

Inspiration to Teach — Reflections on Friedrich Froebel and Why He Counts in Early Childhood Education

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Photos courtesy of Mary Ruth Moore



The year 2010 is the 238th anniversary of Friedrich Froebel's birth, yet his spirit and philosophy of teaching are alive in the hearts and minds of 14 Texas early childhood teachers.

In 2006, teacher education students at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), San Antonio, were inspired by Froebel. Wanting to learn more about his educational methods, they planned a trip to Germany to visit sites and institutions where Froebel lived and worked.

The start of their teaching inspiration

At UIW, I (coauthor Moore) teach a course about the history and philosophy of early childhood educators, including Froebel. Many early childhood students read the history of our field and learn that Froebel founded early kindergartens, but UIW's course is far more interactive. As a result of my own research study tour to Germany in 2001, I share firsthand experiences regarding Froebel's birthplace and places of work to bring to life for the students the Froebelian maxim, "Play at this time is of deep significance . . . [it holds] the germinal leaves of all later life" (Froebel [1826] 1887, 55).

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Activities for Continuing Froebel Traditions

When teachers lead children in the following activities, they are continuing a legacy of Froebelian teaching.

- Singing songs
- Learning finger plays
- Gathering at circle time
- Building with blocks
- Playing with puppets
- Engaging in spontaneous play
- Planting a garden

To further their understanding, students in the history/philosophy course design, plan, and implement a Play Day. Applying Froebel's play principles to enthusiastically engage young children, the students prepare outdoor centers and invite children from local schools for a day of spontaneous play, where they build with cardboard blocks, garden in baby pools, and crawl through a maze of recycled boxes. The students' goal is to empower the child through open-ended activities, which in the words of Froebel give "joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world" (Froebel [1826] 1887, 55).

UIW students also plan a ceremonial birthday party for Froebel, complete with cake, and invite all education students. Creative party activities introduce historical figures in education, including paper dolls of notable educators such as Elizabeth Peabody, Patty Smith Hill, Lucy Wheelock, and Caroline Pratt. One year, students created a scrapbook filled with the notable accomplishments of famous educators and some of their well-known quotations, along with photos and biographical information. The title of the scrapbook, "Learning from

the Past," emerged from their course textbook (Wolfe 2002). Another year, the birthday cake was decorated with photos of the education philosophers Froebel influenced.

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn

The UIW student organization CARE (Children Are Reason Enough) complements undergraduate early education programs, enhancing the interactive nature of learning. UIW's university-wide competition solicits proposals from student groups for projects involving study abroad. CARE suggested traveling to Germany to visit the actual sites where Froebel lived and worked. Out of 76 student organization submissions, CARE's plan was selected for 2006. The early childhood education undergraduates who started with textbooks and photographs were now on their way to trace Froebel's footsteps in person.

Many UIW students rarely travel beyond San Antonio and seldom travel by plane. These 14 teacher education students had the opportunity to visit Froebel's birthplace, Oberweissbach; his first (1817) school, Keilhau; and the first kindergarten, Bad Blankenburg. During the students' tour of the former East German countryside and small villages where Froebel lived and worked, a gracious German host told them that they were the first U.S. student group to travel Froebel's path since the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Students brought their learning home for planting

The result of the student travelers' immersion in Froebel's philosophy led them to implement his principles during student teaching and in their teaching today. One trip participant writes,

One of the greatest things I look back on is our wonderful trip to Germany and my Froebel education. . . . Although I'm teaching fourth grade, I make sure to send a special thank you to my school's kindergarten teachers.

Another comments,

When I spoke with my colleagues in kindergarten and prekindergarten, they were not very familiar with Froebel. I think it's important as a teacher to know why certain elements are in the curriculum.

As these young teachers reflected on their visit to important Froebel educational sites, they saw that today's best practices are often grounded solidly in the roots of the past and can influence how one

Resources for Learning More

Learn more about Froebel's teaching by reading books and articles and checking out informational websites.

Brosterman, N. 1997. *Inventing kindergarten*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Frost, J. 2010. *A history of children's play and play environments: Toward a contemporary child-saving movement*. New York: Routledge.

Hewitt, K. 2001. Blocks as a tool for learning: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *Young Children* 56 (1): 6–13.

The International Froebel Society. www.intfroebelsoc.org. The society

focuses on research, discussion, and debate about early childhood education and studies and promotes Froebelian theory and practice.

Learning with nature idea book: Creating nurturing outdoor spaces for children. 2007. Lincoln, NE: National Arbor Day Foundation & Dimensions Educational Research Foundation.

Moore, M.R. 2001. An American's journey to kindergarten's birthplace. *Childhood Education* 79 (1): 15–20. www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docid=5002498537

teaches. When we use finger play or include music in our teaching or incorporate block play in our daily classroom activities, all of these are directly related to early childhood education's rich past.

Many of the 14 travelers teach, and thus include Froebel's birthday on

their classroom calendar. They explain to the children,

Today [April 21] is the birthday of the man who first thought of a kindergarten.

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Conclusion

These Texas teachers found inspiration in their enriching travel through Germany as they followed Froebel's footsteps. They recognize Froebelian philosophy in their teaching and acknowledge that

The trip helped us realize why Froebel said, "Come, let us live for our children." He wants us to live for the children and to teach them to our very best ability.

By creating their own gardens of learners, they are now Froebel's ambassadors.

References

- Froebel, F. [1826] 1887. *The education of man*. London: Appleton.
- Wolfe, J. 2002. *Learning from the past: Historical voices in early childhood education*. 2nd ed. Mayerthorpe, Alberta, Canada: Piney Branch Press.

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