

Friedrich Froebel's theory and ideas on play



**ASSIGN
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Discuss Froebel's ideas about Play, and the Environments and Resources which support children's development. Reflect on the Value of Froebel's ideas today. Illustrate your answer with examples from your childhood and any observations you have of children at home or in an early years settings.

Introduction

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was a German educator most famous for his insight into the importance of the early years of a child's life to their development and later life. Furthermore he also considered that the effect of early life extended beyond the educational achievement into health and society at large. Froebel created kindergartens (children's gardens) as he perceived a child's growth to be like a plant growing and thriving where the right conditions exist.

Within the kindergartens he utilised his principles and practices, including experience of out of doors activities, as an important part of the educational practice. He developed a series of ' gifts' which are designed to be a gift in two senses: firstly in the sense of being given to the child as a gift and secondly as a gift of development.

The gifts, which are learning tools, were planned to be age relevant and to encourage development and self-actualisation in the child (Provenzo, 2009) p88-89). The kindergarten and Froebel's approach have had a massive impact on early learning and still has relevance today.

Froebel's influence in the present day

The early years of life are vital to the overall development of a child. During this time the emotional parameters are learned together with ways to

interact with others and learning through experiences (Sroufe, 1997 p. 1-8). In order to maximise the benefit of this time correct stimulation and provision of tools/toys that will enable the child to explore and learn about themselves and the world around them are necessary. Froebel specifically devised his principles for ages 1-7.

The Froebel approach involves the principles, pedagogy and environment. The principles take a holistic view of the individual child's progress and recognises their uniqueness, capacity and potential. In addition play is seen to be fundamental and important in the child's development. Part of the learning includes understanding, and working with, the place of humankind in the natural world. Finally the principles recognise the integrity of childhood and of the child as part of a family and of the community (Hermann, 1926 p. 201-205).

The pedagogy involves having knowledgeable and appropriately qualified professionals to provide skilled informed observation of the children and provide appropriate guidance and teaching. Key to the process of teaching is that it must reach the imaginative, creative, symbolic, linguistic, mathematical, musical, aesthetic, scientific, physical, social, moral, cultural and spiritual aspects of the child. This clearly shows how wide a range of stimulation is required.

The child's development is not just the responsibility of the teachers and it is important that the parents/guardians of the child and their educators work harmoniously together to maintain a consistent approach. Play is central to the process and there needs to be a sense of purpose for the child in that

play together with an understanding that the child must be viewed holistically as a thinking, feeling person.

Encouragement is used rather than punishment to help the child to expand their self-confidence and autonomy. Play can also be used to help the child learn to be able work alone and also with others (Willinsky, 1990 p154-5) .

The environment in which the child is placed will also have an important role in their development.

Whilst the environment needs to be safe it must also encourage curiosity, stimulation and challenge. Indoor and outdoor activities widen the possible areas of learning and vary the environment providing interest and variety.

Froebal also saw working in an environment that is integral to the community to be important in helping the child to be both independent and interdependent and to understand individuality and community and responsibility and freedom.

These basic ideals were set out originally by Froebel in his 1826 book ' The Education of Man'. He viewed his own childhood with limited parental attention and remembered his loneliness and using this as his starting point he developed his ideals. He also drew on the knowledge of previous educators when developing his own system of education (Polito, 1996)(p. 161-173). This point may well need to be revisited now with the advent of computers and television programmes specifically aimed at young children.

Research needs to be aimed at determining the effects of lack of face to face attention from parents and other adults at home and learning being ' handed

over' to mechanical means. There would appear to be correlations between Froebel's situation and that of many children today. Lack of interaction with other children and a range of adults limits the possible range of learning situations and may create problems with social interaction later in life although research into this area needs to be conducted to fully understand the effects. Having only the TV or computer for entertainment will also seriously limit the child's imagination through lack of personal interaction and physically being involved in the play. This may affect motor skills too through lack of use and a reduced range of movement. In my own childhood I was always encouraged to use inventive play and would create theatre sets with my friends and we would perform little puppet shows for our parents. This type of play involved a variety of concepts; craft work to create the sets, linguistic skills to write the plays, integrated play by playing with others and dexterity to use puppets.

Froebel's methods are still valid today and can provide children with a wide range of experiences and instil in them curiosity and interest that can be built upon throughout life. Despite how long ago these principles were first developed they are still fully appropriate today perhaps because they relate to the core aspects of development leaving room for the method to be varied as necessary.

The gifts such as gift 2 (a set of 3 blocks one square, one sphere and one cylinder) can be moved together with rods and strings to provide multiple possibilities for interactions. These forms introduce the child to geometry and also allow for free expression within individual play. Gift 2 was a form

that so embodied Froebel's insights that it was used to create a granite construction over his grave (Froebel webn. d.) [online].

There are many toys available today that have similar possibilities and it is important that children are both allowed to play alone with these items but also that parents share play with them too to help with integrated play.

One of the key elements within Froebel's thinking was the interaction with nature and the natural world. I remember when I was young that at school we had a wild garden at the rear of the playground and we had classes sitting in that area learning about plants and how they grew taking inspiration from what was growing around us. In current settings some schools are able to encourage children in their own school gardens.

Whilst this is not appropriate for very small children their interest and excitement about the outside world can be begun by allowing them to play outside and introducing them to flora and fauna such as watching spring bulbs coming up.

Many parents may also need assistance in this area as they have not had these experiences themselves and thus have difficulty in helping their children to develop in this way (Taylor, 2004 p. 163-178) . It is, therefore, important that children have access to a variety of environments in order to have the opportunity to understand and learn about different settings.

Froebel identified that children will have their own individual thoughts and understanding of the things around them and by interaction and role play develop their knowledge further. (Puckett, 2004 p. 45-6) . He described play as the work of children (Miller, 2009)(p. 46-50).

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The current economic situation may have an impact on the money available to parents. However, children are able to benefit from fewer more appropriate 'ready-made' toys and the freedom to become inventive and create their own entertainment. Children will, for instance, often be more interested in the box something comes in and convert the box into a car or tank or dolls house. Such creative play will expand the child's abilities in many different areas (Robson, 2006 p. 39-55) f.

The Government scheme 'Every Child Matters' recognises the importance of the early years of life and sets out a range of proposals to support children, parents and all those involved in the care and education of children (H. M. Government, 2003). Through this provision there is a wide range of information and guidance available that can assist in providing good, safe environments and appropriate resources to facilitate learning.

This includes such resources as Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (available as a free download) produced by the Government which contains a wealth of evidence based information to assist in all areas of child development (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Family, 2009)

Conclusion

Froebel's vision was clear and detailed and still is equally valid today. The way in which it is expressed may have developed further from the original but the basic principles still hold true. The early years are vital to the overall development of a child so it is very important to provide the best environment and resources to facilitate learning.

Most children will need to be able to continue with life-long learning to deal with the challenges presented in adult life so stimulating them early on to enjoy learning and creativity prepares them for their futures. Parents, carers and educators need to be working together in order to provide the best environment and resources for children and give them the very best start in life possible.

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