

Retracing the Roots of Kindergarten as an Art & Design Academy

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Introduction

As a future early childhood and art educator, I have learned that both my passion for the arts and teaching has been deeply enriched and cultivated in the early childhood classroom. I chose to research Fredrich Froebel and his original kindergarten institution which placed a significant emphasis on art, design, and play as a core foundation of early childhood education and child development.

Brief Overview Fredrich Froebel

In 1837, German pedagogue Fredrich Froebel founded the modern Kindergarten Movement, an avant-garde schooling experience for young children that incorporated the concept of structured guided-play and self-activity as a cornerstone of learning. In 1860, Elizabeth Peabody opened the first English-speaking kindergarten, she stated that “Froebel’s Kindergarten is a primary art-school; for it employs the prodigious activity and easily trained hand of childhood, from the age of three years, in intelligent production of things within the childish sphere of affection and fancy; giving thereby a harmonious play of heart and mind in actively educating” (Tarr, 1989, p. 117). Peabody expressed how kindergarten embodied the main characteristics of art education; hands-on manipulation and the production of objects of “affection and fancy.” Froebel’s kindergarten taught children basic elements of art and principles of design with an emphasis on unity. Not only were children introduced to design principles, they would be ready to enter the common school “with wide-awake senses and attention” (Tarr, 1989, p. 117).

Fredrich Froebel was born April 21, 1782 in an East German village. Froebel described his childhood as “painful” due to his mother passing away early in his life and living with an

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unloving father who raised him in a strict religious household. Froebel's lack of a maternal figure combined with a strict, cold, but religious father all contributed to him creating "a sanctuary for young children" (Manning, 2005). As a young adult, Froebel worked as an apprentice forester and land surveyor; he also spent time working as a mineralogist studying crystals. Froebel's childhood experiences, assisting in the garden, and observing nature and its patterns were highly influential in his educational philosophy. Froebel studied architecture and design in Frankfurt, Germany. While in Frankfurt, Froebel was offered a teaching position instructing drawing classes at the Frankfurt Model School led by a Swiss educator John Heinrich Pestalozzi, who at the time was leading the constructivist educational movement in Germany. The Frankfurt model taught basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic with a strong emphasis on art and design as major foundation for learning. Froebel not only admired Pestalozzi for his emphasis on art education for primary-aged children, he was also inspired by his idea that children are innocent and in need of special care and protection. Under the mentorship of Pestalozzi, Froebel began to question the purpose of education; Froebel concluded that "Man lives in a world of objects, which influence him, and which he desires to influence; therefore he ought to know these objects in nature, in their conditions, and in their relations with each other and mankind" (Froebel, 1889, p. 69). Froebel drew upon his love of nature, Pestalozzi's respect for children as well as his instructional model of object-based learning to synthesize his philosophy of kindergarten.

KindergARTen

Kindergarten, the "garden of children," was created to teach children how to observe, reason, express, and create as a way to learn about their place in the universe. With plenty of

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exposure to music, dancing, gardening, nature walks, and play, Froebel founded this new early childhood experience with the basic idea that education for young children starts with a need for them to be engaged in “constant activity and interaction with the physical world” (Brosterman, 1997, p. 35). According to Brosterman (2012), Froebel looked at teachers as gardeners or “nature nurturers.” Froebel’s kindergarten classes were held in tender gardens where activities were “designed to instruct through giving pleasure” (Braun and Edwards, 1972, p. 68). Connecting back to Froebel’s love of nature, he wanted children to recognize their position as similar to the things that they were growing in their garden. Observation and aesthetic appreciation of natural patterns were key activities during instruction in the garden. When instruction took place in school rooms, the learning environment was quite different from our modern day classrooms; “the kindergarten room curiously resembled the nineteenth century artist’s studio or art classroom” (Sienkiewicz, 1985).

Froebel used art as a means of educating individuals to become “well-rounded,” while at the same time providing children with manual skills they would need for industry. To Froebel, engaging children in art activities fostered each child's "full and all-sided development" (Froebel, 1889). Froebel advocated for a method of drawing instruction that focused on learning to draw “through the mastery of line and simple outlined forms rather than copying old masters” (Tarr, 1989, p. 117). Froebel believed in a formal introduction of colors through painting with primary then secondary colors in a sequential fashion. Froebel taught children how to “paint in outlines of natural forms such as leaves, flowers, and fruits” (Tarr, 1989, p. 117). In these types of painting exercises, Froebel’s goals were for children to paint clear and even applications of color and to paint within outlined forms.

Froebel's Gifts

From an early age, the kindergarten experience presented a rigorous 2D/3D art and design curriculum that was an integral part of learning about one's interconnection with the physical world. This highly organized curriculum was developed through Froebel's creations called "gifts." The Froebelian "gifts" were a set of twenty highly manipulable objects of various form, shape, color, size, texture that stimulated children's senses. The "gifts" served as a hands-on curricular system designed to enhance children's learning and aesthetic development through handiwork "such as clay modeling, the interlacing of paper strips, and building forms with sticks connected by softened peas" (Sienkiewicz, 1985, p. 132).

Froebel's "gifts" also emphasized progressive learning. Froebel strongly believed that learning should start with the concrete and then move to the more abstract. The "gifts" naturally allowed for developmentally appropriate practice by engaging young children in hands-on learning. In terms of artistic development, the "gifts" also allowed for the transition from a more tangible element of *form* to the more abstract element of *shape*.

The first six "gifts" allowed children to build and represent objects from their world using three-dimensional solid objects, while the seventh "gift" marked a developmental shift in the series, as children learned to represent objects using two-dimensional flat pieces. The foundational first "gift" of the series was intended for infants as a way to introduce them to basic concepts of the physical world, through sensory play; giving the young child twelve lightweight and easy to grasp yarn balls. This "gift" was also meant to expose infants to basic primary and secondary colors as the three main balls were red, blue, and yellow (primary colors) and the remaining three balls were violet, orange, and green (secondary colors). For Froebel, the ball (or

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sphere) symbolized unity because it was a whole and pure form that children could easily understand. Froebel's second gift was a device consisting of three wooden parts; a cube, a cylinder, and a sphere. By directly observing and playing with the cube, cylinder, and sphere side by side, this helped guide children in visualizing "the essential unity and connectedness of seemingly opposite forms" (Provenzo, 2009, p. 90).

The transitional seventh "gift," parquetry, consisted of brightly colored wooden or cardboard pieces in five different shapes which were designed to challenge children with the goal of retranslating objects from the physical world into two-dimensions. By successfully finding ways to represent objects in two-dimensions, this would prepare children for drawing. The tenth "gift" engaged children in the highest form of abstract cognition and artmaking using sticks and softened peas to build the framework of solid forms; this gift challenged young children to represent objects in the physical world by building skeletal structures to symbolize solids.

Mastering the Forms of Learning

Froebel established three forms of learning that helped teachers facilitate children's inventions created with the "gifts." The three forms of learning are: Forms of Life, Forms of Knowledge, and Forms of Beauty. Forms of Life are forms that are seen in the child's daily life such as a house, chair, or table; according to Froebel, "the child demands that the object constructed, stand in connection with himself, his life, or somebody or someone in his life" (Wiggin and Smith, 1895, p. 65). Forms of Knowledge promote the understanding of mathematical and scientific properties with the "gifts." For example, children would be encouraged to observe the properties of a triangle, counting the faces of a form, and even

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dropping an object to analyze the sound it makes when it hits the ground. Froebel suggested that children understand forms of knowledge through block manipulation. With guidance, the child can attain an understanding of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division through building with their hands — children can also demonstrate for themselves “halves, fourths, eights, sometimes in different proportions, but always having the same contents” (Wiggin and Smith, 1895, p.71). Forms of Beauty are symmetrical patterns created with flat geometrical shapes. This form focuses on symmetry, harmony, balance, and unity of construction. According to Froebel, “symmetry gives the impression of beauty to the childish eye” (Wiggin and Smith, 1895, p. 68). As inspired by his belief in unity and interconnection of all forms, Froebel believed that anything a child creates is never destroyed — only transformed; “the child should keep changing a creation rather than starting over” (Froebel USA, 2013).

Despite the fact Froebel identified different forms of learning, this was only to aid in teacher’s dictation to help the child clarify their inventions. Froebel did not want children to use “gifts” to imitate the world around them; instead, he wanted children to use their imagination and create their own structures. Froebel’s encouragement for children to think for themselves and not imitate the world around them is a similar goal of modern art educators in moving children away from copying the work of artists and motivating them to use the techniques learned from an artist and apply them to their own original work. To assist children with their creations, it was a standard feature in kindergarten classrooms for children to manipulate blocks on a gridded table creating “simple pieces of furniture, complex patterned designs or complex architectural structures” (Provenzo, 2009, p. 91). Grid-based design is a standard practice in modern art classrooms to guide students in developing proportionate figures in drawing.

Connection to Contemporary Art and Kindergarten Education

Froebel's gifts reflect the three tenets of his educational philosophy for early childhood education which revolve around: "the unity of creation, respect for children as individuals, and the importance of play in children's education" (Manning, 2005, p. 372). In the Froebelian kindergarten, the teacher acted as a guide, balancing the curriculum and allowing children to express themselves and develop at their own pace. Froebel's "gifts" acted as tools of empowerment acknowledging each child as an individual. Froebelian kindergarten teachers respected the child's individuality by imparting "the knowledge and skills that would enable the child to grow and ultimately enter society as a productive member" (Manning, 2005, p. 372). Froebel's notion of the kindergarten teacher as a guide in a highly interactive environment resonates with the philosophies of contemporary art teachers today. Art teachers act more as guides by setting up a stimulating environment for students to engage in their own innovations.

According to Steinkiewicz's (1985) there are three main principles of Froebel's kindergarten that embody both the pedagogy of kindergarten and art education — these three principles are sensory learning, symbolization, and self-activity or play.

Froebel's progressive kindergarten set the foundation for sensory-based education. As Steinkiewicz explains, "touching, feeling, seeing, manipulating, tasting, in fact any method of perceiving and reacting to the environment, is essentially background to the production of art forms" (1985, p. 130). By manipulating "gifts," students learn to represent objects in their world by experimenting with a wide range of materials to create 2D and 3D constructions. Art education is built on the primary principle of sensory learning. Art teachers facilitate

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opportunities for students to explore tools and resources creating artwork based upon their own life experiences and interactions.

Another art principle developed in the Froebelian kindergarten was the use of symbolization. Froebel created “circle-time” to symbolize unity amongst children, which is still routinely practiced in primary grade classrooms today. The forms and arrangements that children are able to create with “gifts” allow them to use the language of art in constructing objects they have seen in the world around them. The final art principle the kindergarten movement embodied was the importance of self-activity or play. Froebel encouraged young children to learn by experiences that involved sensory perception and interaction with the body. Froebelian kindergarteners engaged themselves through the process of hands-on creative problem solving by assembling aesthetically pleasing products as part of their learning. As a result of Froebel’s concepts, contemporary art teachers today provide the necessary tools, resources and space for children to best exhibit their inner thoughts, feelings, and dreams.

Conclusion

The Froebelian kindergarten has inspired me to design a highly exploratory, integrated and interactive classroom environment. Inspired by the Froebelian “gifts,” I will strive to implement a rich arts-integrated object-based curriculum which permits young children to freely express themselves and develop at their own pace. Using the basic concepts and principles in which kindergarten was founded, my goal as an early childhood educator will be to foster a child’s social, emotional, and academic development through art and play.

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