

*Year 1 ASEYS 2001/2002 – Semester One
Assessment 3 (9th November 2001)*

**FRIEDRICH FROEBEL'S IDEAS ON THE ROLE OF PLAY
IN THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION**

Play is probably the very first thing that comes to our minds when we start thinking about our childhood. Certainly it's hard to talk about early years without referring to play, as it is a part of children's natural behaviour, embedded in their spontaneous day-to-day life. The fact that the play is enjoyable is generally agreed, but the value of play in school, however, has been in the centre of much debate in the past (and it seems like that debate is still going on today).

The roots of contemporary understanding of the role of play in early childhood education extend clearly to Friedrich Froebel, a German educator, who organized and systematized the methods of early childhood in accordance with the idea of "the spontaneous, self-sustaining nature of children" (E. Evans, 1971, p.43). Froebel believed that every child had within him all he was to be at birth, and that the proper educational environment was to encourage the child to grow and develop in the most favourable manner.

"Young children are to be regarded and tended essentially like plants. Like these, if they were given the right conditions, they would grow and unfold and flower, by their own law, each according to its individual capacity and destiny." (E. Lawrence, 1969, p.195)

In his study of child-nature one of the most marked characteristics, which attracted Froebel's attention, was the child's inborn desire for activity, which reveals itself in play. According to Froebel, "play is the freest active manifestation of the child's inner self which springs from the need of that inner living consciousness to realize itself outwardly." (H. Bowen, 1907, p.116) Froebel made a significant contribution to early childhood education by seeing play as a process in which children bring to **realization their inner nature**. He recognized that children began to learn as soon as they began to interact with the world, and he reasoned that since the interaction was mostly in the form of play, the way to educate a child was through play, "as a means of awakening and developing the active and presentative side of his nature; wherefore none, not even the simplest gifts from a child, should ever be suffered to be neglected." (F.Froebel, 1901, p.77)

Froebel's continuous studies of the function of play in a child's life came to fruition in the concept of the Kindergarten – a place where children "instruct and educate themselves" and where they develop and integrate all their abilities through play. Froebel believed that play provided the **means for a child's intellectual, social, emotional and physical development**. Games were not just idle time wasting, but the most important steps in the child's development, and they were to be watched by teachers as clues to how the child is developing.

"It is through play that the child learns the use of his limbs, of all his bodily organs, and with this use gains health and strength. Through play he comes to know the external world, the

physical qualities of the objects which surround him, their motions, action, and reaction upon each other, and the relation of these phenomena to himself, – a knowledge that forms the basis of that which will be his permanent stock for life.” (H.Bowen, 1907, p.101)

However, Froebel didn't think that the play of young children should be unprompted at all times. For him the skill of adults was in knowing how and when to intervene, **how to support and extend children's play** to help them “to grasp and to try out their learning in concrete ways.” (T.Bruce, 1997, p.23)

To stimulate learning through well-directed play Froebel designed a series of instructional materials, which he called "**gifts**" and "**occupations**".

A gift was an object given to a child to play with, which helped the child to understand the concepts of shape, dimension, size, and their relationships. These gifts or playthings included balls, globes, dice, cylinders, collapsible dice, shapes of wood to be put together, paper to be folded, strips of paper, rods, beads, buttons, etc. The aim was to develop elemental judgement, distinguishing colour, separation and association, grouping, matching and so on.

The occupations were items such as paints and clay, which the children could use to make what they wished. Through the occupations children were developing a view of the world around them by comparing, testing, exploring, touching.

In the Kindergarten, group activities were balanced with individual play, guidance from teachers was balanced with intervals of freedom, the studies of nature, mathematics, and art were balanced by learning them through the gifts and occupations, so that everything was connected with everything else in the teaching process. Thus, the combination of play and education in Froebel's method turned the process of learning into something that the children **spontaneously wanted to do**. This issue appears to be of a great importance in contemporary approach to the role of play in the early years education.

My own teaching experience and observation of the lessons at school (school attachment) reveal to me the shift towards an emphasis on a more formal, more restrictive and less creative mode of education. After the literacy hour in Year 1 (Roby Park Primary School) some children seemed to be happy with the lesson, others felt left out (responses include: “I wish it was playtime”, “When am I going to show my picture?”) Literacy and numeracy hours in our schools seem to be completely segregated from play and art activities. The implication is that play is not serious, play is something supplementary.

In this situation Froebel's idea of play as a tool of education challenges us to examine the current methods and trends in teaching young children. If the shape of the children's day at school could have been set not by government officials, but by the teachers and art assistants, (and maybe by the children themselves), that would probably help us to bring the joy of play back to the classroom.

“Instead of concentrating on pre-specified learning objectives and then spending a great deal of effort in “motivating” children to want to attain these specified objectives, we ought to look more carefully at the conditions in which the children achieve their impressive learning success.” (G. Blenkin, A.Kelly, 1988, p. 67)

Blenkin, G., Kelly, A. (1988) *Early Childhood Education. A Developmental Curriculum*. London, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Play exists for itself and needs no other explanation. But if we make it constructive, purposeful and balanced with a careful guidance it might let “a ray of sunshine fall on our children from the kind soul of Froebel.” (www. geocities.com)

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