Introduction

The project ‘Social and conceptual spaces – Froebelian geographies’ was initiated by Professor Maurice Craft, Chair of the Froebel Trust Education Committee. It produced a number of bibliographic lists detailing the resources of the Froebel Archive Collection located in the University of Roehampton. This aimed to enhance accessibility and enable better utilisation both by students and academics of the School of Education, Centre for Early Childhood Studies and Research (ECRC) and the Department of Humanities as well as other interested groups such as Mathematics, Geography, History, Dance and Movement and Visual Art departments. The bibliographic lists created have become an integral part of the learning and teaching programme but also continue to serve as a guide for visiting scholars and practitioners based both in the UK and internationally as well as other networks who are interested in Froebelian education, when visiting the Froebel Early Childhood Archive Collection.

The lists developed include text based and multimedia resources that focus on different principles of Froebelian philosophy. The resources build on existing module lists of recommended reading for students made accessible through a variety of media, in paper form, through RefWorks and the Roehampton Resource Lists services. The work for this project has also identified and recommended archival material that could be digitalised to expand the Froebel Archive Digital collection.

Wooden block play was the first aspect of Froebel’s principled practice chosen by the Froebel Trust’s Archive Advisory Group. Encouraging feedback from students and staff at the university on the utility of the annotated bibliographies led to further lists being developed. These investigated outdoor learning, Froebel’s Mother Songs and Movement Games, the symbolic life of the child and family life, which was based on Froebel’s famous request ‘let us live with our children’ (Froebel, 1885: 89).

This chapter illustrates key findings from the project’s investigations into the archival materials on block play and demonstrates the demise over time of this important Froebelian tradition.
Syllabi (block play)

While researching on the syllabi of the National Froebel Union (NFU) it came to light that some aspects of the curriculum for students specifically regarding the teaching of Froebel’s Gifts had been slowly marginalised and almost disappeared from the curriculum as time went by. An additional investigation was undertaken to try to understand how and why this might have happened.

The Froebel movement in England gained public and private attention steadily from 1851 until the late 1850s in both the middle-class and working-class sector. Supporters in the middle-class sectors saw an alternative to the small private schools with the advantage of a systematic way of training and a different understanding of the approach to each individual child (Smart, 2006). The following decade, unfortunately, saw a decline in support of the Froebelian movement due to its inability to make further progress within the public sector. The introduction of the Revised Code in 1862 put inevitable pressure on teachers to be preparing children in the ‘three R’s’ as soon as they came into the schools ready for the Standard I examination (Smart, 2006). As Smart (: 43) explains, ‘there is no time left for songs . . . or Kinder Garten’, the new emphasis is now on rote learning, an inevitable result of the system of performance related pay for teachers. In the middle-class sector the Froebelian movement failed to open any more schools and some of the ones that were open were being closed because of the lack of public support (Smart, 2006). When the Froebel Society (FS) started training teachers in the 1840s two things were considered the most important: effecting the growth of the kindergarten movement and ensuring that kindergarten teachers should have recognised and standardised qualifications (Smart, 2006). In 1876, the syllabi for the new examinations were approved but as it gained popularity, the Froebel movement was coming under increasing criticism in the period of 1876 to 1885. It was seen as being of poor quality because of the unsuccessful results in the exams coupled with observations in kindergartens staffed with unqualified teachers who did not know the philosophy behind the system (Smart, 2006).

In 1900, the NFU’s curriculum was intended to train students for subsequent work in kindergartens and was distinctly different from the Government Certificate (Read, 2011b). Up to 1906, the National Froebel Union (NFU) curriculum required the study of the Gifts and Occupations together with Froebel’s principles but excluded more government-friendly teaching (the learning of the three R’s) (Read, 2011b). In 1906 ‘Handwork’ replaced the Gifts and the only reference in the syllabus for these was for younger children’s education (Read, 2011b). By 1914, the NFU’s syllabus had changed considerably and had become less dissimilar to the government scheme of training (Smart, 2006). Nature study was the only subject where the content and structure of the module was similar to that of the earlier Froebelian syllabi (Smart, 2006). In 1925, the NFU introduced the Diploma in Handwork aimed at teachers in middle and upper schools (Read, 2011b). Unsurprisingly, given the age of the children in middle and upper schools, the Gifts continued to disappear, taking an even more backstage presence in the system of education proposed by the NFU.

The change of module title in the NFU curriculum from Kindergarten Gifts and Occupations to Educational Handwork ‘revealed a lessening of the stress laid on the work of Froebel in one area of the curriculum whose general shape and specific detail were delineated in the NFU Syllabus’ (Smart, 2006: 212). Due to Dewey’s influence on the interpretation of Froebel’s educational philosophy when the new syllabus was introduced in 1906 and then made compulsory in 1908 the marginalisation of Froebel’s Gifts became apparent (Smart, 2006). In the revised syllabus, the Froebel Gifts appeared in small print and the less specific syllabus included elements of handwork, which were most suitable for children’s expressive and creative abilities,
drawing, brushwork, clay modelling. ‘[B]uilding with Froebel’s Gifts and other material’ was only mentioned for younger children (Syllabus, 1906 in Smart, 2006: 211). According to Smart, Dewey’s influence was very strong in the revised Handwork syllabus; the handwork activities were more focused on supporting the expression of children’s creativity and there was a greater emphasis on constructive work centred on materials connected with the home instead of pre-made apparatus.

In 1909, the main objective of the NFU was to achieve recognition for the higher certificate, not only as an extra certificate for infant teachers but as an alternative to the certificate provided by the government. In 1914, progress was starting to happen towards this earlier aim (ibid). In 1952, Jebb described the gradual change in the curriculum that has been noted in this research, stating that the course had gone from a specialised course based on the specific study of Froebel’s teaching and methods to a much wider and more balanced programme in which Froebel’s educational philosophy had been reinterpreted in terms of modern psychology and educational practice (Jebb, 1952 in Read, 2011b).

The changes in the syllabus observed in this inquiry, specifically relating to the teaching of Froebel’s Gifts are matched by a change in the prospectuses for potential families wanting their children to join the kindergartens at Talgarth Road, Colet Gardens and Ilstock Place School in London and the Froebel preparatory school, Little Gaddesden, near Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire (FEI/6.2). Before 1896, the kindergarten Gifts and Occupations were included in the subjects proposed for teaching in transition and school classes for children 1–14 years old and took a prominent place in the prospectuses. Over time, a gradual shift in the contents of the prospectuses can be observed. The Occupations became more prominent than the Gifts; the different Occupations were detailed while the Gifts began to appear only in the title for the subject and only for a period. The subjects taught showed a journey from kindergarten to transition class and school classes. After a brief period of the Gifts being included in the prospectuses they disappeared, being replaced by modelling with clay and sand, drawing, painting and other forms of handwork. These changes in prospectuses for the kindergartens and schools concord with alterations to the syllabus and Examinations for students qualifying to teach in Froebel kindergartens.

Perhaps the slow marginalisation of the Gifts in favour of the Occupations, together with toy making and book binding, is an inevitable cause of a movement trying to stay in the present and evolve together with new knowledge and understandings on child development and psychology.

Many people have tried to understand and interpret Froebel’s educational philosophy but sometimes this has been with the consequence of stripping away Froebel’s most important teaching and messages. Moreover, the fact that the Froebel movement in England was desperately trying to stay alive and relevant to the children of the time resulted in gradual but important changes and alterations to the curriculum for teachers, which influenced the curriculum for children in kindergartens and schools across England. This highlights the importance of once again revisiting Froebelian training for teachers today who are striving to stay true to the roots and key messages. ‘In considering our response to changes in the training of teachers for the new century the merits of the balanced model provided by the Froebel training colleges of a hundred years ago should, once again, be revisited’ (Smart, 2006: 249).

Conclusion

Froebelianism during the years has undergone many challenges. By the 1860s the kindergarten in England could not have been further from what Froebel intended. One of the reasons for this was that until the 1870s all the literature was in German. Froebel’s work was translated into English only in 1884 (Smart, 2006). Misinterpretations of Froebel’s philosophy were evident (see
All the main leaders of the philosophy were German, most of them speaking poor English which made it difficult for the children to understand and perhaps was too unfamiliar for them (Smart, 2006). The period from 1900 to 1939 has been found to be a particularly critical period for the Froebel movement (Nawrotzki, 2006 in Read, 2011b). In 1901, Wallas speaking at the Froebel Society conference argued that, ‘Froebel’s pedagogy was grounded in a pre-Darwinian understanding of human development as a biologically-driven process with teachers simply required to “follow nature”’ (Wallas, 1901 in Read, 2011b: 238–9). Moreover, according to Wallas, Froebel attached too much importance to the spontaneous interest of the child and too little to externally directed attention, namely, teachers’ redirection of children’s attention to things that have been chosen for them. In the 1920s, the training of Froebel teachers seemed to have taken a subordinate role even though the movement could not have spread without training teachers according to Froebelian philosophy. As a result of this, teachers who did not understand Froebel’s Gifts were using them mindlessly and mechanically without understanding the deeper meanings and functions behind them (Smart, 2006). Coupled with this, the birth of newer methods of education, such as the Montessori method, the child study movement in the USA, the introduction of theory and the development of the psychoanalytic conception of children’s needs, presented one of the many challenges to Froebelian philosophy, which found itself having to revisit its pedagogy to keep up with the times and still be considered relevant for modern thinking (Read, 2011b). The Froebelian movement today is very much alive. It does not try to hold onto Froebelian practice of the past but instead is working to integrate Froebelian principles with modern practice (Bruce, 2012a). With this aim in mind it is useful to remember that Froebelian principles are much more flexible than a prescriptive method of education; it is those principles that guide modern practice into unknown territories and new discoveries (Bruce, 2012a) (see Chapters 10 and 40, for example).

Students’ feedback on the annotated bibliographies, both at undergraduate and post-graduate level, has been overwhelming. Some international visiting scholars have also benefitted from the lists created as well as members of staff from the university. According to the feedback received during a discussion following students’ and academics’ use of the annotated bibliographies, the accessibility of the archive has been much improved since the annotated bibliographies have been made available. The aim of creating a community of individuals where learning happens in an environment that fosters autonomy and companionship is still on the way, but I believe that the creation of the annotated bibliographies has helped improve cohesion within different departments of the university under a mutual appreciation of key Froebelian principles.

One of the next steps planned will be to publish the lists electronically, making them available to a wider range of readers through the Froebel Digital Archive collection. As well as the publication of the lists, there is a planned review of the recommendations made for archival material that could be digitalised to expand the Froebel Archive Digital collection and ongoing endeavours to fund this new and exciting project that will make available to students, staff and visiting scholars some truly inspiring resources for their study and consideration.