

## **Compare and Contrast the Work and Ideas of three early years educators/curricular approaches.**

Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century children were largely regarded as mini adults, and no special provision was made for them. Since then however, attitudes towards children have slowly changed and we now recognise the importance of play in a child's development.

Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner are three of the main educational pioneers who have influenced the early childhood reform over the last century.

### **Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852)**

Friedrich Froebel was born in Germany in 1782. His mother died when he was nine months old and he was brought up by an uncle who sent him to school. At this school he learnt about the natural world as well as studying maths and languages. This experience influenced his approach to teaching children.

**‘As an idealist, Froebel believed that every child possessed, at birth, his full educational potential, and that an appropriate educational environment was necessary to encourage the child to grow and develop to an optimal manner.’**

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Froebel considered parents to be the main educators of their children and he thought schools should be communities in which the parents are welcome to join their children. He also believed that children learn outdoors in the garden, as well as indoors. He encouraged movement, games and the study of natural science in the garden. Froebel founded the first Kindergarten (literally, garden for children) in Prussia in 1840.

Froebel encouraged symbolic and imaginative play (such as a child pretending that some stones in a pan are food and he is making dinner). He thought that as the children pretend and imagine things, they show their highest levels of learning.

He also developed a set of learning materials, which he called **‘The Gifts’** (these went on to influence the work of Maria Montessori) and activities, which he called his **‘Occupations.’**

**‘ A gift was an object provided for a child to play with, such as a sphere, cube, or cylinder, which helped the child to understand and internalise the concepts of shape, dimension, size and their relationships. The occupations were items such as paints and clay, which the children could use to make what they wished; through the occupations children externalised the concepts existing within their creative minds.’**

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Froebel allowed children to use the Gifts and Occupations as they wished, without having to do set tasks of the kind that adults usually asked of them. Thus he introduced what is now called **Free-flow play**.

Fredrich Froebel also invented finger rhymes and songs to help children learn, such as one, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive.

### **Maria Montessori (1870-1952)**

Maria Montessori was born in Italy in 1870 and began her work as a doctor in the poorest areas of Rome at the beginning of the 1900s. Montessori worked with children with learning difficulties and from this, and her experience as the head of a state institute for the education of such children, she formed her own ideas about early childhood education. Montessori came to the conclusion, that children pass through sensitive periods of development when they are particularly receptive to particular areas of learning (which is now supported by modern research). She also saw children as **active learners**. She did not believe in imaginative play as Froebel and Steiner did and she felt children would learn through **structured play**.

Montessori also felt that children are better learners in the years up to the age of six than they will ever be again and that they can learn almost anything provided special methods are used.

The Montessori method encourages children to learn about the world around them through exploration. Children are given freedom to move around, manipulate and touch. She developed a set of what she called **diadactic materials** (inspired by Froebels Gifts) to support this process. This range of materials particularly encouraged dexterity, and as they worked with them the child was guided from the simple to the more complex tasks. The diadactic materials (diadactic means intended to instruct) have a built-in control of error, so the children can teach

themselves in a non-competitive atmosphere. Montessori encouraged children to work alone. She felt that the best learning occurred when children were focused, silent and completely absorbed in a task. She referred to this as the '**Polarisation of the attention.**'

Montessori placed a lot of emphasis on the development of social skills, and these took precedence over early reading and writing. No formal learning of reading and writing were seen in a Montessori nursery, she felt these would follow once the basic social and emotional development had taken place. Instead, Montessori encouraged children to learn to form letters through sand and finger play. However Montessori placed a great emphasis on the richness of literature and use of language.

### **Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925)**

Rudolph Steiner was born in Austria in 1861. His ideas about teaching young children are known as the Waldorf education system. Steiner believed that childhood was a separate period of life and his methods aimed to develop all aspects of the child. The curriculum Steiner designed aimed to provide equal experience of the arts and sciences. Imaginative play, often with natural materials is central to the Waldorf scheme (which is similar to Froebels methods), and children are free to choose whether to play together or alone.

Steiner like Froebel believed in community education and the importance of maintaining relationships between the child and teacher. He placed great importance on a vegetarian diet and proper rest (rest and activity need to be balanced). Steiner encouraged adults to observe children's temperament as a way of planning their work with children, because children have different temperaments, which affect their attitudes and behaviour. These temperaments were classified as:

- Sanguine (cheerful and confident)
- Phlegmatic (stoic, unemotional)
- Choleric (bad tempered)
- Melancholic (irritable)

(Bruce and Meggitt, childcare and education page 495)

Children with special needs were encouraged to be part of the community and to be encouraged by other children.

Steiner believed in reincarnation and that during the first 7 years the child is finding his or her way in the world so needs protection and a carefully planned environment during this time. Steiner's theory of child

development elaborated three cycles of seven-year stages, each with its own distinctive needs for learning:

- **The will**, 0-7 years – he believed the spirit fuses with the body at this stage.
- **The heart**, 7-14 years – he believed that the rhythmic system of the beating heart, the chest and the respiratory system meant that **feelings** were especially important during this time.
- **The head**, 14 years onwards – this is the period of thinking.

(Bruce and Meggit, *Childcare and Education* page 495)

There are a few schools in the UK, which use Steiner's methods. These **Waldorf schools** are all in the private sector. Like Montessori, Steiner has had less influence on the public sector than on the private sector.

All three of these early years educators have had a great influence of today's practices in early years settings, especially Froebel's ideas. All three opened their own schools, Froebel opened his first Kindergarten in 1840, Steiner introduced the Waldorf schools and Montessori opened the Montessori schools. Education is often designed to be 'child centred,' with the needs of the child central to the activities provided. Both Froebel and Steiner favoured this type of education. Steiner and Froebel's theories which emphasise the importance of relationships and also, that schools should be communities in which the parents are welcome have had a great impact on today's practices. Children in Steiner schools for example often stay with the same teacher for the whole of their primary education.

Both Montessori and Froebel designed their own set of materials and resources to enable children to learn. Montessori's diadactic materials were based on Froebel's gifts. Montessori was the first person to use child-sized furniture in classrooms. Her first school, the Casa del Bambini or 'House for Children' was designed so that all the educational materials would be accessible to the children. Child sized furniture is an essential part of an early years setting in today's practices to create a safe learning environment for the children to play.

Both Steiner and Froebel believed in free play where the child has the opportunity to choose the focus of the play without constant interference or involvement by an adult. Montessori on the other hand, believed in a more structured play. Structured play is adult led, guided and planned. Both types of play are widely used in today's early years settings.

Montessori and Steiner both believed that children pass through particular developmental stages, which they believed, were essential for the child to

be able to learn. Montessori developed a structured education based on these stages, including a number of specially devised pieces of equipment. Steiner's developmental stages were known **as the three phases of childhood.**

In conclusion all three of these early years theorists have helped everyone working with children, past and present, to move forward, and maybe if people like these had not been prepared to stand up and fight for the rights of what children need, we may still be treating children as mini adults.

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