

Friedrich Froebel / Materials as Mediators

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Many common early childhood educational activities have their roots in Froebelian practices, for example, games and songs, outdoor learning, gardening, drawing and painting, and block play. For Froebel, these common activities have a deep significance, and a spiritual quality. The basis for these practices is in the recognition of the strengths and abilities of children and an emphasis on activity (Brehony, 2009). Influenced by Pestalozzi, he believed that 'all understanding of life consists in so harmonizing outer experience and inner thought, that the latter comprehends the former, and the former expresses the latter' (Froebel, trans 1912, p. 202). Froebel's conception of 'outer' and 'inner' were linked to ideas about a spiritual awakening of a young child's consciousness in relation to their connectedness to the divine. He believed that parents are the first teachers of children, and that meaningful learning experiences begin in the home. Froebel focused

intensely on the roles of mothers and women in the care and education of young children, and his work elevated the status of women by highlighting the importance of childrearing activities. This attention to women and the recognition of the value of intimate care of young children also opened spaces for fathers to become more attentive to their role in the lives of their children. Froebel called fathers to share their craft with their children, by involving them in practical experiences of their work, and to consider that 'the first and most important point in the education of children is to lead them early to think' (Froebel, trans 1912, p. 61).

Froebel encouraged children and adults to be keen observers of nature, and to experience all aspects of the natural world so that connections could be revealed. Froebel also carefully designed objects and materials to be used by parents and teachers with children to mediate

the outer world with inner thoughts and ideas of children through activity. He called the objects 'Gifts' and the materials 'Occupations.'

Froebel gifts are a series of solid objects (spheres, cubes, a cylinder, planks, and prisms) that are given to children to explore and create 'forms' of life, of knowledge, and beauty. Gifts are presented in the form of a whole, comprised of parts, that are returned to their original state at the end of the play. This feature of the design was intended to help children and the adults that work and play with them to think about their own physical and spiritual connectedness to the whole of nature through the use of material and symbolic objects. Froebel occupations are activities such as modeling clay, paper folding, cutting, weaving, drawing, painting, and sewing. The occupations are intended to demonstrate that there are forms of matter that can be transformed into new creations through the work of play.

For Froebel, work and play were of equal value, as both can lead people to a consciousness of our connected spirituality. He recognised that adults and children have a privilege and a duty to live with children as guides and companions.

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