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Friedrich Froebel, his life and his ideas

Helen Tovey

I wanted to educate men to be free, to think, to take action for themselves.
(Froebel, in Lilley, 1967: 41)

Froebel’s early life

Friedrich Froebel was born in 1782 in Oberweissbach, a small town in the Thuringian Forest in what is now Germany. His mother died when he was 8 months old and he spent a lonely, isolated early childhood, looked after by servants and his five older brothers. His father, a strict Lutheran pastor, was so occupied with his religious duties that he had little time to spend with the young Friedrich. It appears the young boy was often in trouble and could do little to please his father and stepmother. In his autobiography he refers to the ‘gloomy, lowering dawn’ of his early life (Froebel, 1886: 9). His isolation was made worse by his stepmother’s indifference and eventual rejection of him. He became an introspective child, spending much time on his own in the parsonage garden, in close contact with the natural world of plants, birds and insects. Here he developed the lifelong love of nature which was to shape his educational ideas.

Friedrich’s life changed when, at 10 years old, he went to live with a maternal uncle. His uncle was also a pastor but more gentle and kind than Friedrich’s own father and someone who put a loving religion into practice, showing the young boy the patience and affection which had been lacking from his earlier life. Here he experienced much greater freedom, attending school, playing with boys of his own age and roaming the surrounding countryside. Froebel later claimed that the contrast between the two family environments had a profound effect on the growth of his educational ideas (Froebel, 1886).

Froebel left school at 15 with an aptitude for mathematics and an intense love of the natural world. He spent 2 years apprenticed to a forester where he was largely left to himself but where he began the long process of self-education by studying texts on botany, classifying plants and trees and engaging in long walks through the woods. Even at this young age, Froebel was searching for the meaning of life, the nature of mankind and the spiritual unity which he believed connected all existence. An opportunity to study at Jena University, then a centre of new, radical philosophical ideas, opened up a range of areas of study, but this was to end after 2 years when Froebel was sent to the university prison for unpaid debts. These were caused partly by his...
generosity in lending money to others and partly by his apparent lack of concern over practical matters such as finance, which continued throughout his life.

Froebel studied an eclectic mix of subjects including botany, mathematics, architecture and crystallography. Most of these were self-taught. Studying crystals was highly significant to Froebel as he believed that crystals revealed the universal patterns of life in their growth of form, beauty and harmony. After working as a curator in a mineral museum, he had many different occupations including tutoring, farming and also as a soldier in the Prussian army fighting Napoleon. On the verge of taking up a career in architecture, he decided to pursue his ideals in education after working at the progressive Frankfurt School run by a former pupil of Pestalozzi. Froebel was impressed by Pestalozzi’s ideas on active learning and direct experience, and Pestalozzi was a formative influence on his ideas. However, Froebel eventually rejected Pestalozzi’s approach as lacking an overall coherence and for keeping separate, rather than integrating, subject areas.

Froebel formed his own school for children from 7 years old at Keilhau in Thuringia. This was a democratic community where adults and children lived together in harmony, sharing the community tasks of working on the farm, tending the animals and growing fruit and vegetables for the school kitchens. There was a respectful approach to discipline and, where necessary, children
and staff would discuss and decide an appropriate consequence for any misbehaviour. Children and teachers spent much time outdoors learning geography, history, science and nature in practical ways, mapping the local area from the hilltops, damming up streams and acting out battle scenes from history. Festivals were celebrated, and music, songs, dance and drama were central to the community life. Education was active, meaningful and engaging (Liebschner, 1992).

However, Froebel increasingly realised that education would never be a force for regenerating society unless there was provision for the youngest children. The early years of life, he concluded, are the most powerful and influential and they are the foundation on which all later learning is built.

The birth of the kindergarten

It was not until he was in his mid-50s that Froebel found his real passion, the education of the very youngest children. The first ‘kindergarten’ opened in 1837 in Bad Blankenburg, a small village close to the Thuringian mountains in what was then Prussia. Froebel recalls in his autobiography how he struggled for a few years to find an appropriate name for his new venture as he did not want to use the words ‘institution’ or ‘school’, which implied more formal schooling and institutional life. Rather he saw it as a community where children could grow and learn at their own pace, with adults who understood their development and cultivated their learning, just as good gardeners tend young plants. He gained inspiration as he was walking with a colleague in the beautiful Thuringian mountains and he shouted out to the hills,

Eureka! I have it! Kindergarten shall be the name.

(Froebel, 1886: 137)

The word ‘kindergarten’ combined the human (kinder) with the natural (garten) and it could mean both a ‘garden of children’ and a ‘garden for children’ (Weston, 2000). The word captured Froebel’s vision of a place that was in tune with the natural development of children, where they could grow and develop in harmony with nature, a place that cultivated the unique capacities of each individual as part of a community of learners.

About 50 young children between the ages of 2 and 7 attended the kindergarten. It was situated in the village square in Blankenburg, so was a central part of the community and easily accessible to children and families. The kindergarten was inclusive, unlike the schools of the time, which were segregated by class or religion. It was open from 6 a.m. until 7 p.m., thereby offering flexible provision for working parents. Children brought sandwiches, which were shared together, and clean, mended clothes were available for the poorest children. Many children had to be washed in the village fountain before going in (Weston, 2000).

The ‘gifts and occupations’

The kindergarten was resourced with specially devised materials for children’s play and learning which Froebel called ‘gifts and occupations’. These included small soft crocheted balls on string; wooden blocks; materials for weaving, sewing, drawing and painting; wooden pattern boards; peas and sticks for constructing; and clay, sand and water. (See Chapter 5 for details about the gifts and occupations.) Stories, circle games, singing, dancing, music and finger plays were important parts of the day.

Froebel set up a community workshop for the production of his educational materials and installed a press to print explanations on their use. The most skilled carpenters and printers were
employed, as the aesthetics of the materials were very significant to Froebel. It was also important that everyone understood the purpose and value of the materials they were making. This was a real community endeavour.

The garden

The kindergarten included a garden area for play outdoors and enough space so that each child had their own plot of land for gardening (see Figure 1.2). Here they could sow seeds, tend the plants and harvest the produce, developing an awareness of the cycles of life and the changing seasons. The small individual gardens, each with its wooden name label, were encircled by the communal gardens. Children were free to plant what they liked in their own gardens but were expected to share in the care of the communal gardens. This illustrated Froebel’s educational philosophy, which emphasised the individual at the heart of a loving whole community, and freedom tempered by responsibility.

The mother and family songs

Froebel, based on his detailed observations of babies, understood that learning starts at birth and that parents, particularly mothers, are their children’s first educators and must be involved in children’s learning. He devised a series of songs and rhymes, the forerunners of today’s finger rhymes and Action Songs, for mothers to share with their babies and toddlers at home. Mothers and educators working together could be a powerful force of change in society, he argued (see Chapter 24). It was in the publication of the ‘Mother Songs’ that Froebel brought together all his educational ideas, and he claimed it as his finest achievement.
**Education, training and the importance of women educators**

Froebel promoted his educational ideas on the kindergarten through lecture tours, articles, open letters and weekly newspapers. His ideas spread rapidly, and within 10 years there were more than 50 kindergartens in Germany. He realised that transforming the education of young children required teachers who were deeply knowledgeable about young children’s development and learning (see Chapter 4).

At that time teaching was an all-male profession and it was considered unacceptable for women to work professionally outside the home. However, Froebel believed that education would never succeed unless it included women (see Chapters 4 and 27). He put forward his ideas at an education conference, but they were ridiculed, and his speech was ‘drowned by the laughter of the all-male audience’ (Liebschner, 1992: 28). Despite this, Froebel succeeded in setting up the first specialist training college for women kindergarten teachers in Europe, offering certified courses in the Froebel approach. Clearly, Froebel was way ahead of his time in promoting the role of women as educators, but his rather idolised view of women as the best teachers of young children may also have contributed to the gender imbalance in the early years workforce which is so evident today.

One of his ardent followers, Baroness von Marenholtz-Bülow, dedicated her life to spreading the kindergarten movement, undertaking lecture tours throughout Europe and setting up training colleges. She describes her first meeting with Froebel, who was known by some as ‘the old fool’:

> I met on my walk this so called ‘old fool’. A tall, spare man, with long gray hair, was leading a troop of village children between the ages of three and eight, most of them barefooted and but scantily clothed, who marched two and two up a hill, where, having marshalled them for a play, he practised with them a song belonging to it. The loving patience and abandon with which he did this, the whole bearing of the man while the children played various games under his direction, were so moving, that tears came into my companion’s eyes as well as into my own and I said to her ‘This man is called “an old fool” by these people; perhaps he is one of those men who are ridiculed . . . by contemporaries, and to whom future generations build monuments’.

*(Marenholtz-Bülow, 1891: 1–2)*

**Closure of the kindergartens**

Through his work Froebel convinced many others of the significance of his educational ideas. But he also experienced ridicule, criticism and hostility, particularly from the Orthodox Church, which accused him of heresy.

The Prussian court was suspicious of Froebel’s aim of developing free, thinking, independent people. In 1851 it imposed a ‘Kindergarten Verboten’ banning order, believing – mistakenly – that the kindergartens were a front for atheist and socialist ideas. All kindergartens were closed and Froebel did not live to see the ban lifted. He died in 1852.

**Spread of Froebel’s ideas**

Not surprisingly, attempts to suppress Froebel’s educational approach had the opposite effect. Many of his followers and trained kindergarten teachers left Germany and set up kindergartens and training courses across Europe, America and Asia.
In England the Froebel Society (founded in 1874) and the National Froebel Union (founded in 1887) were especially influential in training teachers and promoting Froebel’s ideas. They later combined to form the National Froebel Foundation (see Chapter 9) and the current Froebel Trust, which is active in promoting Froebelian ideas and supporting research, scholarship, training, conferences and educational projects, including an innovative project in Soweto, South Africa (see Louis, 2012 and Chapter 14 this volume).

The Froebel Educational Institute, now part of Roehampton University, London, was founded in 1892 and the 3-year training course was highly regarded as the specialist course for teachers of young children (see Chapter 27). Today, there are Froebel Certificate Courses at Roehampton, London, Edinburgh and Canterbury Christ Church universities. They examine Froebelian ideas in a contemporary context and help practitioners to reflect on and develop their own practice.

Froebel’s ideas helped shape the ideas of other nursery pioneers – for example, Margaret McMillan, who developed the English Nursery Schools, was a member of the Froebel Society for many years. Susan Isaacs, researcher, teacher and first director of the Child Development Unit at the University of London, also drew strongly on Froebelian ideas.

Froebelians had a strong influence on the development of policy and practice for young children. Their ideas can be found in many UK government reports, including the Hadow Report (Board of Education, 1933), the Plowden Report (1967), the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE, 2000), Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002b) and Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2014).

Today there are very few schools called ‘Froebel’ schools (see Chapter 33), compared with say ‘Steiner’ or ‘Montessori’ schools. Froebel wanted his ideas to be accepted by all rather than seen as a separate ‘method’. Froebelian practice remains closely linked with high-quality provision today and many Froebel-trained educators are influential in the leadership of nursery schools.

![Figure 1.3](image-url) Exploring cause and effect in a Froebelian garden
Friedrich Froebel, his life and his ideas

and children’s centres, in university Early Childhood Studies degree programmes and in many key local authority advisory and inspection roles.

Froebel’s ideas are embedded in many approaches and practices today. For example the image in Figure 1.3 shows a Froebelian garden today offering rich potential for active learning in nature. They have been enriched over time by other significant pioneers of early childhood and through deepening understanding of young children and their lives, learning, emotions and relationships. However, some ideas have become diluted or muddled over time and detached from the principles which once underpinned them (see Chapters 4 and 5).