find elements from his kindergarten, including circle time as a way to create community while playing with music, fingerplays, and story; going outdoors for active movement and interacting **with nature; and an intent to support children's** natural curiosity, love of learning, and respect

for all, knowing that **"a reasoning and creative child [would have] fewer problems learning the three Rs or anything else" (Brosterman, 1995, p. 39)**. However, he would likely suggest schedules should maintain enough flexibility to be **responsive to children's interests**.

Froebel would see well-trained teachers in the role of facilitator and guide, supporting **children's playful learning and self-discovery** rather than controlling it. He would recognize **that the complexity of the teacher's multi-**faceted role still requires specialized training and education to meet each child's needs. Teachers actively engage with students, offering both passive and active support and encouragement. They deliberately observe students within the learning environment to further children's thinking and learning (Tovey, 2017). Care that is nurturing and kind is found in the attitudes and actions of teachers showing respect, honor, and dignity to children, their families, and to the special time of *childhood*. However, amidst all of the changes that have occurred over the past 200 years, what would Froebel say?

Revitalizing Froebel's continental roots

As the program director spoke about the development of the whole child, the active free-flowing play, and caring teacher-child relationships observed in the classroom at her school, she cited key tenets of DAP, while also referencing Froebelian principles. Imagining Froebel joining a tour of a contemporary early childhood program prompts consideration of how **the school director's up-**to-date professional discourse embraces as well as departs from Froebelian ideas. Thus far, we have imagined Froebel as a passive listener. Of course, he would have much to say about what he saw in the contemporary early childhood classrooms as

well as the program director's explanation of what they were observing.

In this section, we will imagine how Froebel might engage in a conversation with the program director. Separated by time, language, and culture it is unsurprising to note that two differing perspectives are in play. Of course, in a modern center designed for the education and care of young children, Froebel would inevitably notice departures from the philosophy and techniques he invented in the mid-1800s. Perhaps much more remarkable, is that after all this time has passed, a dedicated early childhood educator on the other side of the Atlantic professional proudly proclaims herself a **Froebelian! Far from forgotten, Froebel's** imaginary encounter with this 21st century American early childhood center would begin with a very warm and enthusiastic reception from the school director. Nonetheless, communication between Froebel and his admirer might face obstacles beyond their language barrier.

On the surface, Froebel and the school director have many shared values. They both embrace liberating visions of education and appreciate that educating young children is unlike educational endeavors designed for older people. If she explained the impact of GERM **policies, such as "academic shove-down" (Hatch, 2002)**, they would again see eye to eye. Together they would lament that the current conditions of early childhood education prompts parents to question why children are playing. They would again find themselves in agreement about the **value of children's play and holistic** development. Based upon all of this common ground, the school director is likely to admire Froebel even more, considering him a pre-cursor to the child-centered progressive pedagogical approaches she holds dear. However, if they were to thoroughly discuss the philosophical

rationales underlying these shared values, disparities would begin to emerge.

Froebel's philosophy of education does not neatly fit into popular categories of progressive education or contemporary American interpretations of child-centeredness. Historian Barbara Beatty (2017) contrasts **Froebel's distinctive worldview with John Dewey's influential philosophy of education. She explains that Froebel's approach to educating young children was** "more representative of early nineteenth-century formalism than Progressive Era modernism. His methods and materials, developed in the 1830s, were based in German naturalistic philosophy, not the increasingly empirical philosophy and psychology of progressive education" (p. 425). Wasmuth (2020) further elaborates, elucidating **Froebel's educational philosophy as part of a** deeply religious worldview that was grounded by a panentheistic metaphysical foundation. In **effect, the basis for Froebel's development of** educational principles and materials was an assumption that a divine creator is present in all creation, which includes human beings and everything that exists.

Froebel's metaphysical worldview was unorthodox in his day, and it greatly contrasts the more empirically oriented foundations of developmental and educational psychology. These disparate worldviews have potentially significant implications for early childhood practice. They are not always completely incompatible. However, they are not harmonious, like-minded philosophies either. Therefore, looking beneath the surface of observable practices and exploring philosophical **foundations enables us to imagine Froebel's** comments about contemporary American early childhood classrooms with his metaphysical beliefs in mind. What might Froebel have said to

the parent and the school director at the end to the tour?

Parent

We can imagine Froebel sharing the **school director's concerns about common sentiments that devalue play. Froebel's principle of balancing self-activity and guidance immediately comes to mind. The parent's presumption that adults guiding instructional activities is of greater educational value than children's self-directed play is a clear sign of imbalance. However, if the parent was also an educational psychologist, the rationale behind adult-guided direct instruction might come to the fore. One would imagine Froebel becoming quite concerned with an explanation of how direct instruction or any other rigid instructional protocol is "what works". To the dismay of many stakeholders, early childhood classrooms are becoming increasingly teacher directed (Brown et al., 2020). Certainly, Froebel would have deep concerns about such trends.**

Conceptually speaking, contemporary trends toward evidence based teacher-directed instructional practices are logical positivism and philosophical empiricism. These trends are strongly reinforced by GERM policies and they are pervasive in contemporary schools. Froebel would find the fragmented worldview of logical positivism abhorrent. The reductionism of behavioral objectives, behavioral modification techniques would not make sense to Froebel. We imagine he would encourage the parent to reconsider the essence of children and educational processes, reminding the parent that a child is more than a checklist of observable behaviors. Furthermore, for Froebel, educating children is about more than ensuring the acquisition of standardized set of knowledge and skills.

School Director

Imagined as a critic of GERM policies, the school director would likely nod her head in agreement with this response to current policy trends in early childhood education. The director also strives to advance holistic perspectives of children and educational processes. She **embraces Froebel's principles** but has interpreted them through a 21st century, American lens. In the United States such lenses are often inspired by pedagogical experimentalism of progressive educators like John Dewey and in early childhood education key proponents of developmentally appropriate practice (e.g. Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2009; NAEYC, 2020). While on the surface there is some level of continuity between Froebel and the American progressives that came after him, it is important not to overlook their philosophical distinctions. For example, as one of the main initiators of progressive education in the United States, John Dewey advanced a philosophy of education with its own distinctive metaphysical worldview.

If we imagine the school director to be a Deweyan progressive educator, she and Froebel would have philosophical common ground as well as disagreements. Ryan (2011) explains that Dewey followed in the footsteps of key figures of the German enlightenment like Kant and Hegel by rejecting dichotomies that separate objective facts and subjective values. In this sense, Dewey maintained the dialectical thinking of his continental predecessors. For this reason, it is **easy to see why Froebel's principles would** resonate with the school director. A dialectic of self-action and guidance, for example, is a shared focus for both of them. Nevertheless, in our imagined dialogue, the school director and Froebel are not completely on the same page.

While Dewey inherited key patterns of enlightenment thought, his advancement of American pragmatism provided a very different way of thinking about educational practice (Bellmann, 2004). This pragmatic way of thinking that remains a salient feature of American educational discourse (Castner, 2019; Null, 2016; Reinke et al., 2018; Tanner & Tanner, 2007), and for the purposes of this paper we presume it to be implicit in the school **director's reflections. Dewey rejected the transcendental assumptions that permeated Froebel's philosophy, and were characteristic of much of the Western enlightenment (Ryan, 2011). Contrasting Froebel's faith in God, Dewey's metaphysical worldview was predicated on the notion that mind and body are unified through a holistic image of experience. Thus, conceptions and perceptions of human experience, rather than a universal divinity, were the basic element of Dewey's worldview. Seeing fact and value together as interdependent components of human experience is a very different axiom than Froebel's belief in a divine structure that unifies all of God's creation.**

Dewey's pragmatic philosophy was adaptable and able to be reconciled with multiple conflicting philosophical orientation (Bellman, 2010). As evidenced in the vignette of the school tour, many progressive American educators justify children playing at school in ways that coincide with Dewey's **conception of experience**. However, other versions of American progressivism are prone to align with GERM policies. Although experiential (i.e. Deweyan) justifications of play may not **completely appeal to the main tenets of Froebel's worldview**, the school director justified play in pragmatic terms, which assuages a range of issues. The director defended the value of play in early childhood classrooms by categorizing it as developmentally appropriate experiences. The

parent's concerns were aptly assuaged by holistic descriptions of developmental domains and **assurance that play is pragmatic: "it works"**.

Froebel would offer different justifications for play that are not typically considered by early childhood professionals in the United States. He would likely consider the pragmatic worldview of American progressives too fragmented. After all, for him, unity and connection is not just an underlying feature of experience, but a foundation for understanding the world and all of humanity. We imagine he would be heartened to find a dedicated early childhood professional still inspired by his ideas, even though discourses and practices have greatly changed. However, Froebel might also encourage the director to consider the innate dignity of children living within a divinely structured world. Thus conceived, education is a **process of revealing the child's innate dignity** and gradually connecting it to a universal cosmic structure. Remnants of this Froebelian justification of play is still implicitly expressed by passionate early childhood professionals who honor children with their ethical commitments to practicing first-rate education and care.

Conclusion

It is important for early childhood educators to revitalize the ideas of Friedrich Froebel and other important continental educational theorists of his day. Too often, major theorists like Froebel are treated as mere precursors to or primitive iterations of contemporary discourses. Although challenging, it is important to appreciate these ideas in their original form at their time of inception. Otherwise, we run the risk of losing touch with key ideas put forth by the inventors of our field. By situating Froebel alongside his continental contemporaries and imagining him in dialogue

with contemporary Americans, we hope to **convey Froebel’s perennial relevance**. Froebel still implicitly and explicitly inspires early childhood professionals. In addition, we hope to convey his distinctiveness. Even if one does not ascribe to his worldview, Froebel and other continental pedagogues of his day still have much to teach us, especially amidst the challenging conditions brought about by the GERM.

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