

Froebel's ideas on early childhood development



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Although Pestalozzi only devised a formal educative programme for infancy about two hundred years ago, the interest in the development of infant education can be traced back to the earliest civilizations (Verster 1989: 32). The various ways in which young children were educated in different countries at different times, not only gives us insight into the multitude of approaches to early childhood education, but also has a direct influence on contemporary educative theories and approaches.

The early Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian culture's views on early childhood education, which include the importance of the family, the parents, the environment, and religion on a young child's education, are still very present and important in present day views of early childhood education (Verster 1989: 62-3). The view during the Middle Ages and also during the Renaissance that the child is just a 'miniature adult' is still prevalent today; children are often forced to become 'adults' sooner than they should due to family instability, the working mother, and the influence of the media on the child's mind (Verster 1989: 89). Contributions to early childhood development during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which included the recognition of the child as unique and different from adults, of each child as a unique being, the importance of sensory perception to experience reality and gain knowledge, and the importance of the family in the young child's education, paved the way for the development in early childhood education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and are still considered today in early childhood education planning (Verster 1989: 115-116).

During the nineteenth century the focus was on education as a totality event, which focused on the child's abilities and interests, sensory perception, and love and understanding from adults for successful education. This led to the twentieth century being known as the ' century of the child' with regard to early childhood education (Verster 1989: 162-3). Friedrich Wilhelm August Frobel, a German educator during the nineteenth century and founder of the ' Kindergarten', believed that self-activity and play, and the teacher's roll to drill not indoctrinate, play an essential role in a child's education (Britannica. om).

Frobel's views, which greatly influenced modern views and techniques on early childhood education, will be discussed in the following paragraphs. By the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries Frobel found himself surrounded by the idea that schools for infants form the foundation of education. It was believed that infant schools prepare the infant for primary school, as well as provide child care solutions for working mothers and temporary relief for less privileged children (Verster 1989: 141).

These views inspired the way in which Frobel developed his teaching activities. Frobel believed character flaws in adults could often be credited to scars from their infancy. For this reason, Frobel believed infants should be protected from harsh environments with poor adult examples and be placed in a peaceful, happy, and secure environment where they can develop in a natural way. For this reason, in 1873 he opened a school for infants, which he called Kindergarten, or ' children's garden'.

The immediate aim of Frobel's Kindergarten was to help the young child realize his abilities in order to develop and progress towards adulthood, and eventually become aware of his unity with every existing thing - in particular God. (Verster 1989: 142) The image of man and the child of each educator - Frobel's ideas on infant education as well as his implementation of these ideas in the Kindergarten were based on his views of the world, man and child. Frobel believed that the world, man, and child are a unity, created by God, that finds expression in the external (nature), the internal (soul) and the thing that binds both of these (life).

He believed it should be man's life task to become completely aware of existence in this unity (Verster 1989: 141). In one of his most significant books *Die Menschenerziehung* ('the Education of Man'), in which he describes the core of his education theory, Frobel (1887: 5) in Verster (1989: 142) writes that education should "lead and guide man...to a knowledge of himself and of mankind, to a knowledge of God and of nature, and to the pure and holy life which such knowledge leads".

He believed that childhood is not just preparation for adulthood, but instead believed that children are gifts of God and should be treated as necessary and important members of humankind and the unity between God, nature, and humanity. He also believed that a child and his companions, as social beings, are individual parts of the whole and therefore have a duty towards this unity (Verster 1989: 142). The role of the parent in the education of young children - Frobel believed that education in the home is the responsibility of the parents.

He believed the parent plays a very important role in their child's education. Frobel believed that all the natural gifts and powers of a young child could be brought out and developed through home education. He realized that home education is a natural instinct of a loving mother, who slowly guides the development of her child, but he also believed that home education should be a conscious act. For example, by asking the child meaningful questions like "Where is your nose?" the child will eventually become aware of his entire body (Verster 1989: 145).

Frobel (1887: 66) in Verster (1989: 146) wrote that the home is "where understanding of the higher values of life are fostered in such a way that cognition and action are never isolated from each other but are always in close association" The relationship between sensory perception and learning - Frobel believed humans progress gradually through various phases of life. During the Infancy phase (1-7 years old), Frobel believed that educational activities should be concerned with the use of the senses - touching, seeing, and hearing. He believed the time spent in Kindergarten should be a time of creativity and imitation.

He believed that a child's abilities can progress and develop through self-activity and through continuity - the idea that every part of education must be connected to every other part and that the degree of difficulty should only increase gradually because knowledge can only be obtained when new facts are related to facts that have already learnt; through contrasting - the idea that object can be understood once it is compared to its exact opposite, as well as a third object which is similar to both the first and the second one; and through observation - Frobel believed that observing nature and the

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world around us is a very important part of teaching (Verster: 1989: 143).

Language instruction, or stories, can also lead to progression because they deal with the specific characteristics of the object instead of just the way the object looks. Frobel believed that stories can combine all work being done by the child.

They are a valuable aid in the intellectual, visual, and moral progression of the child and should therefore be presented in a lively manner to ensure that children will find the stories interesting and understandable (Verster 1989: 144). The learning content of the early years of the child - Frobel believed that two specific questions should be asked when deciding on the learning content for the first two years of learning. The first question should be: "What are the child's needs during this time?" Frobel believed young children require learning content that will allow them to express, relate and organize the information inside of them and the information that nature can teach him through language and art.

The second question should be: "What has the child already learnt? This is an important question because the school has to build on the knowledge that the child already has. With the above mentioned questions in mind, Frobel suggested the use of the following learning content for the young child:

Religious practice, physical molding, observation of nature and the environment, poems and rhymes, language practice, construction, drawing, a knowledge of colors, games, narratives, journeys and walks, numbers, morphology, practice in speaking, writing, reading, gardening, and caring for pets (Verster 1989: 145). The value of play in education - Frobel was very

aware of the importance of play in early childhood and used it at an educative tool in his Kindergartens.

He (1887: 55) described play in Verster (1898: 145) as “ The purest most spiritual activity of man at this stage and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole – of the inner hidden natural life in man and in all things”. He believed play, should be used and encouraged because it leads to happiness, freedom, satisfaction, and overall peace with the world. (Verster 1989: 145-6). He believed children should be outside playing in nature and with other children. He believed that play is a way for the child to develop and mature and is an important means of expression. He also realized that play promotes good health as well as social, intellectual, and moral values (Verster 1989: 209). Frobel believed the human mind could be developed through contact and interaction with material things so he developed certain toys, which he termed play ‘ gifts’, as teaching aids.

A few of the play ‘ gifts’ used by Frobel in his Kindergartens were the ball, a sphere, a cylinder, and a cube, a cube divided into eight smaller cubes, and mosaic tiles, puzzles, building-blocks, beads, peas, plaited mats, laths, clay, sand, paper and cardboard (Verster 1989: 147-8). He would attach a symbolic meaning to each of the gifts. For example when the child handled the ball, it would represent unity between all things, of completeness and a feeling of being part of a social group, or ultimately the whole of mankind (Verster 1989: 209). The ball was actually a set of six different colored balls. The child would begin by just feeling the balls.

They would then be attached to a string and swung back and forth to spoken or sung words so that a child could become aware of the object in space and time. Only then will the child begin playing with the ball on his own and with a group while playing movement games (Verster 1989: 147). The same idea was applied to the other play 'gifts' used by Frobel such as building blocks. Frobel believed that when children play with building blocks it enables them to imitate everyday object, to develop creative abilities, and to learn concepts (Verster 1989: 209). The influence of Frobel's views on educative thought and practice can be summarized as follows: he emphasized motor expression, self-activity, and creativity, i. e. learning by doing, particularly through play; he emphasized nature study, gardening, and school excursions because they created knowledge about nature and aroused the child's innate interests and laid the foundations for impulsive activity; he emphasized the use of handicrafts as a means of expression, for constructive creativity, for the practical application of thoughts, and for moral, religious, and aesthetic molding; and finally he emphasized social cooperation in education to develop thought and mould character. Frobel's views were very influential in Europe, Britain and the USA, and still exist in the modern Kindergarten's of today (Verster 1989: 149). His method's inspired many well known contributors towards early childhood education including Maria Montessori, whose philosophies are schools are still around today even in South Africa, and Rudolf Steiner.

Prior to Frobel very young children, or infants (1-7) were not educated. He was the first to recognize the importance of education during that phase of a child's life. His ideas on the human physiology and that humans are creative

beings laid the foundation for early childhood education. His view on the importance of parents, in particular mothers, in the child's education, is still valid today. In fact, he promoted women as the ideal teachers for his Kindergarten schools, and in most early childhood schools around the world and in South Africa, women make up the majority, if not all, of the teachers. His views on the value and importance of play are still very present in early childhood centers across the world.

Even today children in early childhood centers are still using similar 'gifts', and the activities associated with them, to learn and develop visual skills before they even begin developing their verbal skills. Frobel's play 'gifts' affected the design of toys in general. Today toys used in early childhood centers are considered for their educational content and potential for creative expression (froebelsgifts.com). So we can see that although his ideas on the man, world and child as part of a unity may prove to be untenable in some present-day early childhood centers, the influence and importance of many of Frobel's ideas on early childhood development today cannot be denied.