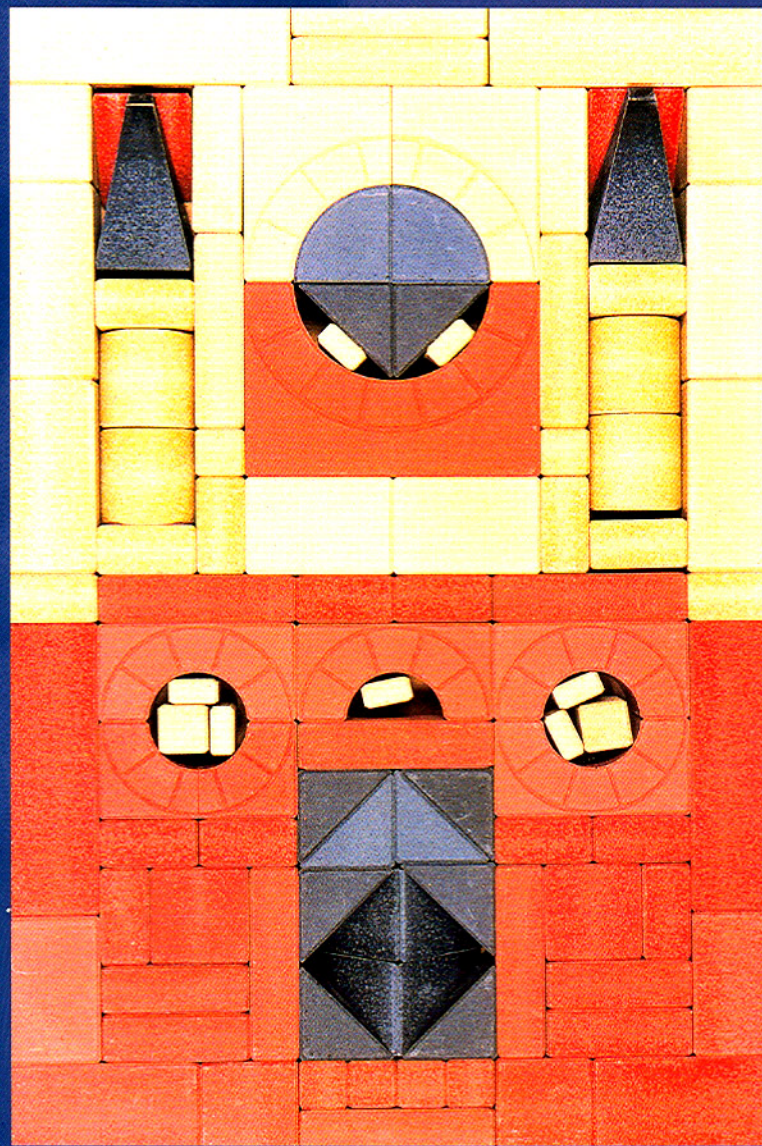


FRIEDRICH FROEBEL  
HIS LIFE, TIMES & SIGNIFICANCE



PETER WESTON

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**Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Let me do and I understand. Confucius**

# Contents

1. 1782-99: Childhood and Apprenticeship – Oberweissbach	2
2. 1799-1805: Student – University of Jena	3
3. 1805-11: Teacher and Tutor – Frankfurt & Yverdon	6
4. 1811-13: Student Again – Universities of Göttingen & Berlin	10
5. 1813-16: Soldier for Prussia – Lützow Free Corps – University of Berlin	11
6. 1816-31: The First School (Griesheim/Keilhau) & <i>The Education of Man</i>	12
7. 1831-36: Schools in Switzerland – Burgdorf	14
8. 1836-48: The First Kindergarten – Bad Blankenburg & <i>Mother, Play &amp; Nursery Songs</i>	15
9. 1848-52: Closure and Banning of Kindergartens	17
10. The Froebel System and the Gifts ( <i>Spielgaben</i> )	18
11. Froebel in the Twenty-first Century	21
Further Reading (in English)	24

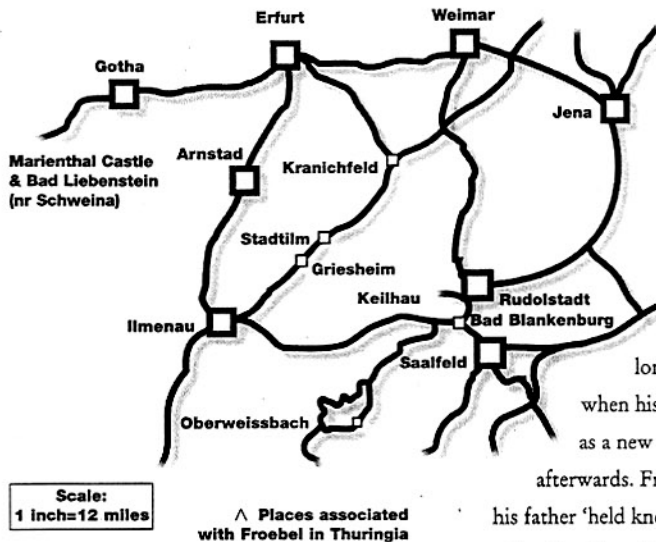
**FRIEDRICH FROEBEL** was probably the most influential educationalist of the nineteenth century. He turned common sense upside down by arguing that the most important part of schooling was the *pre-school* period. He claimed that the health and happiness of the individual, the family and the state depended on the quality of pre-school education, at a time when there was virtually no public provision for it. He invented the concept and word *kindergarten*, and he began programmes of training for women kindergarten teachers, at a time when teaching was almost entirely a male profession. These convictions came to fruition when he was already in his late fifties, but by the age of seventy it seemed that his whole life's work was destroyed.

It requires an effort of historical imagination to understand how the principles and practices which are today called 'Froebelian' emerged from the context of Froebel's life and times. The early nineteenth century was a turbulent period in Europe, both intellectually, as some of the greatest names in world philosophy were writing and teaching in the universities where Froebel studied, and politically, as Napoleonic imperialism defeated the apparently invincible Prussia and cleared the way for German nationalism by sweeping away feudal structures. For both philosophical and political reasons, *education* came to be seen as of vital importance, but the values and vision of Froebel gave a unique direction to one major aspect of its development.



△ Froebel's birthplace today

## 1. 1782-99: Childhood and Apprenticeship – Oberweissbach



Friedrich Froebel was born on 21st April 1782 in the village of Oberweissbach in Thuringia, in central Germany. He was the sixth child of a Lutheran pastor in a village which then as now was famous for its herbal medicines, and then as now was in a very beautiful and relatively unspoiled part of Europe. The village is not far from Weimar, which was the ducal capital and was already a 'cultural capital' when it became the home of Goethe (1749-1832), the great humanist writer who lived there for nearly 50 years, and of Schiller and other writers, artists and philosophers.

Friedrich's mother died before he was one year old. As his father was very occupied with parish business, Friedrich spent a lonely childhood, as he recalled in his *Autobiography*, written in 1827. His loneliness was not alleviated when his father remarried in 1785, as a new baby arrived soon

afterwards. Friedrich later reflected that his father 'held knowledge and science in less estimation than faith', and Friedrich's own early education was uneven. He was sent by his father to a girls' school, as the only boy, because his father thought it provided better teaching than the village school.

As a child, Friedrich was considered to be a 'dreamer', and not destined for an academic life. At the age of ten, he went to live in a neighbouring town, Stadtilm, with his natural mother's brother, Herr Hoffmann. He was also a pastor, but with a milder, kinder disposition than Friedrich's father, and so the former strictness of his home life was transformed into a greater toleration and liberty. He was also sent to a boys' school with forty pupils, and he came to

feel more normal and accepted. He was able to integrate a belief in God, which he never lost, with a sense of the diversity and harmony of Nature, derived in part from his introspective solitary rambling in the local woods at this time. Later, he was to combine both with the philosophical idealism which was the dominant intellectual movement of his time, thus laying the foundations of his pedagogic principles and values which were centred on a relentless quest for 'unity'.

At the age of fifteen, in 1797, Friedrich was apprenticed to a forester, Herr Witz, nearby in the Thuringia forest, with whom he was to learn land surveying and valuing. (The systematic development of forests for economic gain was an emergent industry at the time.) Even though Herr Witz was often too busy to teach him, he broadened his knowledge of nature and made good use of the forester's library and other borrowed books to learn about botany, forestry, surveying, geometry, and mathematics. Thus the autodidacticism and introspection of his earlier childhood returned.

## 2. 1799-1805: Student – University of Jena

In the winter of 1799, still only 17 years of age, Froebel persuaded his father – against the wishes of his stepmother – to allow him to register as a full-time student at the nearby University of Jena, where his brother Traugott was studying medicine. At this time, the University of Jena was probably the most renowned in central Europe, attracting many distinguished scholars to its staff. The curriculum in natural sciences at Jena had been directly influenced by Goethe in his capacity as Minister of State. Froebel hoped to gain qualifications to further his intended career in forest-management, and he studied a very wide range of subjects, joining both the Mineralogical Society and the Natural History Society. He was most drawn to subjects that emphasised order and classification (reflecting a trait that his father possessed), including the natural sciences and geometry. He later wrote of his studies in natural history: 'Invariably, whenever I grasped the interconnection and unity of phenomena, I felt the longings of my spirit and of my soul were fulfilled'. However, as a result of accumulated debts, he was held in detention by the University for nine weeks, and he left the university after two years to return home to Oberweissbach where his father was seriously ill.

The 1790s and early 1800s were a period of continuous political and social revolution throughout Europe, following the French Revolution. The upheavals caused by Napoleon stimulated in particular the movement for German nationalism. Germany at this time was not a state, but a collection of scores of small feudal duchies and principalities, plus Prussia, which were bound together loosely within the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation' (about which Voltaire famously inquired in what respect it was holy, Roman, or an empire). Napoleon swept feudalism away, and was widely regarded by educated Germans at this time as a moderniser and liberator, even after his occupation of the Rhineland and other parts of Germany in 1794. For Hegel (in 1807) Napoleon represented 'history on horseback', a dynamic force sweeping away



▲ Napoleon: 'history on horseback'

the rigidities and parochialism of the past and opening up the possibility of creating a new, modern German nation. The Holy Roman Empire was effectively dead when Napoleon established the Confederation of the Rhine in 1806, to which eventually sixteen German states belonged.



Ullstein Bilderdienst/BFA

^ **Johann Fichte**

In addition to the political and social revolution taking place in Germany, there was a quite extraordinary flowering of philosophy in central and northern Germany, associated mainly with Fichte (1762-1814), Schelling (1775-1854) and Hegel (1770-1831). This was to colour indelibly Froebel's personal development. Not since the time of ancient Greece had there been such an intensity of philosophical exchange and development as at this time, in the fifty years between, say, the publication of Kant's major work *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and the death of Hegel in 1831.

The secularisation of philosophy resulting from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had proposed a world unmediated by the divine, and old-fashioned theological metaphysics was seen as a mystifying and irrelevant distraction. As a result the major philosophical issue of the period became analysis of the relation between a self-conscious and autonomous 'subject' and the external world of Nature as mere 'object'. Is the 'self' part of Nature or apart from it? What is the self that reflects upon selfhood? Is the world an aspect of mind, constructed by mind? Is intellectual freedom an illusion? How can knowledge be possible, and what is it? What is the origin and justification of moral values? These and other urgent questions, relating to all aspects of human experience, including education, were the concern of the 'Idealist' philosophers, as they became known, and set the basic pattern for modern thought. The Idealists saw the search for unity of subject and object, mankind and Nature, mind and matter, as the true object of philosophical activity. Education was identified as a crucial means towards that end.

Fichte was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Jena from 1794 to 1799 (the year that Froebel arrived) in which year he



Ullstein Bilderdienst/BFA

^ **Friedrich von Schelling**

was sacked, ostensibly on a charge of atheism, but in the view of many because of his political and philosophical radicalism. Schelling was a Professor at Jena from 1798 until 1820, where he worked with Hegel, who was a lecturer there from 1801 to 1807. These philosophers were all involved in the turbulent politics of the time. They, along with the rising bourgeoisie, were at first ardent supporters of Napoleonic values, though they later came to adopt a more critical position. They advocated liberalism and a united Germany as a means of ending feudal despotism and in order to bring about the social and political liberation of the people. It is quite extraordinary to



realise that the ideas and arguments of these philosophers in this period became the crucible for all the major political and social movements which changed the course of history in the next century. When Schelling lectured on Hegel in the University of Berlin in 1841 it is known that Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Bakunin (1814-1876) and Engels (1820-1895) attended, leading figures in existentialism, anarchism, and communism, and it has been argued that elements of Fichte's authoritarianism, in particular his advocacy of 'obedience to authority', were important features adopted by the Nazis in their rise to power.

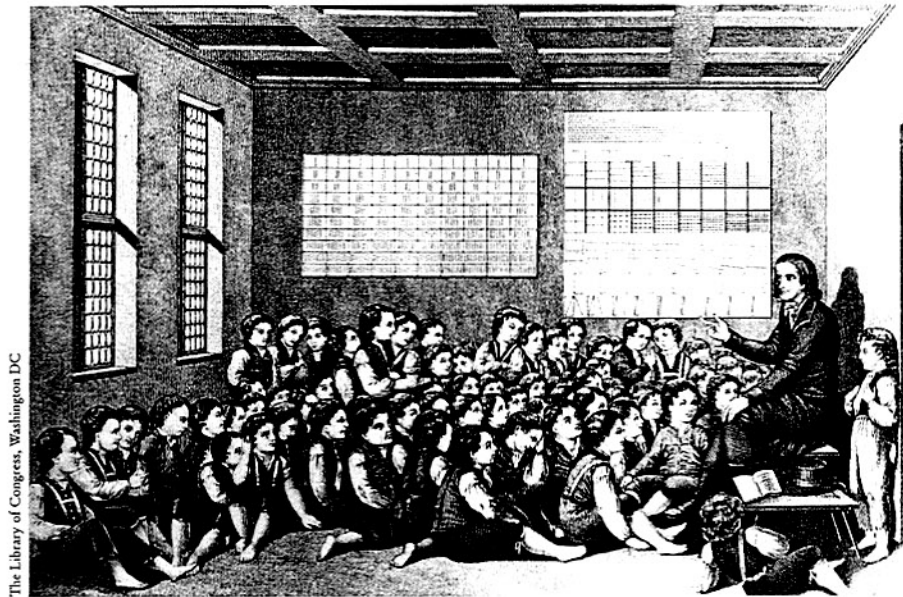
Following his father's death in February 1802, Froebel, nearly 20 years old, had left Oberweissbach for good. He was now reading widely in the literature and philosophy of the time, in particular Goethe, Schiller, Novalis and Schelling. He took up employment as a land surveyor in Bamberg, newly-incorporated in Bavaria by Napoleonic decree, and became friendly with a young doctor of philosophy who 'leaned towards the new school of Schelling', and owned a property which Froebel was assigned to survey. This unnamed doctor lent Froebel a copy of a Schelling text (*Bruno, oder über die Welt-*

*seele*), which moved him profoundly. They talked philosophy a great deal, and in response to a strange warning of the young man's - 'Guard yourself against philosophy; she leads you towards doubt and darkness' - Froebel was later to write, 'I regarded philosophy as a necessary part of the life of mankind, and could not grasp the notion that one could be verging towards darkness and doubt when one calmly investigated the inner life'.

Froebel's craving for intellectual stimulus was later satisfied temporarily by another unnamed scholar whom he chanced to meet, a mathematician and physicist, as a result of which Froebel became convinced that he should become an architect. He read two works by the nationalist Ernst Arndt at this time, and afterwards felt his life was starting anew. To mark this he began to call himself Wilhelm Froebel for a while, using his second given name, rather than Friedrich. He later wrote that he could only find his life-aim 'in a continual striving towards inward perfection'. It was at this time also that he wrote the famous words in a friend's album: 'You give people their bread; let my aim be to give them themselves'.

Froebel had kept in touch with the young Bamberg doctor of philosophy, who suggested that he come to Frankfurt-am-Main, where he would help him to find a position.

### 3. 1805-11: Teacher and Tutor – Frankfurt & Yverdon



The Library of Congress, Washington DC

#### ^ Pestalozzi teaching at Yverdon, 1809

Froebel arrived in Frankfurt in June 1805. At the time the city was a thriving commercial centre under Napoleonic control. Radical ideas and social reforms had been reflected in educational experiment and the establishment of a 'Model School' under the direction of Gottlieb Gruner, a disciple of the Swiss teacher, Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827). [This was a school with about 200 pupils, with boys and girls in separate classes, as was customary, and four permanent and nine visiting male teachers.] The friend introduced Froebel to Gruner, who

persuaded him to give up his aspirations for a career in architecture and offered him a job as teacher in his school. It was at this Model School that Froebel taught his first formal lessons. Froebel's interest in architectural training was now abandoned, but his enthusiasm for teaching stayed with him for the rest of his life.

In September 1805, fired with enthusiasm, and having read Pestalozzi's tract *How Gertrude Teaches her Children* (published in 1801), Froebel walked for three weeks, from Frankfurt to Yverdon on lake

Neuchâtel in Switzerland, to meet Pestalozzi at his recently established school. He stayed there as a teacher for two weeks. His views on Pestalozzi's methods, based more on intuition than on analysis, as reported in his *Autobiography* some 22 years later, were significant. He supported streaming by ability in each subject, but with flexibility for movement between streams, as each subject was taught at the same time throughout the school. He was unhappy that some subjects 'important to the all-round harmonious development of a man' were inadequately emphasised. He felt both 'exalted and depressed' by what he saw, but was particularly frustrated by Pestalozzi's unwillingness to give any theorised account of his practice. Pestalozzi preferred to say 'Go and see for yourself: it works splendidly!'

The great influence on Pestalozzi and on all progressive educational ideas at this time was Rousseau, and in particular his *Emile*, which was partly a treatise on education and partly a novel. On its publication in 1762, *Emile* was condemned as 'rash, scandalous, impious, tending to destroy the Christian religion and all governments' and the book was banned by governments in Paris and Geneva. What was offensive about the book,

Rousseau reflected afterwards, was that it was based on the radical premise 'that man is naturally good'. It formed a philosophical complement to his earlier *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), but its down-to-earth, practical tone, centred on education as a potentially revolutionary force, frightened governments. Emile is brought up outside the influence of society 'like young peasants and savages', and Rousseau emphatically states: 'Let us first lay it down as an incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart; the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced'. Emile's model education is based on very practical interaction with his natural environment, uncontaminated by books or social influences. The teacher is a guide, not an instructor, and play, motivated by curiosity and pleasure, is encouraged as the appropriate mode of learning for the young child. Books are withheld until the age of twelve, and then only sparingly introduced.

Pestalozzi's methods echoed the principles expounded in *Emile*. He had replaced the traditional educational method of lectures followed by recitation, drill and rote-learning, with observation and physical activity, even music, and as a result the

normal school regime based on punishment had been progressively abandoned, as voluntary obedience based on self-respect made it unnecessary. Nature walks were more important than book-learning, and the teaching of writing was preceded by practice in drawing, to help the children develop a sense of form. Pestalozzi's key concept was *Anschauung*, which essentially meant giving a priority to 'observation' or 'sense-perception', i.e. direct experience of *things*, as a basis for learning. What Froebel essentially derived from Pestalozzi was an appreciation of the importance of a teacher's concern for the development of the whole child. He did, however, modify Pestalozzi's somewhat more mechanistic attitude to learning with his idealist sense of 'harmonious wholeness' of the child – body, soul and intellect. (Pestalozzi once wrote 'You are, as a physical living being, nothing but your five senses' – something which Froebel could never have written; also, in old age Pestalozzi boasted that he had not read a book for 40 years – again, an impossibility for Froebel).

Froebel was in due course to build on and develop Rousseau's proposals and Pestalozzi's practice with more systematic theoretical rigour, based partly on a unique

combination of his reading in idealist philosophy, partly on his early and solitary interaction with nature in the woods around his home, and partly on his later studies in crystallography, a science that was entering an exciting period of development.

Enthused by what he found at Yverdon, the 23-year-old Froebel returned to the Model School at Frankfurt, where he stayed for nearly two years. He contributed to a major revision of the curriculum, and produced innovations, particularly in the teaching of local geography, teaching mostly arithmetic, drawing, physical geography and German in the middle school to pupils aged 9-11. He wrote to his brother at the time that he felt as if 'my life had at last discovered its native element'. Froebel was also at this time reading widely in philosophy, in particular Fichte and Ernst Arndt (1769-1860). Arndt, formerly a Jena-educated Lutheran minister, gave up his calling in 1798 and became a 'patriot', or vociferous German nationalist and opponent of Napoleon, before becoming a Professor of History and, in 1848, a Deputy in the National Assembly at Frankfurt. His *Fragments on Human Culture* was considered by Froebel to be 'the bible of education' at the time.



△ Froebel as a young man

Then, in June 1806 Froebel took on an extra job, at first for only two hours a day, as private tutor to the three sons of Baron von Holzhausen, having been introduced by the same friend who had introduced him to Gottlieb Gruner. Private tutoring was a common practice at the time for educated young men (Fichte, Schelling and Hegel all did it), though it was normally not considered as a long-term career. Froebel, however, gave up a permanent post at the Model School, much to Gruner's astonishment, to devote himself to tutoring the Holzhausen boys. The position became full-time in July 1807 and lasted until 1811, during which time Froebel insisted on living with his pupils in the country rather than in the town. He was also allowed to take them for two years (1808-1810) to Pestalozzi's school at Yverdon – quite possibly with the collusion of their mother in order to remove them from the domineering influence of their father, the Baron.

The position had a deep personal effect on Froebel, mainly because he fell hopelessly in love with the young mother of his pupils, Caroline von Holzhausen. Froebel may even have been the father of her son Hector, born in March 1812. Certainly Froebel wrote very emotional letters to Caroline until 1816,



▲ Caroline von Holzhausen

when she returned a personal gift and broke off the relationship. Froebel's obsession with her continued for many years thereafter, however, and this confirmed his lifelong idealisation of women.

It also had a lasting effect in other ways. Baron von Holzhausen had set aside a small patch of meadow as a garden for the children, and Froebel assisted them in transplanting and tending flowers. This later came to be an important part of the philosophy of the kindergarten (and part of the metaphorical significance of the very

word 'kindergarten' – 'children-garden'). Froebel also invented and tested games and toys for the boys, and this experience was probably influential in the development later of the 'Gifts'. (The name 'gifts' signified for Froebel both the interactive and the creative nature of children's play: 'Happy is that little one who understands how to satisfy that need of his nature, to give by producing various gifts of his own creation'.)

This period, while Froebel worked for the von Holzhausens, was an extremely turbulent time politically. Napoleon had declared war on Prussia in September 1806, and the Grande Armée, after the unexpected and spectacular defeat of the Prussian Army at Jena and Auerstadt, was at the gates of Berlin within ten days. The Prussian king sued for peace, and Prussia was saved from complete destruction only by the intervention of the Russian Tsar, who wanted to preserve a buffer between Russia and France. Even so, Prussia lost about half of her territory, and Napoleon became complete master of Germany without a rival on the continent, until the humiliating 1812 retreat from Moscow and the Battle of Leipzig a year later, when a coalition of nations led by Prussia defeated him.

It was in Berlin in 1807-08, while the city was under French occupation, that Fichte delivered his provocative *Addresses to the German Nation* in which he argued for a national education system for German boys and girls, 'in order to attain the purpose of life in man and in all mankind'. Patriotism, he argued, would ensure that 'this light would radiate from this nation to all mankind'. (The population of all the German states at this time was little more than 25 million, of whom only about 30% were literate.) Fichte became the first Rector of the new University of Berlin, which was established two years later, in 1810, by Wilhelm von Humboldt precisely to provide a cultural focus for the identity (*Bildung*) of the emergent German nation (and which Froebel later attended). Thus Froebel's own ideas about the potentially healing and liberating effect of education, its importance as a universal right, and his commitment to fundamentally holistic, idealist principles arose from this unique conjuncture of events and people.

## 4. 1811-12: Student Again – Universities of Göttingen & Berlin

During all this upheaval Froebel was still searching intellectually for a unifying philosophical system. He was never a systematic thinker and his lack of philosophical training is manifest in an unpublished treatise which he wrote in 1811 called 'SPHAIRA' ('The Sphere'). In it he proposed, in an Idealist manner, that the same laws govern the individual, society and nature, and that a spiritual unity holds the universe together.

He registered in July of the same year at the University of Göttingen in order to further his self-training as a teacher by studying at first languages, and then 'the deeper-lying unity of natural objects' through a study of mineralogy, natural history, physics, and chemistry. The new discoveries and theories of Dalton and others in the application of atomic theory to crystallography which were being published at this time strengthened his view that the universe was composed of the same atoms in varying arrangements. This seemed to confirm the legitimacy of his search for an underlying harmony in all things human and material. It was also at Göttingen that Froebel came to believe 'that politics itself was in essence but a means of uplifting man from the necessities of Nature and of life to the

freedom of the spirit and the will' – thus echoing the terminology and sentiments of leading contemporary philosophers.



Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz

^ Christian Weiss

In 1812 Froebel left Göttingen and registered in October at the University of Berlin, where he could support himself financially more easily, but also in order to study under Professor Christian Samuel Weiss, the originator of the science of crystallography (who was only two years older than Froebel himself).

The University had been established with the explicit rationale of providing an education for its students which would be a unifying force for German nationhood, and Johann Fichte was the first Rector. Prussia, following

the battle of Jena, was desperately trying to modernise its institutions. The king had abolished serfdom in 1807, thus enabling peasants to buy and sell land. He established a ministerial system to assist in policymaking, allowed free entry into trades in 1810, thus allowing small businesses to start up, delegated responsibility for municipal affairs to local authorities, and, through Wilhelm von Humboldt, overhauled the whole educational system, revising the curriculum to include languages and history, and establishing training colleges for teachers. Army reforms had a high priority, as the objective was to create a modern state capable of avenging the defeat by Napoleon. Brutal punishments were abolished, and promotion on merit rather than on social position was introduced, as was conscription.

## 5. 1813-16: Soldier for Prussia – Lützow Free Corps – University of Berlin

Froebel's studies at the University of Berlin were interrupted. At Easter 1813, the year after Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, Froebel enlisted as a volunteer with the Lützow Free Corps in Leipzig. This was a newly established Prussian volunteer unit, of which one-third were students, many, like, Froebel, coming from other German states. It attracted several thousand volunteers, and they swore allegiance not to the king but to the fatherland. (It is thought that their black uniform with red stripes and yellow piping may be the origin of today's German national colours.)

Though Prussia declared war on France in March 1813, some German states such as Saxony fought on the French side. Support for the war in Prussia was mainly an urban phenomenon, and volunteers were mostly students and craftsmen. The Lützow Free Corps did not see much front-line service, perhaps because the king was suspicious of its social composition, perhaps because members were poorly trained. It was used mainly to harry the enemy, and was eventually disbanded. Froebel, however, did fight in two battles in May 1813, and continued as a rifleman until the defeat of Napoleon and the First Peace of Paris in May 1814. The experience of service in the

Lützow Free Corps stimulated Froebel's enthusiasm for German nationhood, and made him even more aware of the importance of education in producing social change.

Froebel's war service had not seriously interrupted his intellectual development. In the Lützow Free Corps were two friends who had attended Fichte's lectures at Berlin University with him, and with whom he was to maintain a lifelong relationship, Heinrich Langethal and Wilhelm Middendorff (the closest friend and colleague Froebel ever had). He also corresponded with Professor Weiss about mineralogy and geology. But perhaps most important of all, the war experience intensified Froebel's search for 'unity'. This had not been a traditional war between professional armies, but a war by a people in arms for a popular cause, German unity, and education had already been reformed in Prussia, being regarded as the essential element which could produce cultural and political change. Froebel was developing an educational philosophy that would be based on uniting 'the home, the school and the world'.

Froebel later wrote that he lived his soldier-life 'in a sort of dream', being mostly away

from any front-line engagement. On his discharge from the military in July 1814, Froebel returned to the University of Berlin, and, as a result of his Prussian military service, was eligible to obtain a post working for Professor Weiss, with whom he was now friendly and who was currently at the leading edge of the emergent science of crystallography. These were two crucially significant years for the development of Froebel's philosophy. The symmetries of crystals were recognised by Weiss to be an external manifestation of internal structure at molecular level. As Froebel organised and classified the collection in the University's Mineralogical Museum, he became convinced that he was coming to understand the geometric handiwork of God, and that the variations in crystalline form were the outcome of the same natural laws of growth as were plants and people. He later wrote 'Thereafter my rocks and crystals served me as a mirror wherein I might descry mankind, and man's development and history'. At this time he decided against becoming a university teacher, and decided to devote himself instead to 'the education of man'. He volunteered again for military service in 1815, the year of Waterloo, but, being a state official, his service was not required.

## 6. 1816-31: The First School (Griesheim/Keilhau) & *The Education of Man*

In 1816, turning down an academic career in mineralogy, Froebel started his own school in the small village of Griesheim, a few miles from his birthplace and the home of his brother Christoph. He later wrote 'I consider my present educational work to have begun on 13 November 1816' with the establishment of this school, which he called the 'Universal German Educational Institute' (*Allgemeine Deutsche Erziehungs-Anstalt*). (He agonised over the 'German' epithet, but felt it was less arrogant than 'for mankind', and, as stated above, nationalism was considered at the time a modernising force in the context of a still semi-feudal Germany.)

The main stimulus for starting the school was to provide an education for his five nephews. Three were sons of his eldest surviving brother Christoph, who had recently died of typhus in a military hospital in 1813, and the other two were sons of his second surviving brother Christian. (His three daughters followed in 1820.) Froebel had always been very close to Christoph, whom he had referred to as an 'angel of deliverance' in mediating between him and his over-strict father, and who had supported and encouraged him on many occasions thereafter. Two other

pupils, Ernst and Georg, were the sons of a pigfarmer and descendant of Martin Luther. (Froebel publicised their enrolment in 1817 as a 'living memorial' to Martin Luther, on the 300th anniversary of Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the doors of Wittenberg church on 31 October 1517.) Froebel had many times walked past Wartburg Castle, where Luther had fled for refuge after the Diet of Worms, and where he had translated the Bible into German.



From 'Keilhau in Wort und Bild'

^ Froebel's first wife, Wilhelmine Henriette

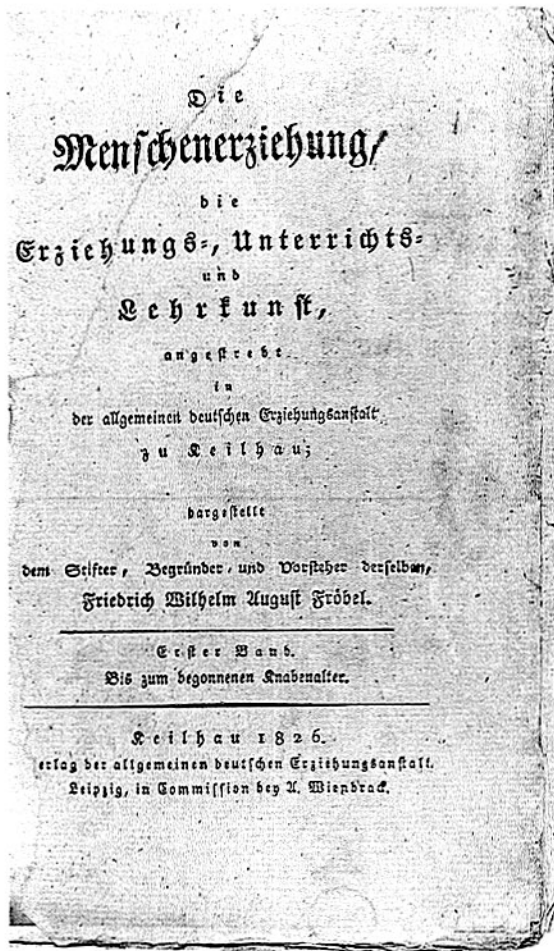
The following year the school moved a few miles away to another small village, Keilhau, where his friend Wilhelm Middendorff and Heinrich Langenthal's brother Christian

joined him as teachers. Middendorff, who nine years later married Froebel's niece Albertine, was to be Froebel's closest associate and collaborator for the rest of his life. The marriage of Froebel to Wilhelmine Henriette Hoffmeister, whom he had met at the University of Berlin, where she had been taught by Fichte, took place the following year, in September 1818. She came from a comfortable civil service background, and had been previously married, but gave up her security to share Froebel's life of relative impecuniness. She was two years older than Froebel, and brought no dowry.

The number of pupils at the school soon grew to 56, and more teachers were recruited, but the school was allowed only to enrol pupils aged seven or above: it was not a kindergarten. While at Keilhau Froebel had begun to publish his ideas in a weekly journal, *The Educating Families* (*Die erziehenden Familien*), and in 1826 he published (privately) his first major book, *The Education of Man* (*Die Menschenerziehung*). These publications established his growing reputation.

*The Education of Man* outlines not only Froebel's aims and teaching methods at this time, but also embodies a theory of





^ Title page of *Die Menschenerziehung*

education based on the principles of (i) 'wholeness' – a person must ideally be in harmony with society and nature, so that 'school and life, knowing and doing, cannot be separated' and 'playing learning and

working should form a harmonious unity'; (ii) innate human goodness and perfectibility, in the tradition of Rousseau, and in line with contemporary progressive Idealist thought; and (iii) 'activity' – in the sense that 'thinking and doing' through play, learning, and work are 'the proper basis for a fully active, conscious and happy life' for the individual and for society.

It is no wonder that the reactionary Prussian authorities were not enthusiastic about this eccentric man with these dangerous ideas. They were suspicious of the school, considering it to be a seedbed of radical ideas, rather like the 'Burschenschaften', or students' associations, which had been set up after 1815 for nationalist and liberal purposes. In fact, a leading figure in the Halle Burschenschaft, Johannes Barop, Middendorff's nephew, taught at Keilhau from 1823 at the age of 21, joining the staff

permanently in 1828. In 1831 he married Froebel's favourite niece Emilie, and later became Principal of Keilhau. Julius, Froebel's nephew (son of Christoph) and a pupil at Keilhau, later wrote that the school was 'a breeding ground for the revolutionary spirit of the time'. Froebel himself acknowledged in 1828 that, had he set up a merely vocational school 'training servants, footmen or housemaids, shoemakers or tailors, tradesmen or merchants, soldiers or even noblemen, then I should have gained fame and glory... but I only wanted to train up free, thinking, independent men!'

The Prussian authorities instigated a thorough investigation of the practices at the school, and, perhaps because of some disunity among the staff deriving from increasing debts and from Froebel's somewhat autocratic management style (and also perhaps because of the accidental drowning of a teacher which produced rumours of carelessness), parents started to remove their children. This precipitated a major financial crisis when finally only six pupils remained.

## 7. 1831-36: Schools in Switzerland – Burgdorf

The financial crisis caused Froebel to leave Germany in 1831, and a chance meeting led to an invitation to open a school in Switzerland. He left Barop in charge at Keilhau, and, helped by Middendorff, Langenthal and his nephew Ferdinand (Christian's son) he started a school in a 'borrowed' castle in Wartensee (1831) and subsequently another in Willisau (1832), both in Luzern canton. This Catholic canton, however, was not a welcoming environment, and Froebel's liberal educational and Christian values generated fierce opposition from the Jesuit clergy, who branded the Froebelians as heretics.

Eventually, following an invitation from a deputation from the canton of Bern in 1833, Froebel became Director of an orphanage in Burgdorf which had previously been run by Pestalozzi. It was here that he started to consider seriously the importance of a curriculum for pre-school education, as, without it, he could see no proper foundation for school education. Industrialisation and economic pressures were leading to increased exploitation of child labour, and neither church nor state were making any educational provision for the very young. Froebel became convinced of the need to train capable and gifted women, in particular mothers, if pre-school education were to become effective and widespread. This in turn would require him to develop an educational system that was theorised without being merely theoretical, and practical without being merely pragmatic. Some early toys and games were developed at this period, which would later become transformed into the systemic 'gifts' and 'occupations'.

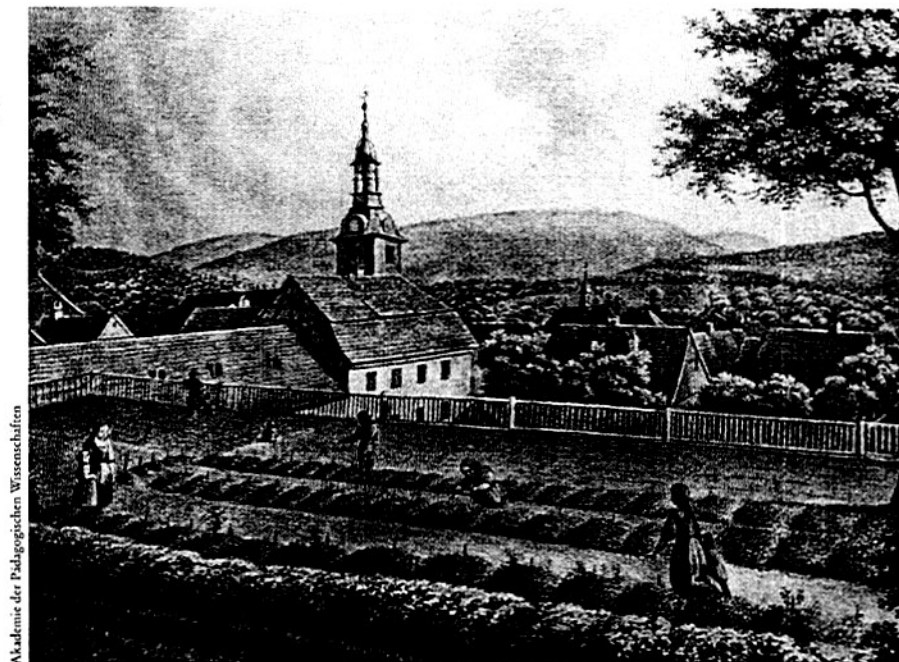


^ Women teachers in an early nursery school

## 8. 1836-48: The First Kindergarten – Bad Blankenburg & *Mother, Play & Nursery Songs*

In 1836 Froebel and his wife returned to Germany on account of Henriette's ill-health, as the Swiss mountain air was thought to be bad for her. They left nephew Ferdinand as Director of the orphanage at Burgdorf, and moved at first to Berlin, and then in 1837 to Bad Blankenburg. This was a small town in Thuringia, not far from Keilhau and Oberweissbach, Froebel's home territory, and they settled in rooms which Johannes Barop had rented for them.

The idea of establishing an institution for the education of the very young was now a firm conviction in Froebel's mind. It was in Bad Blankenburg, in a building provided by the town council (now a memorial museum to his work), that Froebel opened his first institution for early childhood education in June 1839. He called it the 'Play and Activity Institute' (*Spiel- und Beschäftigungsanstalt*). A phrase which has become associated with Froebel as perhaps summing up his entire philosophy was first coined by him in a journal which he published in 1838: *Kommt, lässt uns unsern Kindern leben!* It is very difficult to translate accurately, but means something like 'Hey, let's live our lives so our children may benefit!'. Sadly, 1839 was the year in which Henriette died.



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^ The first kindergarten, in Bad Blankenburg

In 1840 he renamed the Institute *kindergarten*, a word which he famously coined while walking in the mountains with Middendorff and Barop. According to Barop he stood transfixed, his eyes assuming a refulgent brilliancy, and shouted to the four winds of heaven, 'Eureka! I have it! *Kindergarten* shall be the name of the new institution!'. This name has become an enduring international memorial to his achievements. The word cleverly combines the human (*kinder*) with the natural

(*garten*), and can mean both garden *of* children, and garden *for* children. (The Bad Blankenburg building originally had a garden at the rear in which each child had a personal patch of land for cultivation and observation.) There were nearly 50 children registered in 1839, many of whom had first to be washed in the fountain in the marketplace before starting school.

On 28 June 1840 Froebel's *Universal German Kindergarten* was formally



^ A sample page from the *Mutter-, Spiel- und Koselieder*

opened, on the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention of printing. It was staffed entirely by women, who were not previously well-represented in the teaching profession, and many women were subsequently trained there as teachers of infants. It was at Bad Blankenburg in 1844 that Froebel published his most influential book, *Mother-, Play- and Nursery-Songs (Mutter-, Spiel- und Koselieder)*, and in 1845 that he published his developed theory of toys, or 'gifts' (Spielgaben). By 1848 more than fifty kindergartens were operating in Germany, as Froebel and Middendorff proselytised nationwide for the new kindergarten system, and in the course of the next two years Froebel organised six-month certificated training courses for kindergarten teachers, thus helping to ensure the survival of the system.

## 9. 1848-52: Closure and Banning of Kindergartens



^ Froebel in 1849, aged 67

A long period of political stasis came to an end with the revolutions of 1848 which swept across Europe. Froebel welcomed the Revolution in Germany as the 'spring morning of the German people', and he wrote excitedly in a letter in July, 1848, 'Take a look at the essence of my educational activity – ...I am educating and training people in the exercise of republican virtues'. In the next month, August, the success of his work seemed assured, as 260 kindergarten teachers met to celebrate in nearby Rudolstadt. In 1851, the Grand Duke of Weimar donated to the sixty-nine-

year-old Froebel the nearby Marienthal Castle at Schweina as a centre for the training of kindergarten teachers. All seemed to be going well in fulfilment of Froebel's dream of revolutionising education on liberal democratic lines in Germany, as he and Middendorff travelled all over the country promoting the establishment of kindergartens. In July 1851 he married Luise Levin, a kindergarten teacher and former pupil. But then, in August 1851, the Prussian court, fearful of popular uprisings in the wake of the failed revolution of 1848, closed all the kindergartens, and neighbouring states followed suit. Even Baroness Bertha von Marenholtz-Bülow, who was a patron of Froebel and who had been instrumental in facilitating the gift of Marienthal Castle, the former seat of the Duke of Meiningen, was unable to prevent this disaster.

Froebel died less than a year later, on 21 June, 1852, aged 70, at Marienthal. The sense of failure and despair that Froebel must have felt at the apparently permanent closure of all the kindergartens and training centres as he neared the end of his life's work, however, must have been somewhat mitigated by his reception at the large Educational Congress of teachers held in

Gotha in April 1852, two months before his death. When he appeared all the delegates rose and gave him a standing ovation, thus testifying that, despite government hostility, the Froebelian system had a future, which would be assured by the commitment and determination of key elements within the teaching profession.

Why did the Prussian authorities act in this unexpectedly draconian way? Possibly they mistook the authorship of a pamphlet by Froebel's nephew Karl (he later emigrated to Britain and started a school in Edinburgh). Possibly they associated him with Karl's elder brother Julius, who had been condemned to death as a member of the National Assembly at Frankfurt, and later fled to New York. A more likely explanation is that educating the people according to principles of freedom is a dangerous thing for oppressive regimes, which can have no control over outcomes and rely on a subservient population for their existence. After all, Froebel himself called the kindergarten 'the free republic of childhood'. The Prussian authorities eventually abrogated the prohibition, in 1860.

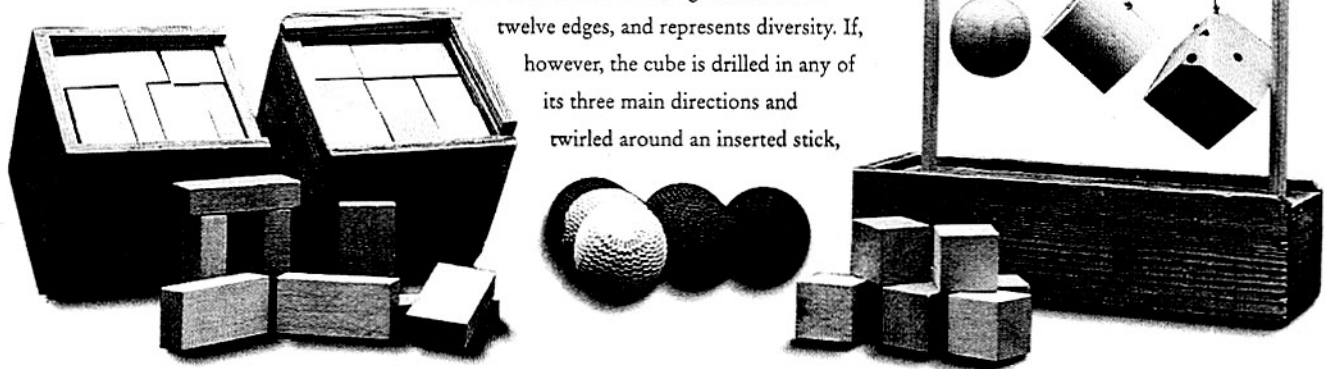
## 10. The Froebel System and the Gifts (*Spielgaben*)

The two legacies with which the name of Froebel has commonly been associated in the years since his death are the kindergarten itself and the 'Gifts', which are an ordered sequence of educational toys. Froebel had begun to codify a system of about twenty 'gifts and occupations' for young children by 1838-40. Although simple wooden toys had existed in Germany as elsewhere long before Froebel's time, his special contribution was to theorise and systematise their educational use by very young children in accordance with his philosophical beliefs. They are therefore a bridge between his general and unsystematic philosophical 'theory' and a radical new educational practice, which sensitively but systematically directed the child's activity, thought and imagination into interaction with the physical world.

The first gift is a soft ball or balls, representing the six colours of the rainbow [*sic*]: three primary colours (red, blue, yellow) and three mixed colours (violet, green, orange). They are for play between infant and mother, and produce movement and apprehension of number, shape, colour, and texture. More profoundly, Froebel claimed that their skilled use produces subliminal awareness of being, having, and becoming, and of present, past, and future – in other words *self-awareness* and concepts of *unity and difference*.

The second gift has three elements: a hard ball, or sphere, a cube, and a cylinder. While the sphere represents movement, as it is never stable, the cube represents stillness, as it does not move freely. While the sphere has no edges and so represents perfect unity, the cube has six faces, eight corners and twelve edges, and represents diversity. If, however, the cube is drilled in any of its three main directions and twirled around an inserted stick,

an intermediate shape is perceived by the child, i.e. the cylinder. Thus there is unity at the heart of diversity. As the child places the sphere on the cylinder and the cylinder on the cube, so the elements of architecture are unconsciously assimilated through imaginative play. It is of note that two of the twentieth century's greatest architects, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and Le Corbusier (1887-1965), acknowledged their kindergarten experience to have been a major influence on their development – in Frank Lloyd Wright's case in the USA and in Le Corbusier's case in Switzerland.

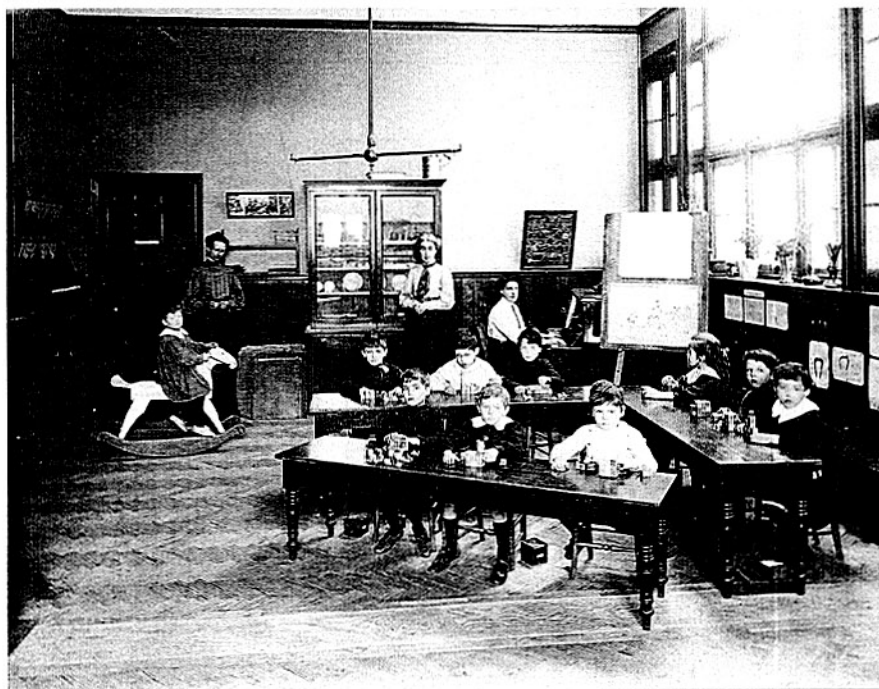


^ Some of the Froebel Gifts

Further gifts include multiple cubes, slats, sticks, rings, and occupations include clay modelling, paper cutting and folding, weaving, drawing, sewing and interlacing. Although Froebel never emphasised a distinction between the gifts and occupations, some later Froebelians have suggested that the gifts involve arranging and discovery, activities which produce insight, whereas the occupations involve controlling, creating, and invention, activities which produce a sense of power. They all require the infant to act, observe, to understand and apply knowledge, to analyse, synthesise and evaluate – all activities which might today be termed ‘transferable skills’, as classified by Benjamin Bloom in 1956 in his renowned *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. Altogether, the gifts and occupations are part of an educational system driven by a liberal humanist philosophy, aimed at producing a creative ‘whole person’ in a harmonious context of home, school and natural world (the garden). The ultimate driving force of the Froebelian system is a moral concern for the individual, unlike some other contemporary systems with which it might be compared.

As one example, consider another influential nineteenth-century German teacher who was particularly influenced by Fichte, but whose educational principles were based on ‘mastery’ of a child, through exacting unconditional obedience in order to save a child from physical, mental and moral dangers. This was Dr Daniel Schreber, who published more than ten books on education between 1839 and 1862, with titles such as *The Harmful Body Positions*

and *Habits of Children*, including a *Statement of Counteracting Measures (Die schädlichen Körperhaltungen und Gewöhnheiten der Kinder nebst Angabe der Mittel dagegen, 1853)*, and *The Systematically Planned Sharpening of the Sense Organs (Die planmässige Schärfung der Sinnesorgane, 1859)*. Schreber advocated a ‘modified military strictness’ in schools, with a ‘severity of discipline ... [in order to keep] the noble zestful mind in full swing’.



^ Children using the gifts, c.1910. Rear centre is Miss Esther Lawrence, Principal of Froebel College London, 1901-1931

He saw proper education as producing a healthy nation, and saw the uneducated as 'tumours on the body of the state'.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see the serious dangers of such an educational philosophy in the context of the way German nationalism developed in the early twentieth century. Schreber's son Daniel Paul (1842-1911) became an eminent judge, but 'went mad' and was institutionalised at the age of 42, the case becoming famous because of the publication of the son's *Memoirs* in 1903 and because of Freud's analysis of him in 1911. It is only in the context of such alternative and competing educational theories of the period that the true value of the Froebelian system can be fully appreciated.



Courtesy of Please Touch Museum®



## 11. Froebel in the Twenty-first Century

In many accounts of the spread of Froebel's influence after his death, the language is quasireligious: the story is of the Froebel 'Movement', with its 'disciples' and 'pioneers' spreading 'the Gospel of Froebel'. Froebel himself is referred to more than once as 'the Master'. *The Student's Froebel* (1893) is dedicated to Miss Anna Snell, who, it is stated, 'upheld in England during twenty-five years with unwearied zeal and perseverance the banner of F. Froebel'. The attacks and criticisms from non-believers which the 'disciples' have had to resist over the years have been many and varied. Starting with the anxiety of the Queen of Saxony, that to educate the common people would be a bad thing because it would make them difficult to govern, they include practical charges, such as that the gifts are too simple for children and too difficult for teachers, and more theoretical ones, such as that the Froebelian model of child-centredness is inappropriate and dated, and inhibits the teacher from adopting a necessary role of guidance.

Sometimes Froebelians have been too quick to attempt a defence of the Froebelian method by appropriating apparently scientific 'proof' in validation of his intuitive theories. An example of this is the appropriation of Jean Piaget (1896-1980),

the Swiss biologist, who seemed to provide a modern and scientific justification for various 'stages' of child development. His theories, however, when grafted on to a holistic Froebelian developmental practice, had the deleterious effect of suggesting that specified educational experiences should be delayed, on the grounds that the child might not be 'ready' for them. Professor Marten Shipman has persuasively argued that uncritical adoption of the research of Piaget

by Froebelians has not only tended to bring 'child-centredness' into disrepute, but may also have led to an underestimation of the reasoning power of young children. Piaget was 'a biologist steeped in the evolutionary view, seeing cognitive growth as the unfolding of a biological programme'.

Nevertheless, in the British context it is often observed that basic Froebelian values, if not methods, including in particular



Redford House Nursery, 1997

respect for the child and the need for interactive learning, have been so thoroughly assimilated into the practice of infant education that they have become the norm, and that 'Froebel' therefore no longer stands for anything radical, or even special. The campaigning and proselytising of former

years is now long since over, so the question arises: what are the enduring aspects of Froebel's work which need to be emphasised and advocated in the twenty-first century?

First, it must be repeated that Froebel was not a systematic philosophic thinker, and

that his enthusiasm for the dominant philosophic movement of his time, Idealism, led him to write in an often woolly and incomprehensible style, as in large parts of *The Education of Man*, where the justification for his propositions often adds mystification rather than clarification. Further, he often did say things which, taken out of context, are eccentric. (For example: *To give the child a ball to play with is to guard him*

*against ill-humour and all the moral evils of which it is the root. It also protects him from his own desires and passions...*)

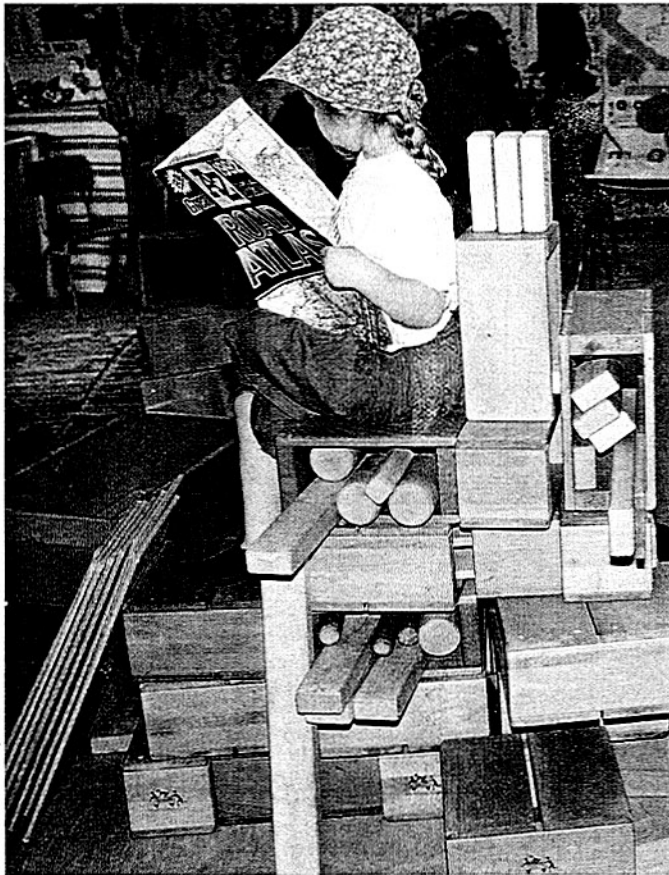
However, on the positive side are far more important aspects. He had a clear and overwhelming humanist aim to his educational practice, which he articulated with power and conviction:

*...there must exist somewhere some beautifully simple and certain way of freeing human life from contradiction, or...some means of restoring to man, himself, at peace internally.*

He saw the importance of an appropriate education in achieving this:

*...the method of education hitherto in use, especially where it involved learning by rote, and where it looked at subjects simply from the outside and considered them capable of apprehension by mere exercise work, dulled the edge of all high true attainment, of all real mental insight...*

His solution was to promote a liberating experiential and holistic education based on respect for the individual child – not seeing the child as a mere economic or political unit.



Redford House Nursery, 1997

^ A motor car constructed collaboratively from solid and hollow blocks

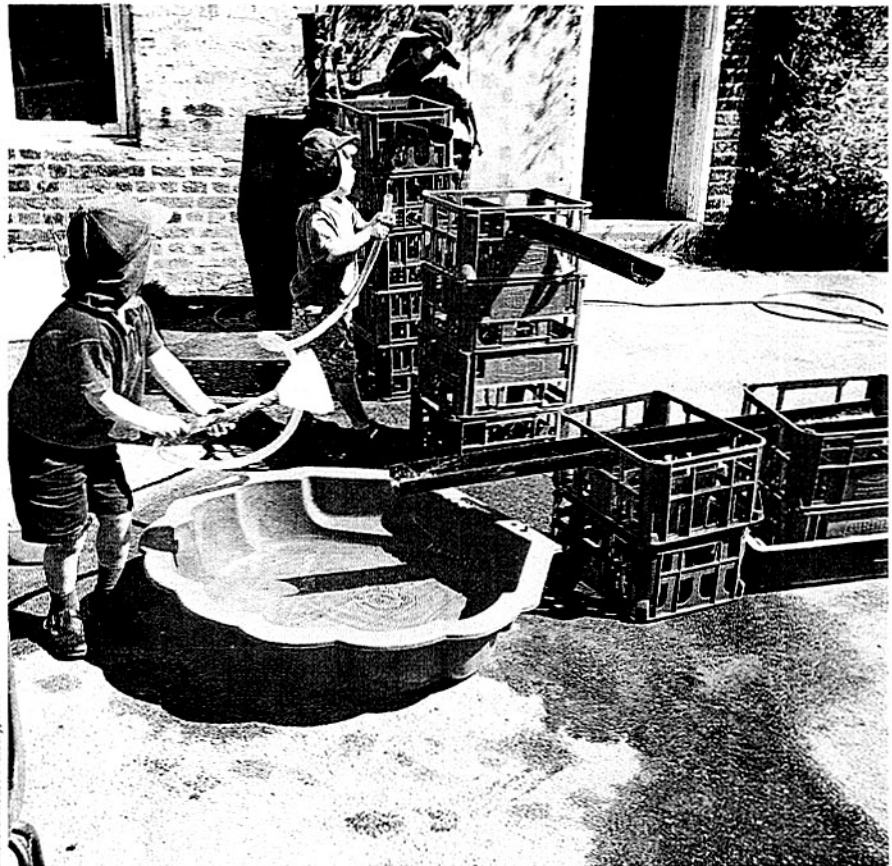
It was centred on the child's capacity to develop through a judicious mixture of freedom and guidance, and on encouragement of the child's creative play as a learning process. 'A child's play is his work' he wrote. To that extent he was 'child-centred': he was famous among teachers for actually *listening* to children. The importance of these values can hardly be overemphasised, given their relative fragility compared with other imperatives which are concerned with registering measurable 'outcomes' as the only index of learning.

A serious danger which should not be overlooked today, at a time of intense global competition for economic success, is of education systems being taken over, not by the nationalist imperative, but by the *economic* imperative. The language of 'training' rather than education, of 'skills' rather than creativity, of 'outcomes' rather than development – all a legitimate part of educational practice, but only a part – has begun to dominate educational discourse relating to older children and students, so that protection of the liberal humanist inheritance of Froebel is of increasingly urgent importance. Education has other goals in addition to national economic success.

Perhaps the last words belong to Froebel himself, as they have application to his own as to all theories of education:

*But I will protect childhood, that it may not, as in earlier generations, be pinioned, as*

*in a strait-jacket, in garments of custom and ancient prescription that have become too narrow for the new time. I shall show the way and shape the means, that every human soul may grow of itself out of its own individuality.*



Reelford House Nursery, 1998

^ Collaborative and creative play using 'found' blocks (milk crates and guttering). The boy at the rear is pumping water from the barrel, and the others are about to experiment with the plastic tubing. Where will the water go? Why?

## Further Reading (in English)

Brosterman, N. (1997) *Inventing Kindergarten*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

*A stunningly illustrated account of the kindergarten, the gifts, and their influence on art and architecture in particular.*

König, H. (1982) *Friedrich Fröbel 1782-1852*, Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag  
*An illustrated bicentenary publication from the former East Germany.*

Lawrence, E. ed. (1952) *Friedrich Froebel and English Education*, London: University of London Press  
*A centenary publication containing six essays, published under the auspices of the National Froebel Foundation.*

Liebschner, J. (1992) *A Child's Work: Freedom and Guidance in Froebel's Educational Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press  
*A scholarly critical account of the development of Froebel's educational ideas, with a full bibliography.*

Lilley, I.M. (1967) *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection From His Writings*, London: Cambridge University Press

*A concise and focused selection of Froebel's writings, with introduction.*

von Marenholz-Bülow, Baroness B. (1895) *Reminiscences of Friedrich Froebel*,

Boston: Lee and Shepard

*A very positive, anecdotal description of Froebel by his most ardent disciple and propagandist, who met him first in May 1849.*

Michaelis, E. ed. (1886) *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel*, London: Swan, Sonnenschein & Co.

*Written in 1827, this was an uncompleted autobiographical 'Letter to the Duke of Meiningen', who had asked Froebel for a plan for reorganising the school system in his dukedom.*

Shipman, M. (1997) *The Limitations of Social Research*, London: Longman (4th edition)

*One section argues that Froebel and Piaget do not mix.*

These and other texts relating to Froebel and the history of early childhood education in Britain are available for consultation in the Early Childhood Collection, Froebel College, London, on application to the archivist, Jane Read, [+44 (0)20 8392 3323].



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