

There are many aspects of early years practice which have their origins in the past and which reflect particular ideas about the nature of childhood. It can be argued that it is important to identify these aspects so as to understand current interpretations of early years practice. Discuss with reference to the philosophies of two key historical figures.

Current early years practices such as play, a stimulating environment, the role of the practitioner, and recognising the child's parents as playing a key role in their education originate from theories that were made in the past. The following pages will outline the influential ideas of Friedrich Froebel and Dr. Maria Montessori and discuss them in relation to the current ideas relating to the above topics.

Before the nineteenth century, childhood was not seen as a stage of life separate from adulthood. Instead, the concept of childhood was regarded as an *immature form of adulthood* (Wood, E. 1996) children were regarded as being naturally evil and so education was not prioritised. Most children learnt the values of life through labouring alongside adults.

Into the nineteenth century, and with the concept of original sin dropped, three different views of childhood and education arose. The nativist view is the view that children are born with a pre-programmed development pathway. The empiricist view believes that each child is an empty vessel waiting to be filled, and the interactionist view recognises that children do have pre-programmed ideas whilst understanding the influence that the child's socio-cultural surrounding has on his education. (Bruce, T. 1997)

At the moment, the interactionist view is the most popular method of educating children (Ibid) and professionals regard both Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori as interactionists. However, both approached the development of childhood from a very different angle.

Friedrich Froebel believed that

The human being is born for research; and he is to practice it even as a child
(Anonymous, 2000,p1)

He assumed that children have to investigate the inner properties of things in order to discover hidden influences and causes. Froebel also considered children as being naturally good suggesting that this goodness could be harnessed and fostered through nurture care and education. (ibid) and so developed a special environment where children could grow and learn. This he called his Kindergarten or garden for the children. Froebel also considered the spiritual, physical, feeling and intellectual aspects of a child as a whole and believed that within his special environment (which will be discussed further on) allowing children free playful, conversational experiences would build and shape all of a child's senses.

Like Froebel, Dr. Montessori believe that the best way to educate a child was to design a method that would track the natural physiological and physical development of the child and allow touch, movement and freedom to aid the child to learn. (Montessori, 1964). Maria Montessori however did not regard her method of education as instigating play claiming;

If I were persuaded that children need to play, I would provide a proper apparatus, but I am not so persuaded. (Ibid)

The Dr. claimed that a child's mind was most absorbent between the ages of 0-6 years, and that children learn best through movement and senses although this should not be regarded as play. She also viewed the child as a whole however, in contrast to Froebel's theories, she believed that each sense should be isolated and developed separately. To achieve this Montessori developed thematic activities based on real life experiences, and allowed her children to work individually or as part of a group. Again, a special environment was set up where children could move about freely and pick and plan there own method of self education using apparatus that could only be utilised one way.

It is the theories of both Froebel and Montessori that have been translated into today's ideas of play related learning and can still be witnessed in current early years settings.

When a subject based curriculum was introduced in England it meant that teachers had to think more clearly about how specific subject knowledge could be represented through play. After some consideration the Desirable Outcomes document was introduced which in turn led to the release of the Early Learning Goals and stepping-stones guidance in 1999. Within this document play is regarded as a *way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge*. (QCA 2000, p25) and this guidance is followed in most government funded nursery and reception classes throughout England.

As part of this guidance, practitioners are asked to focus on six areas of learning. Personal, social and emotional development (Froebel's notion of developing the spirit and feelings) physical (one of Froebel's key areas) mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, creative development and communication, language and literacy (all make up the intellectual development of the child). Like Froebel's philosophy it is thought that through play children will, amongst other things, make sense of the world by exploring and developing learning experiences, think creatively and imaginatively, and learn to communicate with others. (Ibid)

The same document also highlights that children should be allowed to work and play alone if they wish, and be allowed to take risks and make mistakes. (QCA, 2000, p25) much like Montessori's theory that a child's natural instinct was to function independently so as to acquire autonomy (Hainstock, G. E. 1978) and her assumption that a child's natural instinct to correct themselves would compel them to repeat an activity until they realised their mistake. (Ibid)

As well as the foundation stage curriculum, the High Scope Curriculum bears certain links to Maria Montessori's theories. The High Scope Curriculum is a method of education that originated in America and bases its practice on theories principles and specific curriculum guidelines concerning content, planning and routines. (Wood & Attfield, 1996, p79) Amongst the curriculum's eight key experiences for learning is 'active learning' which like the Montessori method is based around a plan to do

review system (ibid, p80), in which children are able to plan and chose their own activities and carry them out within a structured environment.

From the evidence outlined above, it is clear that the importance of play in today's early years environment derive from the theories of both philosophers. Froebel believed that the nature of childhood was to question, examine, observe and compare in order to understand and flourish into adulthood. Montessori maintained that children need hands on practical experience of real life in order prepare for maturity. Both of these methods have been adapted and integrated into today's learning environment.

Yet today's learning environment also takes many of its aspects from the theories of the two philosophers'.

Both Froebel and Montessori outlined the importance of carrying out their method of education in a specially prepared setting. As Froebel believed that children need to be self-active and creative he designed his kindergarten to house a variety of toys and other apparatus, which he believed could aid the child with their sense, perception and understanding of nature and life (Murray, E.R. 1914, p148) these he labelled his gifts and occupations.

The objects that made up Froebel's gifts were cubes, cylinders wooden balls and small wooden blocks or cubes that could be built up into one large one (Bruce, T. 1997 p21). These gifts were purposely made so as to contrast and contradict, and in Froebel's view allow children to begin to understand both the inner and outer properties of things. Aside from size and shape, each gift differed in texture, colour, number of possible divisions or fractions, and the science of movement. (Anonymous, 2002p1)

The occupations that Froebel provided were activities in which children could display their fine motor skills such as drawing, modelling, and plasticine making, playing with sticks and threading tiny beads.

Personal experience would suggest that these aspects can still be found in today's early years classrooms. Modern day construction areas allow the child to develop both their fine and gross motor skills whilst building on their mathematical development by experiment with different sizes and shapes. Communication and language is also practiced through the giving and taking of orders or directions.

According to Etheredge, J. (2002) the right learning environment is essential for the development of children's motor skills. Much like Froebel's theory the pre-school supervisor believes that, in order to acquire good motor skills practicing teachers should provide their children with a selection of boxes, different textures and materials, a selection of balls with differing shapes and sizes, and blocks to build towers.

Montessori however believed in preparing her children for adult life and so designed activities modelled on real household tasks. Children in her care would be allowed to help prepare food, wash and tidy up, sweep floors and assimilate a wide variety of household chores. Like Froebel, tying ribbons, buttoning laces and threading materials would also take place. These she called her practical life activities and developed them to promote social skills, independence, self-discipline, concentration and motor skills.

Again from personal experience within an early years setting, it could be suggested that aspects of today's environment are also modelled on the theories of Maria Montessori.

When practicing in the early years environment children can be seen at their most potential when using their imagination. The most common area for this to take place is within the home corner, which is so called because it is designed to represent a house. Today's home corners will have a place for a tea and cutlery set, pots, pans, food, oven, sink, iron and ironing board, and clothes for dressing up. Within this space, children are allowed to role play as grown ups and simulate making tea, washing up and cooking food much like Montessori's theory on practical life activities.

Bayley, R. (2002) acknowledges that today's early years environments still symbolize ideas embedded in the past by Maria Montessori. The former teacher states that practitioners will ensure that materials are available and easily accessible by having *a place for everything and everything in its place* (p26) Areas are logically situated and sectioned and displays are kept at a reasonable height so as children can observe their own work. As well as this, Bayley believes that like Montessori's notion of the acquirement of autonomy children should be allowed to participate in the preparation and handling of drinks and snacks and getting involved in setting up the learning environment with the practitioner.

The practitioner's role within the early years environment has always been paramount. However, throughout history, psychologists and theorists have always disputed about how much the practitioner should physically be involved with the children.

This is an area in which both Montessori and Froebel held similar ideas. Throughout Friedrich Froebel's observations of childhood, the philosopher came to believe that the practitioner's role within the Kindergarten was to plan and observe the child in their play. By monitoring the child closely the practitioner could intervene in the child's play when it was deemed necessary. However, the activity was left to the child to lead whenever possible.

Because of Montessori's whole concept of self-education, she considered the child to be her teacher in an environment where practising teachers received the term director or directress. Like Froebel, the practitioner's role was to observe, record, intervene when necessary and plan.

It could be said that both theories have stood the test of time and are still witnessed today.

When carrying out activities within a structured environment, practitioners encourage children to solve problems for themselves. Aiding children with open questions the practitioner will encourage the child to query what is accepted and work out answers for themselves. Of course children will not always come to the right answer first time

however according to Bayley (2000) *it is when we make mistakes that the greatest learning happens*. It is also believed that children who learn to function independently have many advantages over those who do not. (Ibid)

However, children do need interaction, as well as observation so as to motivate and encourage them in a testing situation. The foundation stage document follows the historical principles of observing and assessing children so as to identify stages of development and knowing when it is time to intervene and when to hold back. (QCA 200)

Once a child has been observed and assessed. Practitioners can then plan the right type of education depending on the child's diverse needs. Again this relates to Froebel and Montessori's theory of planning and record keeping and gives the practitioner an insight into what the child knows and can do. More importantly it can help identify children who may have special educational needs.

However, the practitioner was not the only influential adult in the child's education. Both Froebel and Montessori regarded the child's parents as playing an equally important role in the development of the child.

Froebel saw the child's family as being the most important first educator in their life. He viewed the child's relationship with the parents to be as important to the child's development as was his socialisation and interaction with his peers and teacher. He also believed that the context of life was the love and respect that both parent and child share with one another, therefore through a loving, purposeful relationship, foundations for learning could be laid in the family during the early years.

Maria Montessori on the other hand viewed any adult, including the parents, to be a threat to the child's freedom, as she believed that their presence would hinder the child's independence. She maintained that within the household, because of the different psychological states between the two, it would be almost impossible for parent and child to live together unless necessary adjustments were made. (Carter, B.B, 1936)

According to the philosopher, the child's home would need to be large with multiple rooms set out like a school environment. (Montessori, 1964, pp 9-10) Instructive apparatus like the ones used within the classroom, and designated areas where children could be left free to move would have to be in place. Within his home the child could then continue to be educated with or without the need for his parents and so extending his independence out of the school environment and into the world around him.

The idea of parent school partnerships is a more modern concept of parental involvement but could almost certainly be traced back to the ideas formed by both Froebel and Montessori.

The high scope curriculum that was talked about earlier highlights the importance of a developing partnership between the school and parents. Professionals teaching the curriculum maintain that this partnership needs to be established if parents are to significantly influence their child's education. Schools practicing the high scope method welcome all parents and focus on sharing control of their children's education by listening and learning from parents and using themes such as coffee mornings and PSP meetings to form relationships and show interest in the parent as well as the child.

Similar to Froebel's theory, the parent of today is still seen as the first and most enduring educator (QCA 2002) and schools aim to become part of their local community. Parents are urged to develop their own education as well as their children's so they will be more able to help their children and not shy away from awkward questions about numeracy or literacy. Portage groups can also be set up to encourage parents to work at home with their child.

Henry (1996) claims that children see love and affection as an attachment. This he believes is a basic need to every child, that only the mother can give. The author states that as schools work on rote and have many children to teach, they cannot give children the type of secure attachment they need to be emotionally stable. Therefore by working along side the school, parents are giving children a psychologically steady, and secure education.

To conclude it can be suggested that from the evidence brought forward in this essay, the four main areas of a good early years education originated from theories that were set in the past. These theories were developed because of the different views that each philosopher had about childhood and education. Since the progress and practice of Froebel and Montessori's ideas, many more theories have developed and it is important that many more continue to do so as

Learning and development in humans is so complex that no single theory can adequately account for all the interrelated processes involved. (Wood & Attfield, 1996)

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