Froebel on Education *

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Froebel lived at a time when children were considered as something apart from adults, something which needed moulding and forming, something to be used, at best something to be tolerated. This attitude towards children led to violence, arson, revolt, mutiny. The following occurrences in renowned British schools are evidence enough:

1818 Winchester - two companies of troops had to be called in to suppress an uprising of pupils.

1818 Rugby - pupils set fire to desks and books, withdrew to an island which had to be taken by assault by the army.

1783 Eton - Revolt against the headmaster with rooms pillaged and windows broken.

The last mutiny occured as late as 1851 (Marlborough).

Historians tell us that the picture was the same all over Europe. In France, Italy and Germany, Austria and Spain, tutors were busy working out how to control the wild hordes of young people.

Yet, at this very time in history, an Inspector who had been called to Froebel's school in Keilhau to inspect the school because of rumours that pupils in this school were undisciplined, had long hair and lots of freedom, wrote the following report:

> I found here a family which is held together because of its strong bonds of mutual confidence and because every member seeks the good of the whole, everything - as if of itself - thrives in happiness and love.

While in other schools all over Europe children were beaten into submission, in Froebel's schools discipline was (and still is) a matter of *matching* the teaching material with the level of understanding of the learner. In all of Froebel's writings you will not find an article on discipline and punishment. It was not an issue which needed discussing.

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Education for "Unity of Life"

Friedrich Froebel was a natural scientist by self-education and vocation. He started from the basic idea that all growth and development of man is similar to the development of all organisms. All development in this world is a matter of mediation between opposites, and this becomes known in Froebel's writings as the Spherical Law, where Nature mediates between God and Man and the Spirit between Man's inner Life and the outer world. In as much as man and nature proceed from the same source, they must be governed by the same laws.

The laws of Nature are the laws of Life, and the laws of Life are the laws of Education. There was unity in all things and schools had to express this Unity too.

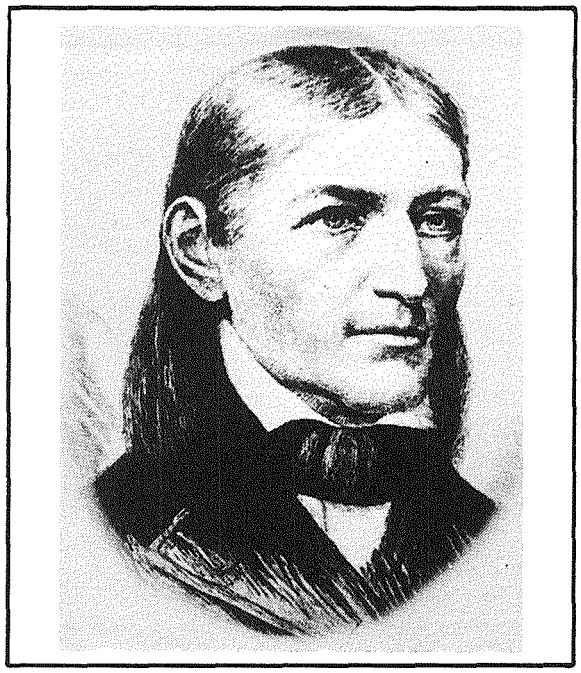
This basic notion of 'Unity of Life' underlies all of Froebel's thinking. It is the foundation of his relationships with children, the cornerstone for his educational ideas and the basis from which he developed the Kindergarten, the Gifts and the Mother-Song Book. The Lack of Unity which Froebel experienced in his schooldays in the village school may also have influenced Froebel's determination to search for this Unity. About his school days he writes as follows:

> "We repeated our task parrotwise, speaking much and knowing nothing, for the teaching of a subject had not the least connection with real life; nor had it any actuality for use, though at the same time we could rightly name our little specks and patches of colour on the map. My teacher wished to advance further with me and so took me to the Geography of England. I could find no connection between that country and the country where I dwelt myself, so that of this instruction I also retained but little."

During his time at the University Froebel recorded in his Diary the beginnings of his search for order, for unity. Froebel believed that everything functions in relation to the Creator, the total unity. Yet each man, woman and child was uniquely different. How were those two great opposites to be reconciled? Froebel records:

> "Here then bedded and open to my soul, one lovely bright Spring morning, when I was surrounded by nature at her loveliest and freshest, this thought, as it were by inspiration, that there must exist, somewhere, some beautifully simple and certain way of freeing human life from contradiction, or as I then spoke out my thoughts in words, some means of restoring to man, himself, - at peace eternally, and that to seek out this way should be the vocation of my life."

Froebel searched for this Unity - or at least for the theoretical justification for this idea - all his life.



However difficult it may prove for us to understand the meaning of his writings on this subject, we will have no difficulties in observing and understanding the connection of his educational theory as seen in his practice.

Mothers as educators

Mother, in Froebel's education, was not only the person who cared for a child's physical and emotional needs, but who also provided for his intellectual needs. It is she who plays the first games with the child, talks to him and provides the first words, encourages him to take the first steps and guides his observations to differentiate between likes and dislikes.

Because a child's first impressions are also the most lasting ones, care has to be taken that a child's first teaching is sensitive and appropriate. Mother being *the* most important person in a child's life therefore also needs educating. To achieve this, Froebel, in his later life, travelled up and down the country creating Women Organisations where women would talk about their children and compare notes and thus educate each other. Froebel also made sure that the doors in the Kindergarten were always open to welcome mothers (and fathers), so that the parents could watch the Kindergarten Teachers and then would know how to teach their children at home. In Froebel's school parents were welcomed from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. Education was a joint enterprise between parents and teachers. There was unity in all things.

It was probably also the concept of Unity which made Froebel realize that all was not well in

schools as long as we had only male teachers. "We will never succeed in our educational endeavours until we also involve the other half of humanity", he used to say. When he put this idea to a teacher's conference, an all male conference of teachers, principals, inspectors, ministers of education, university professors, - the audience interrupted the proceedings with comments and questions. One of the university professors got up and asked Froebel: "Does Herr Froebel mean that eventually we will also have women university professors?" And, the minute book records that the audience once more collapsed with hilarious laughter.

To Froebel the whole issue was self-evident. He always maintained that a good school is like a good home. Just as you needed mother and father and children to create a harmonious home, so you needed male and female adults and the children to create a harmonious school. There was Unity in all things. When the government and the local aristocrats ignored Froebel's suggestions for the creation of a Woman Training College, he founded such a College himself, three years before he died. This was the first Women Training College in Europe, probably in the world.

The Helba Plan

The Helba Plan was Froebel's concept of an all-inclusive educational institute where people would be educated from babyhood to adulthood. Fundamental to the Helba Plan was the idea that pupils had to be educated according to their gifts and abilities. All would start off in the same institution where basic learning was to be achieved through free activity and creative work. There was to be no segregation by either social class, ability or race. Children from Jewish parents were to be admitted in order to overcome racial segregation common in Germany at the time. After attending the first institution, children were then to be educated either in "The German Institute for Art and Crafts" leading to the "University of Self-Education" or in the "German Institute for General Knowledge" (Keilhau) leading to the Universities as generally known.

The Helba plan also included the idea of a "Developmental Institute" for pre-school children, aged 3-7. Froebel was at pains to explain that this was not a school, for children will not be schooled in this institute, but will develop freely, " so that human beings who are not angels yet, have the possibility to have nurtured and protected that which is divine in man."

Froebel outlined in the Helba Plan his belief that the aquisition of knowledge is the unification of the interaction between life and self-activity and understanding. All the education in these institutions should therefore be based on self-activity and self-representation.

The "doing" together with the "thinking" was to be elevated to an educational aid and physical work was to be seen as part of the means for education.

The Helba Plan was Froebel's response to the Duke of Meiningen's request for ideas to re-organise his schools. Jealous advisors at Court made sure that the plan was not brought into operation in spite of the Duke's earlier enthusiasm for Froebel's educational ideas. Froebel was so discouraged by the developing mistrust exhibited by the Court that he broke off all negotiations and left Keilhau for a lecture tour in West-Germany. As it happened, a Swiss nobleman heard one of Froebel's lectures and invited him to open a school in one of his old castles in Switzerland.

Dark forests, grey rocks, green valleys, snow covered mountains surrounded Schloss Wartensee. Such abundance of natural variety was equally matched in human terms where German, French, Italian and English-speaking families would provide the pupils for Froebel's new venture. The school achieved a good reputation within a short time and the citizens of Willensau urged Froebel to transfer his school into the nearby town. No sooner had Froebel done so, the Swiss Government invited Froebel to take charge of the orphanage in Burgdorf as well as organise In-service Courses for practising teachers. Froebel once more felt that his work was gaining ground.

For the first time in his life, one of his institutions included children of pre-school age. The man who had spent his childhood observing plants, butterflies and birds, his adolescence observing deer, wild-boar and pheasants had become an astute observer of children. His diaries are full of minute observations of children's actions and re-actions. And sitting in the orphanage surrounded by these young children, Froebel noticed for the first time in his life how children played with each other, learned from each other, talked to each other in their play, shared ideas and objects, disagreed and settled their arguments, were concentrating in their play, facing problems and solving them. Froebel noticed how life itself became manifest when children demonstrated their inner being through speech, song, dance and their simple representation in play.

Play as Education

Froebel spent the rest of his life trying to solve the problem of how to help children in their play so that the educator may know how to develop a child's inclinations, interests and abilities. Play as a means for education not only solved the problem of how to educate the young child, it also provided the answer to the question of how to achieve development from within. To Froebel education

was always a matter of how to draw out of people rathen than what to put into people. These very young children were providing the answer to his questions.

For the next seven years Froebel's thinking is taken up with the importance of play as a means for education. During this period he founded the Kindergarten, created the Gifts, Occupations and the Movement Games and finally, probably, his most important educational achievement, "The Mother Song Book". (1844)

Froebel's lengthy justification for calling his new creation a Kindergarten and not a school was based on the argument that a school is a place and a method by which knowledge is gained from outside. But before man can contemplate knowledge placed before him from outside, he has to have some knowledge, some standpoint of his own. As very small children had not yet developed intellectually, it was a misnomer to talk of Infant 'Schools'. Only the idea of a garden could serve to illustrate symbolically the proper treatment of children at this stage, who ought not to be schooled and taught, but ought to be given the opportunity for the interaction of their inner life with the outside world in a protected and predictable environment.

The creation of such a Kindergarten demanded two essential conditions. It had to have a garden where every child could be responsible for his own plot of land as well as share a second plot of land with other children, and it had to be situated in such a way that it was close enough to the children's homes so that each member of the family could take part at any time in the games, activities and lessons. Cultivating the Schoolgardens not only helped children to acquire elementary knowledge in biology, but also created a situation where children had to co-operate.

Froebel avoided the teaching of number, of poems, of songs and even the telling of stories unless they were related to the activities of the children. Froebel warned teachers not to tell too many stories because it left children too inactive for too long.

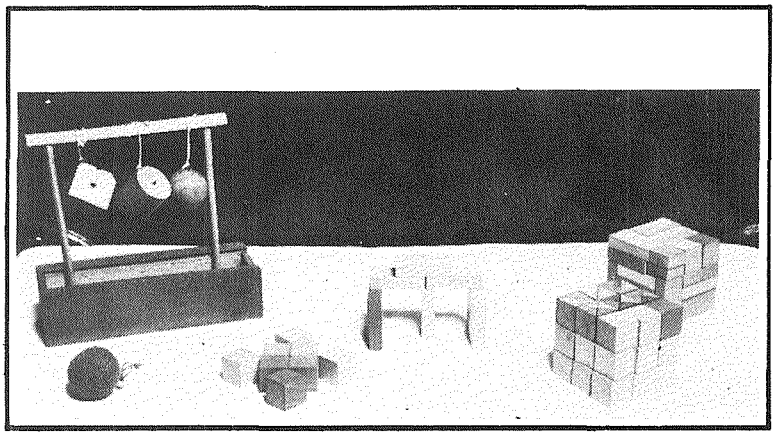
To observe and utilize children's inclinations and tendencies in the service of education was quite clearly also stressed in Froebel's training courses. When one of the trained Kindergarten Teachers was eventually in charge of her own Kindergarten and she found herself wondering what to do with a group of children "who were stamping their feet while sitting at the table and waiting for lunch, she used the natural movements, as we had learned to do and changed them into acceptable behaviour by making up verses (e.g. Stamping feet) which provided a rhythm, a beginning and an end to stamping." Froebel's dictum to use children's inclination for educational purposes included the idea that unacceptable behaviour needed to be changed for the better.

Children were given time to formulate their own problems before adults rushed in to provide an answer to a question the children had not asked.

Problems created for the adult by Froebel's emphasis on self-activity, on children's choice, on more respect for children have to be seen in relation to the effect Kindergarten attendance had on children. Froebel quotes a letter he had received from a "well-known lady" saying:

> "it has been noticed how individual children from the kindergarten played so well with younger children,"

Using Froebel's gifts in one of the first English kindergartens



though nobody had told them to do so. There also exists a report by one of Froebel's Kindergarten Teachers saying that one of her children's father had commented that his son had changed considerably for the better since his attendance at the Kindergarten. His son had apparently always had a great inclination to destroy everything so that nothing had been safe from him, whilst of late he rarely did this and preferred to construct, build and invent.

The problem which the first Kindergartens faced were essentially the same as found in our schools today. They were concerned with educational principles relating to the content and methods of teaching. The search for an acceptable solution to the problem of freedom of the individual in relation to the other children in the class, the freedom of choice of the individual in relation to the subject-matter to be taught, and the problem of fostering favourable relationships between children, parents and teachers were all thought about in Froebel's first Kindergarten.

Froebel's Gifts

The basic idea behind Froebel's Gifts is the attempt to make available to the child the means by which the child can demonstrate to himself the Laws of Nature. By analogy, the child will early on in his life be acquainted with God's powers of creation, and will be able to demonstrate in his play with the Gifts his own abilities and gifts and thus partake in the mysterious act of creation. Only when man creates himself will he be drawing closer to his Creator. A godly spark enlivens childish play.

But such freedom to create after the creator demands certain rules, a certain order. The material itself will set limitations to the child's imagination, he cannot do as he pleases. Even when he puts his wooden bricks 'to sleep', it will have to be done in a certain order or he will not be able to close the box.

Play, Froebal says, is the interaction between Law, Freedom and Life.

The Gifts themselves follow certain mathematical laws, romantic mathematical laws rather than scientific mathematical laws, endeavouring to demonstrate the invisible and the inner connections between the inner and the outer, between man and God, between God's creation and the Laws of Life.

These ideas emerge from a brief description and the concepts behind the first two gifts (there are six gifts).

The First Gift

The soft ball on a piece of string.
It is an ideal first gift, so Froebel believes, because it is a familiar object which the child knows from his baby-days; ideal also because the sphere is the most complete, the most perfect, the most unifying form we possess, thus symbolically, the child is brought nearer to that which is ultimate unity - God; and finally it is an ideal first object for the child to be introduced to because it helps to develop the basic concepts of Time, Space and Causality.

Froebel argues that the child's first activities (*self*-activities) are exercises of his limbs, carried out by his hands, fingers, lips, tongue, feet, eyes and facial movements (mime). In order to learn to differentiate between self and his surroundings, the child needs an object on which to carry out his experiments. As the child now uses these objects to demonstrate what he knows (the bird flying), the child needs plenty of experiences outside the nursery room in order to collect the images which he will need for his imaginative play. There can be no play without an active life.

Second Gift

The introduction to the second gift says "the interaction between the self and the environment leads to comparisons." A *wooden ball* and a *wooden cube*. A hard ball has certain different characteristics: smoother, glides better, makes a *sound* if rolled over a table-top and a different sound if rolled over a carpet.
— it rolls further and faster.
— it can be spun around its own axis.

The child cannot help but make comparisons. The ball has difficulties in standing on one spot. Has the cube?
— the cube is an object of opposites.
— that is the reason why the ball and the cube belong together.

Games introduced with the second gift are *paired games*. The ball and the cube are used for comparisons.

The Mother-Song Book

Froebel recognized that before the stage of

active manipulation of objects, there is a time when the child experiences the world primarily through his senses and through the manipulation of his own limbs. And because the processes of education begin on the day the child is born, it is imperative that some guidance be given to mothers. Froebel does this in his Mother Song Book, published in 1844.

This book contains fifty play-songs which aim at providing exercises for body and limbs to be carried out by mother and the child. At the same time it provides also a symbolic introduction to the abstract values in life, like honesty, beauty, truth. Each play song is printed on one page surrounded by pictures illustrating the song in many different ways. Incorporated into each series of pictures is usually a drawing of a pair of hands, illustrating the kind of hand-and finger-exercises which can be carried out by mother and the child. A more detailed explanation for each song is given at the end of the book. There are two verses on each page, one in large print to be sung to the child and one in smaller print serving as a short explanation for the mother, about the deeper meaning of each song.

Those who throw a casual glance at the book only will not be able to comprehend the pedagogical riches in the book. Froebel himself has no doubt as to he book's significance.

> "I have recorded the most important aspects of my educational theory in this book. It is the starting-point for an education based on nature."

Froebel shows us how the child's earliest physical movements will eventually lead to abstract thinking. He argues that the strengthening of the limbs will lead to a more purposeful use of them and this in turn to an awareness of things as they are. Such an awareness of separate objects will lead to the search for their connections. Thus physical activity is the basis for mental activity, for 'outer arrangements of things into groups and classes will lead to inner comparisons and judgements', which develop our powers of comprehension and understanding. Once we have developed our powers of comprehension we no longer are satisfied with perceptual judgements but ask for the reasons why and the origins underlying things and events, which in turn develop our powers of logical thinking, culminating in abstract thinking.

It would be easy to find comparable statements in Piaget's writings for each of Froebel's statements made in this last paragraph. The comparison of the stages of mental development given with those of Piaget: Sensory-Motor, Pre-Operational (Pre-Conceptual, Intuitive, Symbolic, Concrete Operational and Formal Operational) shows such similarities that they may be described as identical.

Further study of Froebel's explanations reveal that, to him, the education of man involves more than a mere rational application of life. He says that as mind turns objects into images, so images are turned into symbols, and it is the *symbolic* which allows us to grasp the essence of matter as part of a spiritual whole.

Froebel's use of the symbolic in the Mother-Song Book, however, is not only providing a concrete example for spiritual matters, but is also used to fulfil a *psychological* function. Froebel believed that a man's inner life is given expression in his actions. These actions, therefore, in themselves were symbolic and contributed to a person's development of his mental structures provided they were recognized as being symbolic of a person's inner life, by that person himself. And thirdly, the symbolic was also used to illustrate *philosophical* concepts like perseverance, fairness, etc., in a way which can produce the beginning of an understanding even in younger children.

Of course, there is much more to the concept of truthfulness, for example, than is being expressed in the song of "The Fish in the Brook". The symbol used (the clear water of the stream) provides us with the surmise of what truthfulness is all about, rather than with factual elaborations, but then Froebel maintained that knowledge was made up of cognisance *and* the surmise.

Froebel argues that whatever man is capable of doing and thinking in later life, must at least be a *surmise* when a child is young. Nothing can grow unless there is at least a germ, a seedcorn from which it can originate, and equally nothing can germinate unless the seed-corn is given its correct nourishment and encouraged to grow. It is for this reason that Froebel in all his educational endeavours puts so much emphasis on the teaching of the meaning of life, even when the child cannot possibly grasp it intellectually. The fostering of *the presentiment,* of the surmise, was paramount in his teaching and the symbolic was the essential medium through which to achieve it. Froebel believed that there could be no understanding, no new learning, no change from a percept to a concept unless the *surmise* of it existed.

When a visitor once asked Froebel what he intended to achieve with his new kind of education, Froebel answered that he hoped that his children, when adults, would be able to live in harmony with their creator, in harmony with their neighbours and in harmony with themselves.

Creativity as an Educational Process

Froebel considered creative activity an important part of the curriculum of the Kindergarten. In such activities children were able to explore the unknown and venture to express a

surmise which logical thinking might reject. Froebel points out that adults, too, must work at the level of the surmise when interpreting the new before it can be fully grasped intellectually. Froebel believed that unless we make use of our ability to probe into the dark, unless we foster the hunch and pay attention to presentiments, human progress would soon be stunted.

Froebel is saying that to explore the inpenetrable, we have to pay attention to the surmise. It is the surmise which will push the boundaries of knowledge forward, not pedantic repetition of what is known already.

If, for example, one looks at the story of transport, one can see that the horse served us well for many, many hundreds of years. Developing the cart, inventing the most delicate refinements on the cart and teaching our children all about the cart, would never, never, have led to the invention of the combustion -engine, just as the detailed knowledge of the combustion engine did not lead to the invention of the rocket.

But this is precisely what many people want us to do in education today - teach our children about rockets, electronics, computers. Teach them what we know. Their argument is that there is not enough time for children to work on their own, to think and to find out for themselves. Froebel would answer that there is even less time available for children to be burdened with the knowledge of others.

It is no mere coincidence that Dickens published *Hard Times* soon after studying Froebel's Kindergarten Education. *Hard Times* is an imaginative testimony for true education against the false education of "Coketown," symbol of economic growth and the technocratic mind which informs and supports it.

The eminent ethologist W.H. Thorpe, too, warns us against the pitfalls of this one-sided education which concentrates on the rational only. At the end of his recent Gifford-Lectures he said:

> "Scientific advance is essentially unpredictable... Enlightenment will only come with a further development of creative imagination.
> Something akin to the creative intuition and perception of the artist and the poets is going to become as necessary to the future of science as are the skills of deductive inference and experimental prowess."

In Froebel's schools the skills of making use of the surmise so as to foster the act of creation were as much catered for as the skills of deductive inference, the mathematical and scientific.

Froebel argued that if it was true that man was made in the image of God, and God is above all The Creator, it follows that man must, above all, be creative. Creative activity therefore becomes subject Number *One* on Froebel's Time-Table. Just as man is not born with a deductive mind, so he is not born with a creative mind. Creativity like any other human ability has to be fostered, encouraged, developed. The Gifts, the Occupations, the Movements Games, all were designed to encourage creativity.