Froebel’s contributions to early childhood pedagogy

Publication details
Louie Werth
Published online on: 01 Aug 2018

How to cite: Louie Werth. 01 Aug 2018, Froebel’s contributions to early childhood pedagogy from: The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice, Re-articulating Research and Policy  Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
This chapter discusses four key areas of early years practice in which Froebel has made a significant contribution: the Gifts and Occupations and the Mother Songs (as pedagogical resources and tools); the importance of play (as a mode of learning); and outdoor learning (in unity with the natural environment). Though each of these areas merits an entire book, this chapter takes a short but focused look at Froebel’s own views on his contributions in each area and how recent research and practice has represented or developed these aspects of early years provision. The chapter also emphasises that major themes in Froebel’s writings are observed across these key aspects of practice, reminding us that Froebelianism is not a set of activities, but a set of principles that permeate and resonate in all that Froebel said and did.

Froebelian Gifts and Occupations

Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations were carefully designed pedagogical objects and purposes that were bestowed upon children in the kindergarten (see Chapters 1 and 3). The two most significant writings by Froebel on the Gifts and Occupations are chapter XI of *Education by Development* (1902), *A Complete Epistolary Statement of the Means of Employment of the Kindergarten*, and the text, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* (1899), most of which is dedicated to the first Gifts and Occupations and how they are to be used.

In *Education by Development*, Froebel beautifully describes the initial intent of encouraging young children to engage with the particular objects that were the Gifts:

> The retroactive effect on the child which becomes perceptible through his use of objects is in the beginning merely a twofold one, the testing, as it were, of the things around him as to their independent existence and also as to their free movability, and second, the exercise and the feeling of his own power.  

(*Froebel, 1899: 312*)
Such an approach exemplifies experiential and investigative play and demonstrates an understanding of early learning experiences built upon inquisitiveness and self-discovery. The chapter continues through the sequence of Gifts and articulates their perceived educational merit:

By means of this manifestation of form and movement these solids and the play with them give many opportunities for the observation and consideration of form, size, and number (particularly for a somewhat advanced stage of childhood), and in many ways introduce the child into the phenomena of nature and life around him. They are therefore, as it were, the middle point and source of the later training for school and life, as well as for the union of these.

(Froebel, 1899: 317)

Froebel's emphasis on mathematical areas of development through engagement with Gifts and Occupations is clear to see as is his support of play as a pedagogical tool for learning. This comment also demonstrates his willingness to see the Gifts as valuable for a range of age groups and a perception of the Gifts and Occupations as foundational resources for later life and learning.

It is clear that Froebel envisions a logical progressive order through the Gifts; his chapter deals with the progressive points of learning that children will accomplish as they progress through and utilise each Gift.

I have already intimated that each following plaything is necessarily presupposed in and required by the preceding.

(Froebel, 1899: 319)

Froebel's Pedagogics of Kindergarten helpfully outlines instructions for each 'play thing' discussing its merit and educational benefits and explaining how each builds on learning from the previous Gift. One very valuable section to this text is his Plan of an Institution in which Froebel clearly outlines the overarching principles and practices that make up the Gifts.

The spirit and character of these means of employment, and so of instruction, are therefore that 1. They proceed from unity, and develop in all manifoldness from unity in accordance with the laws of life . . . 2. The aim of each of the means of employment, and likewise of education, is purely human instruction and cultivation . . .

(Froebel, 1895b: 18)

The theme of unity is evident throughout the text as are the educative elements, particularly with regards to mathematical learning. As well as the important themes of unity and education, the chapter also discusses how each learning moment, however big or small, represents a whole; and like a kernel, further learning can develop from it. Froebel also highlights the central role of parents and the inclusion of guidance to ensure that the Gifts are used to their fullest potential.

In summary, Froebel's own writings on the Gifts and Occupations show an emphasis on exploratory and progressive learning. They also demonstrate the emphasis on the role of parents as guiding, supporting and deepening children's experiences with the resources, assisted by the written materials he provides. The theme of unity in particular pervades this work as Froebel discusses a unity between the child's inner and outer impulses and the experiences of learning as a way of developing unity with nature and God. The practicalities of each task and Gift and the learning that accompanies it are made clear and take up a large amount of Froebel's writing on this area.
Recent literature (2000–2014)

Contemporary literature includes specific interpretations and discussions of Froebel’s Gifts, Occupations and block play. The Gifts and Occupations are frequently cited as central and synonymous with Froebel, and his work (Moore, 2002; Manning, 2005). Tovey (2013) highlights the importance of seeing beyond the Gifts as a resource to an understanding of the ideas that underpin the resource. Similarly, Read (2006) states that the Gifts and Occupations were imbued with philosophical and political beliefs and many writings on the subject highlight the centrality of unity – parts and whole that children were to learn through engaging with the Gifts (Manning, 2005; Read, 2006; Moore, 2002; Wolfe, 2002). Read (2006) suggests that Froebel did not expect young children to fully understand the principles of unity between the inner and outer life, man, woman, nature and God that the Gifts intended to teach; rather, Froebel intended that the Gifts would guide children closer to these understandings.

The role of the teacher during block play and involvement with the Gifts and Occupations is also highlighted. Gallach (2006) uses Froebel’s Gifts and Occupations with ideas on the learning environment by the Italian educator, Maria Montessori (1870–1952) to describe the role of the teacher as one who arranges the materials that do the teaching; and Manning (2005), Tovey (2013) and Weida (2013) introduce Froebel’s concept of the teacher as a guide to learning.

A key theme in the literature is the potential benefits children may experience during block play and engagement with the Occupations. Jeynes (2006) states that Froebel anticipated that the resources could be used simultaneously to develop children’s cognitive and sensory abilities. Others have argued that the Gifts and Occupations promote further developmental gains or learning opportunities, for example: spatial awareness and working effectively with others (Tovey, 2013; Anderson, 2010); fine motor skills (Bakker, 2013); language acquisition (Manning, 2005); concepts of opposition, difference, texture and shape (Read, 2006); symbolic representation (Whinnett, 2012); number and creative play (Read, 2013); drawing and imagination (Weida, 2013); concepts of lost and found (Tovey, 2013), interconnectedness (Wellhousen and Keif, 2001) and mathematical development (Weida, 2013; Tovey, 2013). These learning areas are very much in line with the principles that Froebel conceived of when considering the value and purpose of the Gifts, Occupations and block play. However, another large theme in the literature is the demise of the original Gifts and Occupations and the newer forms of activities and Occupations that are perceived to be ‘in the spirit’ of the Froebelian Gifts and Occupations (see Chapter 6).

When considering the ‘demise’ of the Gifts, authors have noted that the perception of a strict pedagogical approach, which was perceived to have been articulated by Froebel, alienated many potential followers. It is noted that many revisionists abandoned more organised approaches to using the Gifts and Occupations and instead developed more free play approaches (Gallach, 2006; Nawrotzki, 2006). However, whilst the formalisation of the methods of using the Occupations is cited as a reason for the demise (Manning, 2005), Wellhousen (2002) argues that Froebel designed the Gifts to be free and open and that a selection of his suggestions became a standard to follow. It is also suggested that some of the Gifts and Occupations were dropped during the revisionist period on physiological grounds (Brehony, 2013) whereas other teachers utilised them but discarded the philosophical and symbolic elements of the resources so that the adoption of some of the Gifts in the UK school system became disconnected from Froebel’s philosophical tenets. Instead, the Gifts were adopted as resources that served an educational policy which sought a skilled manual workforce (Read, 2013).

Manning (2005: 373) suggests that losing the rich heritage of the Gifts constitutes ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’, adding that their demise was exacerbated by subtle changes in the approaches used by the kindergarten movement in response to social pressures and the
‘bastardisation’ of the products by toy companies (ibid: 375). Though Manning laments the loss of the original Froebelian Gifts and Occupations, Whinnett (2012) suggests that the modern version of Gifts and Occupations is wooden block play and construction and workshop experiences. She argues that Froebelian learning concepts are met through these and other activities, such as weaving, paper folding and malleable materials. Likewise, Tovey (2013) suggests a range of activities considered to be Froebel’s Occupations. These include painting and drawing, threads and punched cards for sewing, peas and sticks, clay, stones and sand, paper cutting, stick arranging and many more. These practical activities can be linked directly to specific practices outlined by Froebel in his writings on the Occupations; or to alternative activities that maintain the principles and original learning intentions of the Froebelian Gifts and Occupations.

In conclusion, contemporary scholars highlight the unique contribution Froebel made – and continues to make – to education through his Gifts and Occupations and the centrality of these to his educational theories. The role of the teacher as a guide is noted as are the wealth of educational benefits afforded by engaging with the Gifts and Occupations and block play. The literature also chronicles the demise of the Gifts as revisionists instigated changes that impacted the place of the Gifts and Occupations within Froebel’s curriculum. While Manning (2005) articulates a need to re-examine the original Gifts, their construal and purposes as educational resources, Tovey (2013) and Whinnett (2012) demonstrate how both the original Froebelian Occupations and new ideas that utilise the same principles are still active in many early childhood settings.

**Mother Songs and Finger Plays**

Froebel recognised and emphasised the importance of singing and musical experiences for young children. Froebel was so convinced of the importance of singing that, when describing the characteristics necessary to work with children in his nurseries he claimed that ‘a liking and capacity for singing, are indispensably requisite’ (Froebel, 1899: 232).

The greatest example of Froebel’s support of singing was his creation of the Mother Songs text. This text included songs, hand movements that could accompany each song and descriptions of the purpose and learning that would occur through the song.

There are a number of different areas in which Froebel conceived singing to be beneficial and these will be briefly explored before considering some of the contemporary Froebelian writings on these issues. One key element is the issue of intimacy and singing as a way of further strengthening the mother-child bond which Froebel valued so deeply:

> 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.

*(Froebel, 1902: 74)*

The emotive aspects of singing (feeling) are suggested as ways of making language and words more engaging and significant to young children:

> The influence of the word is yet more heightened by the law of movement (the rhythm) and by the singing tone (the mother’s way of singing), because, in this way, the word has an influence on the mind, on the thought, by means of the feeling.

*(Froebel, 1899: 52–3)*
Singing was also conceived of as having an effect on musical ability:

the singing by quite small children when they are quiet . . . should be yet more observed and developed by those who have the charge of children, as the first germ of future development in melody and song.

(Froebel, 1885: 38–9)

Singing was not for the sole purpose of musical development, but instead part of the holistic development of the child:

the employment with colours has by no means as yet in view the training of a painter; and just as little has the employment with tune and song the object of training a musician. But these employments aim at and produce, first of all, in man, an all-sided development and presentation of his nature; they are, in general, the needful food for the spirit.

(Froebel, 1885: 265).

Another learning aspect related to this area of holistic development is how singing gives opportunity for children’s self-expression and experimentation:

But singing is no less essential. For even the easily resulting and again easily vanishing, echoing tone produced in one’s own throat or by one’s own members, or by ringing and resonant objects (glass, bell, metal, etc.), must serve for creative representations of inner conceptions, sensations, feelings, and indeed ideas.

(Froebel, 1899: 62)

Froebel conceived of singing as serving a number of purposes – strengthening relationships, language development, musical ability and self-expression. There was also a larger intention in the Mother Songs text, which related to conceptions of childhood and the role of the child within the family:

with each new born child in each family experience has shown that the life of the child in relation to the whole family through all conditions of life is, alas, only too little observed. Hence the Mother-Play and Nursery Songs, just named . . . has been hitherto so little understood, so little acknowledged, and still less brought into the family and used there . . . that it [Mother’s Songs] not only shows [parents] the means, way, and manner, the object and aim, of such training, but also actually produces, at its most important period a family life which fosters childhood in such a way.

(Froebel, 1899: 53)

Froebel became frustrated with the lack of uptake of his Mother Songs text, believing them to be valuable in supporting mothers to sing with their infants and enabling the whole family to conceive of and foster childhood in a more positive way. The songs would effect a shift in family thinking with regards to the place and role of the child as a catalyst for greater unity.

Whilst the content of the songs and the hand actions that accompanied them were carefully designed, specified and explained, Froebel was not prescriptive in his approach to the use of song:

My second remark is that it is of no consequence that precisely these songs and these tunes shall be sung which have been suggested by myself. They have been merely put forward by
Froebel was actively involved in supporting mothers and teachers to use singing to connect with young children and support their development. But he also believed that mothers and teachers could use singing independently to good effect, though this belief was underpinned by a conception of innate maternal feelings, which was typical of his time.

For Froebel, the use of singing, finger plays and the bond between adult and child was more important than specific song content. Unlike the early texts that explain his Gifts and Occupations, which had specific ideas of what the Occupations should be and the order in which they should be introduced, Froebel offers greater freedom with singing and song. This freedom is more closely related to the concepts of closeness and unity as facilitators of learning than the order, logic and structure that gives meaning to the Gifts and Occupations.

Recent literature (2000–2014)

Several contemporary scholars have highlighted the significance of Froebel’s Mother Songs for current early years practice, referring to their theoretical and philosophical foundations, to the benefits of singing that current research evidence can illuminate, to the purposes of singing pedagogies and to suggested approaches that honour Froebel’s ideas.

Tovey (2013) highlights the Froebelian roots of contemporary early years practices that include finger plays, action songs and ring games and outlines a number of Froebelian themes relating to the using of singing in early years settings. These include the relationship between mother and child, the connection between movement, rhythm, rhyme and learning, developing symbolic awareness, making meaningful connections between songs and the child’s own life and developing respect for others. She also emphasises the moral and spiritual content of Froebel’s Mother Songs, which is less evident in contemporary nursery songs (Powell and Goouch, 2015).

Tovey argues that the principles that underpinned and informed Froebel’s development of his songs and rhymes are more important than adoption of the songs themselves, as Froebel himself acknowledged. He also recognised that his Gifts and Occupations did not cater for the very youngest children and this realisation led to the creation of the Mother Songs text in which touch and tickling rhymes are connected to Froebelian notions of unity (Baker, 2012). In his Finger Plays, Froebel shows how unity of the whole precedes but is connected to the parts. Bruce and Spratt (2011) illustrate this principle, outlining not only the benefits of finger rhymes (developing phonological awareness, the rhythm of language, relationships and physical development), but also showing how underpinning principles are enacted in Froebelian pedagogy. Finger plays are introduced sequentially: stage 1 focuses on rhymes that use the whole hand so as to introduce the concept of unity; stage 2 is for rhymes that represent the specific part of the body (heads, shoulders, knees and toes, for example); and finally the fingers are used for symbolic representation of other things (two little dickie birds, for example).

The use of songs and singing to demonstrate or develop closeness (Ouvry, 2012), to reinforce and establish routines and everyday events or to soothe children, reveals that singing is deployed for a range of purposes (Powell and Goouch, 2015), which Tovey (2013) connects to Froebel’s beliefs about order and regularity as well as spontaneity.

Baker (2012) cites recent research evidence to support her argument of the importance of singing in the mother–child relationship and shows how music and movement can help children connect with their heritage, community and culture. Spratt (2007) – linking Froebel’s holistic
Froebel’s contributions

philosophy to the Rose Review’s (2005) recommendations for an integrated phonics approach with multi-sensory learning – highlights how creative arts activities can enable development across multiple domains.

Ouvry (2012) considers Froebelian theory and song as a means to make connections between home, community and early years setting. She refers to the importance of observation, effective musical environments and adult support, which help to ensure that children’s opportunities to engage with music making are maximised.

This section has highlighted some of the recent Froebelian texts on singing. Chapter 24 outlines the findings from a recent study that examined the role and place of singing with young children in contemporary settings through the lens of Froebel’s philosophy and principles.

The Froebelian approach to play

Froebel articulates strong support for play as crucial in young children’s development. It is in Education of Man that Froebel first penned a now often quoted description on the value of play:

Play is the highest stage of the child’s development at this time; for it is freely active representation of the inner ... It produces, therefore, joy, freedom, satisfaction, repose within and without ...

(Froebel, 1885: 30)

It is the description of play as the ‘highest stage’ that likely underpins the popularity of this statement. Froebel’s support of young children engaging with play and the use of the term ‘development’ shows a clear commitment to play as a pedagogical tool – it is more than just ‘free time’ but is itself a time of deep learning. Froebel’s rationale concerns the idea of play as a form of expression and representation for the child. This could perhaps be best understood as the idea of children ‘acting out’ what they know think and feel through play and using play as a context in which to extend and develop their knowledge. Froebel’s assertion that, ‘Play, that is, freely active representation and exercises of every kind’ (1885: 228) demonstrates his understanding of the purpose of play within the context of personal expression and symbolic representation:

To what has been already written concerning play belongs the following. The plays of boys of this age, that is, the freely-active employments of this age, show a three-fold difference; they are either imitations of life and of the phenomena of actual life; or they are the freely-active applications of what has been learned; or they are completely spontaneous, symbols and representations of the spirit of each kind of object by materials of every sort.

( Ibid: 228)

Whilst terms such as ‘spontaneous’ and ‘freely-active’ may imply a looseness or freedom to the play, Froebel clearly articulates the importance of an adult guided approach:

play at this age must be guided, and the boy developed for it; that is, his individual life (his school life, and his life of outward experience) must be made so rich that it must necessarily break forth in joy from within.

(Froebel, 1885: 229)

This is a very important point to note regarding Froebel’s approaches to play. He did not see a dichotomy between spontaneous and freely active play and the need for teachers to support,
guide and develop play. This is further emphasised at the end of this short section where Froebel, after explaining a range of different play activities that boys [children] engage in, states:

the spirit of the play is but rarely comprehended, and the plays are but seldom managed in accordance with the needs of the boy.  

(Froebel, 1885: 229)

That the ‘spirit of the play is rarely comprehended’ suggests an approach to play where children left alone may not necessarily grasp or reach their full play potential. It can be surmised that Froebel’s passion for play derives from a construct of play as a form of expressing and exploring one’s self and the world in relation to one’s self at the foundation of learning. Whilst creativity, spontaneity and a sense of freedom in play is commended, Froebel also strongly believes in the importance of freedom with guidance to ensure play reaches its full potential as an educative methodology.

**Recent literature exploring the Froebelian approach to play (2000–2014)**

Within the body of recent literature on Froebel, play and its centrality to Froebelian pedagogy is often explored explained and applied, though it is rarely critically discussed except in the work of Brehony (2003, 2013). This review will highlight the myriad of points and comments made about Froeblian approaches to play before engaging more specifically with the crucial work of Brehony, (2003, 2013) on this issue.

Froebel’s philosophy is typified as one which highlighted the importance of play (Manning, 2005). Froebel’s concept of play as part of children’s nature, and his belief in giving children freedom to play, are also broadly mentioned (Bradford, 2012; Penn, 2009). Brehony (2003) states that in the opinion of most educators, Froebel is considered an ‘apostle of play’, as evidenced by the range of ideas related to Froebel and play which are articulated.

Willekens (2009) highlights the metaphysical and spiritual elements of Froebel’s approach to play, his perception of creative play as a means of children developing their innate manifold faculties so as to become part of the cosmic whole. Willekens (2009) also explains how resources, songs and techniques devised by Froebel gave space for individual creativity while also helping to develop children’s imaginations into ‘cosmic totality’.

Russell and Aldridge (2009) also suggest Froebel conceived of play as a form of spiritual expression and, by highlighting various links, make the argument that Froebel’s perceptions of play may have had a transformative effect on Carl Jung’s views on play. The article also explains Froebel’s belief in play being connected to educational development and its use as a form of artful expression.

Adleman (2000) states that one of the two essential qualities of a child centred education, according to Froebel, was that children’s abilities to be fully engaged in play – and thus the idea of play as a powerful source for sustaining a child’s interests – be recognised and acted upon. Strauch-Nelson (2012) argues that the theme of self-activity and play is one of the lasting influences of Froebel on early childhood pedagogy. She briefly explains that children’s affinity and love of play activities led Froebel to believe that play would be an effective methodology for teaching and learning. Play is also depicted as a methodology through which children learn the skills to grow as a human being (Manning, 2005) demonstrating the holistic approach to play and development advocated by Froebel.
Bruce (2012a) (Ed.) contains frequent references to play in the context of writings on Froebel’s various pedagogical tools and principles, such as the ‘whole child’. Bruce describes 12 features of play, which she describes as Froebelian principles.

Froebel developed his ideas on play from observation and these ideas evolved over time, becoming closely allied to educational purposes. In this way, play supports seasonal learning (Brown, 2012), adventurous and outdoor learning (Tovey, 2012; Read, 2012), the use of Mother’s Songs and plays (Baker, 2012, Ouvry, 2012), engaging with block play and Gifts and Occupations (Whinnett, 2012), and the use of cooking in the early childhood setting (McCormick, 2012).

Bruce’s first book, Early Childhood Education (2012a) – now in its 5th edition (2015b) – and the later book she edited, Early Childhood Practice (1996) did not dedicate a specific chapter to play but rather embedded Froebelian conceptualisations of play throughout the text. This was because the publisher had requested a second book entirely about the subject of play, which was published in 1991: Time to Play in Early Childhood Education. This publication initiated the term ‘free flow play’ and gathered together 12 features which resonated with Froebelian themes. During this period, publishers were hesitant to publish books even for a general early childhood readership let alone books which privileged one educational approach. This meant that Froebelian education was not so overtly articulated then and has only become possible since about 2010 in the UK. However in every publication, Bruce has included and argued for the importance of what is in essence Froebelian play with a chapter exploring it, such as in Developing Learning in Early Childhood Education (Bruce, 2004) and other books (2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Perhaps one of the groundbreaking moments was in putting forward a Froebelian approach in the only (at that time) textbook for the training of nursery nurses (Bruce and Meggitt, 1996) and subsequently level 3 textbooks reaching six editions (Bruce et al, 2012, 2016).

Tovey (2013) dedicates a specific chapter to Froebelian approaches to play and learning, which begins by explaining the role observation played in developing Froebel’s thoughts on play. Nine key ideas on play (adapted from Froebel’s writings in Lilley, 1967) are then summarised:

- Play builds on the young child’s innate impetus for self-activity
- In play the whole child is active – moving, feeling, thinking and willing are integrated
- Self-chosen play activities help develop determination, concentration and persistence
- Play helps children reflect on and understand themselves as well as the world around them. It makes the ‘outer’ inner and the’ inner’ outer.
- Play is increasingly social and fosters friendship, fairness, understanding of rules and care for others.
- Play encourages close relationships between adults and children. It helps adults gain insight into the minds and future minds of children.
- Play helps develop an awareness of symbols and symbolic thought where children operate at their highest level.
- Adults have a critical role in valuing, supporting and extending play through the provision of play materials, indoors and outdoors, and through informed, sensitive observation and interaction.
- When children have little or no opportunity for play, the pattern of their development can be disturbed and distorted. (Tovey, 2013/2017: 17–18)

Bruce’s ‘free-flow play’ (1991) chimes with reinterpretation of Froebel’s approach, highlighting the opportunities play affords for exploring and experimenting, developing symbolic thought
through imagination, storytelling and playing with ideas. To facilitate the opportunities, educators need to consider making time and space for play, giving play a high status in the setting and the importance of setting aside time to 'observe, support and extend' (Bruce, 1987: 65) children's play.

Brehony (2013) states that whilst Froebel was a great supporter of play, he saw it as subordinate to work and that Froebel's thoughts on play were highly complex. Froebel, it is argued, believed that play and work were inter-related but, with regards to self-active representation, play had a subordinate role to work in achieving this. The purpose of education was conceived as through and for work (Brehony, 2013). It is suggested that it was the revisionists who put greater emphasis on play and abandoned traditional Froebelian views on work (ibid). Consequently, the motto 'Play as the child's work' is often misattributed to Froebel rather than his follower, Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow.

It is interesting to note that other authors who look at play in Froebel's pedagogy from a historical perspective also note the more formal aspects of play that Froebel conceived. Nutbrown and Clough (2008: 31), in their brief summary of the work of Froebel, states his support and creation of resources for 'well directed' play opportunities. Similarly, Read (2006) and Nawrotzki (2006) highlight the change in emphasis to free play from child led approaches during revisionist times. Within the historical discussions on Froebelian pedagogy, the work/play dichotomy in Froebel's writings is analysed, particularly as it relates to the progression of the movement through the revisionist period. However, while it is argued that free versus directed play were binary issues during this period (Brehony, 2013), Read (2013) highlights the transition from play-based to work-based approaches that existed the 'Burghly' infant school in London, led by Froebelian Head teacher Francis Roe. The concept of a bridging transition class and Roe's own recognition of the importance of teaching the children 'the three R's' shows that, as the revisionist movement progressed, some individuals sought to develop a balance between free play and the more formal adult directed approaches advocated by Froebel. Read (2013) also notes that this terminology was used, in key educational conferences, by Susan Isaacs, Head of the Childhood Development Department at the Institute of Education. This suggests these potentially more balanced perceptions became more widespread during the early twentieth century.

In conclusion the recent literature on play is varied. Play is synonymously linked with Froebel, and there are reasonable understandings and applications of various aspects of play articulated and applied throughout the literature. Of particular note and use, however, is the work of Tovey (2013), who specifically tackles the Froebelian approach to play and learning in a clear and pragmatic way, providing a list of principles that are clear to understand and clearly Froebelian. Another key area of writing is the concept of play and work, the interconnectedness between these two experiences and, in particular, the navigation of this issue during the revisionist period.

Outdoor learning

The centrality of outdoor learning opportunities is clearly expressed by Froebel in *Education of Man* where he says:

> Outdoor life, life in Nature, is pre-eminently important, especially for the young human being, for its effects are developing, strengthening, elevating, and ennobling. It gives life and higher significance to all.

(*Froebel, 1885: 233*)
Froebel envisaged that the outdoor environment could provide enriching learning experiences through heightened self-discovery and awareness. In the first chapter of Froebel’s *Education of Man* he describes education and its purpose in reference to nature and connectedness:

> Education is to guide man to clearness about himself and in himself, to peace with Nature, and to union with God; therefore it is to raise man to the recognition of himself and of humanity, to the recognition of God and Nature, and to the pure, holy life thereby conditioned.

*(Froebel, 1885: 3)*

Education is conceptualised as a form of realisation and development of knowledge, peace and harmony between self, nature and God. The above quotations succinctly demonstrate the centrality of outdoor experiences for learning and the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of Froebel’s advocacy of these experiences.


Maynard and Waters (2007), in their discussion on missed opportunities in outdoor play, highlight the renewed governmental interest in outdoor learning as reflected in recent policy. This resurgence of interest is commended as being in line with the concepts of the early childhood pioneers, Rousseau and Froebel. The link between Rousseau’s and Froebel’s views on outdoor learning is also noted by Wellhausen and Keif (2001).

Garrick (2009), referring to the government’s *Growing Schools* initiative, links the programme that encourages schools to grow their own fruit and vegetables to the educational work of Froebel. Both these examples demonstrate ways in which elements of educational policy have been loosely linked to Froebelian concepts.

A number of recent research projects relating to outdoor learning have referenced Froebel as part of their justification. These references are usually brief, but demonstrate an acknowledgement of Froebel’s work. Bloomfield and Willy (2008) suggest that the Froebelian concept of a garden for children and a garden of children and the idea of holistic and interconnected education still have resonance in the current educational climate and that these thoughts could enable student teachers to connect what they are learning to teach and what they are taught about learning in relation to outdoor experiences.

Clark (2007) considers young children’s perceptions of early childhood outdoor environments. As part of this, the issue of children’s perceptions of feeling and belonging is discussed. It is in this context that, after other suggestions, the freedom to garden is put forward. Clark explains how the opportunity to garden played a key part in the Froebelian approach to early childhood education and she speculates that having personal gardening plots linked to one another in a communal area may give children a sense of belonging and responsibility. This perspective is echoed by Read (2012).

Fabian (2009) notes that primary school children in England spend a majority of their curriculum time in classroom and then let off steam in the playground during ‘play time’; whereas children under 4 or 5 years of age in non-compulsory early childhood educational settings (such as maintained nursery schools and classes, day care settings and play groups) may have access to the garden for longer periods of time and with greater choice in how to spend that time. Because of the underlying pedagogy, children under and over 4 or 5 years of age experience two very different types of outdoor experience.
Frost (2006) discusses the development of playground spaces in the USA and highlights the two competing influences with an emphasis on development and learning typifying the works of Froebel, Dewey and Patty Smith Hill as well as approaches to outdoor spaces based on the German *outside gymnasion* approach to outdoor spaces.

Some of the aforementioned texts and others (Ernst, 2014; Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008) refer to Froebel and outdoor learning generically amongst other educators, who include Dewey, Montessori and Patty Smith Hill, with whom Froebel would have been in fierce disagreement in important respects. This may show a tendency to see outdoor learning as a catch all early childhood approach rather than the dynamic, progressive discussion that Froebel was involved with in the nineteenth century.

Whilst the distinctive features of Froebel’s approaches to outdoor learning are mentioned by some, they are glossed over by others who generically refer to the pioneers of early education as simultaneous supporters of outdoor learning.

The theme of outdoor learning is central to Tovey’s (2013) discussion of modern Froebelian education which characterises the outdoor space as carefully planned, offering experiences that cannot be created indoors and giving space and freedom for children to initiate, create and sustain their own ideas in play. Such environments offer engagement with the natural world; space and freedom for whole-body expansive movement; opportunities for adventure, risk and challenge; flexible context for imaginative play and meaningful learning in all areas of the curriculum. Key Froebelian themes include Froebel’s emphasis on direct experiences of nature as essential for children’s learning and Tovey highlights contemporary research that supports the Froebelian concept of the interconnectedness of body movement, brain and mind.

Brown (2012) explains how Froebel believed that the garden enabled children to develop their own sense of place within the world and that seasons can be effective themes through which children can connect with their outdoor environments. Practically, seasons are suggested as a long term planning framework that can guide outdoor provision. Emphasis is put on developing flexible spaces and developing children’s autonomy in the environment.

Fahey (2012) argues that the surge of interest in forest schools is related to Froebelian kindergartens becoming formalised over the years. McNair (2012) suggests that the forest school movement of the 1950s can be seen as having its roots in Froebelian approaches. The emphasis is on giving children the opportunity to learn through nature as opposed to about nature and it is suggested that trips to the forest can have effects on developing intrinsic motivation and concentration skills that can be brought back into the classroom learning context. The use of the forest for contemplation and reflection is synonymous with Froebel’s own childhood experiences of nature.

Read (2012) takes a historical look at the outdoor learning environment both pre- and post-Froebel. The views of Robert Owen and Samuel Wilderspin are briefly explained before moving onto Froebel’s views which are highlighted as influenced and imbued by philosophical beliefs (as demonstrated in the beginning of this section). The centrality of the garden in Froebel’s kindergarten is explained and the allocation of individual gardening plots based in a communal plot is explained as an approach which was designed to teach children responsibility and cooperation.

Wellhousen (2002), examining the evolution of outdoor play, discusses Froebel’s ideas spirituality and connectedness and his linking of practical and spiritual elements. But, she argues, the rise in science and scientific understandings resulted in little room being afforded to the symbolic and spiritual elements of outside learning, as conceived by Froebel. However it is noted that these scientific approaches were instead used by theorists such as Patty Smith Hill as ways of justifying outdoor learning as a legitimate pedagogical approach.
Froebel is invoked to illustrate, justify or contextualise a research project or programme relating to outdoor learning. Tovey (2013) and Bruce (2012a) articulate a range of themes relating to Froebel, and Froebelian approaches to outdoor learning are probed and explored. But as scientific theories and evidence have gained prominence in education, the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Froebel’s outdoor learning ideas have been sidelined despite their obvious resonance with current trends in forest school pedagogies.