

The Free Republic of Childhood


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Friedrich Froebel (Oberweißbach, 1782) was a pioneer of early learning, recognising that before children attended school, they were able and willing pupils. He acknowledged that as children in their own right, with only tentative language skills, form was promoted before things, things before words.

Froebel developed an education system to harness children's innate desire for 'creative and useful occupation through craft'. He modelled the system on the relationship of mother and child - the teacher taking the role of mother, and the classroom replacing the home. The name Kindergarten refers theoretically to the spiritual foundation of it as a 'garden of children' and also to its organisational model, 'child's garden'. Play is discussed in terms of 'work', and in this sense play is a serious pastime. Toys were replaced with 20 Gifts & Occupations.

Recognising the unity of ones physical, intellectual and spiritual powers, Froebel promoted learning by doing. He saw 'self-activity' as an educational process, and for the student to be free to choose and devise their own 'occupation'. Traditionally this aspect of teaching and learning would be a barrier between the teacher and pupil, but Froebel's approach made them 'co-workers'. Expression became self-expression rather than recitation, and the teacher becomes the guide.

Froebel devised simple pedagogical tools to facilitate activity. In form the gifts & occupations travelled from solid - plane - line - point - line - plane - solid. The gifts (Nos. 1-6) involved building blocks and balls to be played with, explored and returned to their boxes. The gifts gave the child 'a new cosmos', and insights that led to discovery. The occupations (Nos. 7-20) were materials, (coloured paper, threads, sticks, peas, clay) to be



transformed into new things. The occupations fixed the impressions made by the gifts, leading to new inventions. Where the gifts gave insight, the occupations gave power.

The tools could be explored in relation to each of three realms and these were interchangeable. They were identified as nature (life), knowledge (science), and beauty (art). They gave children their first encounters with understanding the relationship and interdependence of nature, family and society.

The gifts & occupations, with their mathematically generated logic, were central to the 19th century Kindergarten education system. They were props to instigate activity, by which children were introduced to the physical world around them. Froebel had devised a child-centred way of learning that gave ownership and freedom to the children. By the time of Froebel's death (1852)

his Kindergarten system had been exported worldwide.

In the 20th century teaching through the gifts and occupations became less relevant to Froebel's core principles of child-led learning and free play. Although the gifts and occupations are no longer central to kindergarten teaching, the system thrives in woodland nurseries and places where children are given the opportunity to holistically co-work with teachers and experiment with the world around them.

Early Learning has utilised the gifts and occupations as a starting point to initiate a more dynamic and autonomous approach, adopting their basic principles in a series of artist led activities for dads and their kids.