

Froebel's Gifts

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Friedrich W. A. Froebel was a 19th Century German pedagogue, who was a pioneer in education for very young children. Froebel was the founder of the 'kindergarten' (c. 1840) which was a unique educational setting for young children. His ideas about early care and education have a legacy that has spread throughout the world through the teachers that he educated who set up kindergartens and training centres. Froebel's legacy has also been carried forward by those who were inspired by his wisdom regarding the principle of unity which guides learning, the importance of play, the value of learning through nature and the outdoor learning environment.

For Froebel, and those inspired by his pedagogy, early education is based on a recognition of the strengths and abilities of the young learners and an emphasis on activity and engagement in order to awaken the young person's consciousness (Brehony, 2009). Influenced by Pestalozzi, he believed that through education, we strive to 'make the outer inner – and the inner, outer' and that education, as a self-directed process, should 'lead man to a clear knowledge of himself, to peace with nature, to unity with God' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, p. 32). Jackson and Lee (1996) explain that 'Froebelian philosophy emphasized self-knowledge, the developing sense of inner psychological and outer material harmony, and the place of all things psychological and natural within the divine order' (p. 49).

Key aspects of Froebelian practice and pedagogy are outdoor experiences, gardening, songs and games, the use of Froebel 'Gifts' and engagement in what he called 'Occupations.' Froebel's original 'Gifts' are a series of specifically designed objects that were meant to be given to children to explore and create. The objects were designed to be used in open-ended play activities, and each gift was meant to help the child begin to understand the properties or affordances of objects in relation to him/herself and the surrounding world. Froebel's occupations are activities which help the learner to develop practical skills in relation to his/her emerging capacities (physically and intellectually). The occupations are activities such as modeling clay, paper folding, cutting, weaving, drawing, painting, and sewing. A key distinction between the gifts and the occupations is that the materials used in gift play are meant to demonstrate that matter, in the form of these solid objects can only be transformed, and not changed, altered, or destroyed. Gifts are presented in the form of a 'whole' which is comprised of parts that are returned to their original state. The materials used in occupations demonstrate that modifications can be made to alter

the form and purpose of matter into new creations. For example, paint and paper can be used to create representational art in the form of a painting.

Froebel 'yearned' to foster a harmonious development of young children through outdoor activities, songs and games, the gifts, and occupations. This harmonious development was centred around the concept of spiritual, physical, and intellectual 'unity' (Jackson and Lee, 1996). Froebel saw education as process of recognising the unity between ourselves, others, nature, and 'God.' His approach involved the facilitation of the learner's active interaction with the environment.

According to his principles, an essential means of engagement with the world around us is in the form of 'play.' He accorded play as an expression of human spirituality, and is well known for articulating that 'play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul' (Froebel, 1826, trans 1912, pp. 50-512).

For Froebel, play provides a means for discovery of the unity of self and other with a universal Spirit. He stated that play:

'is the purest and most spiritual product of the child, and at the same time it is a type and copy of human life at all stages and in all relations. So it induces joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer repose, peace with all the world. From it flows all good' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, pp. 50-51).

Froebel believed that the natural environment had a special significance to a person's unfolding understanding of the unity and harmony of all things. He wondered, 'why does man, wandering through gardens and fields, meadows and groves, fail to open his mind, and refuse to listen to the lesson which nature silently teaches?' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, p. 33).

A Froebelian-inspired pedagogy would be based on the concept of unity, would place a high value on experiences in a natural environment, and would be practiced in the facilitation of 'play' for young children. A Froebelian pedagogy would encourage the learner to take initiative, and the pedagogue to nourish the child's need to seek the unity between all things which emerges as the child grows into consciousness, and into an understanding of her/himself as a physical-mindful-spiritual being. The role of a Froebelian teacher is to inspire the child to 'live and act in harmony with unity' (p. 83). Because Froebel saw all humans and growing in consciousness, he believed that teachers, in the act of teaching are also increasing their own knowledge and insight as a result (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, p. 154).

For Froebel, the school is much more than a place where knowledge is imparted from teacher to pupil. A school is animated by a spirit of living and learning. He wrote: 'a true school, therefore, implies the presence of an intelligent mind which partakes in the nature both of the pupil and of the external world, and so can link

them together in language and understanding' (Froebel, c. 1826 trans. 1912, Fletcher and Welton p. 80).

The Gifts

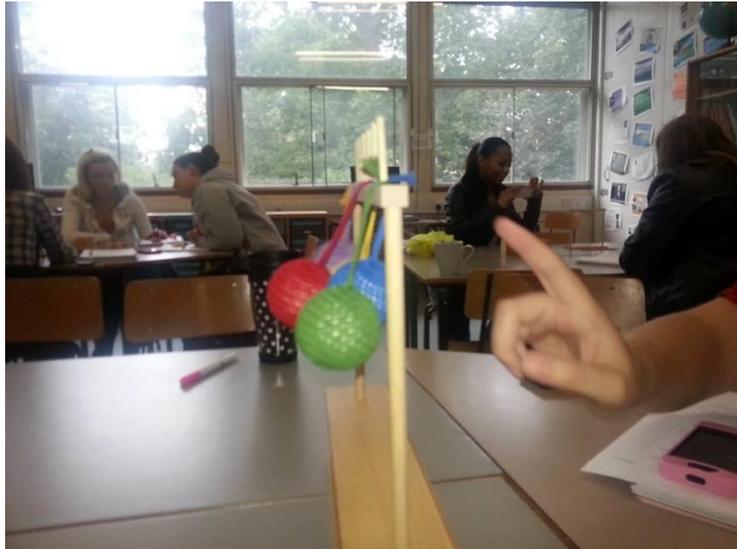
There are 6 original Froebel Gifts that are meant to be 'given' to children in order, as they age:

- Gift 1: Set of multi-coloured yarn balls with strings (for the infant)
- Gift 2: Wooden ball, cylinder, and cube (for the 1-2 year old)
- Gift 3: Set of 8 small wooden cubes (blocks) (for the 2-3 year old)
- Gift 4: Set of 8 small wooden planks (blocks) (for the 2-3 year old)
- Gift 5: Set of wooden blocks that includes cubes, planks, and triangles (blocks) (for the 3-4 year old)
- Gift 6: Set of more complex wooden blocks that includes cubes, planks, triangles (blocks) (for the 4-5 year old)

Froebel's Gifts were the first 'educational' playthings. The Gifts are made of natural materials, and are specifically designed to demonstrate the key concept of spiritual 'unity' that can be recognised in play, which Froebel believed to be the clearest expression of the human soul.

Froebel's deep spiritual beliefs were expressed in his philosophies of teaching and learning. He believed that a person's spiritual life is a 'co-ordinating centre of all experience' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 145). The purpose of education, according to Froebel, is to awaken, within the child, an understanding of his/her spirit, and to help the child to live in harmony with the spiritual unity of person, nature, and God. This unity could be realised through experiences in nature, and in play:

'Play to man, especially in childhood, is a mirror both of thoughts and feelings, and of surroundings. In childhood it is emphatically a mirror of the innate need for life and occupation. So a plaything is any thing which is related to the child as a means to purpose, and which, by creating pleasant anticipation, calls forth play in which he finds fresh and continuous pleasure. Play is, therefore, really the product of the connection of related opposites – the free activity of the child and the mobility and consequent responsiveness of the object' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 173).



Froebel's first Gift is a set of multi-coloured yarn balls, which were designed to elicit a particular kind of responsiveness between the child and the parent, using the ball. That is, when a parent and a child play with the first gifts, the child may begin to see the shape and the colour, and also begin to think about how the ball moves and 'responds' to movement and gravity, and even more, the child will begin to recognise the connection between the ball and the parent, but also the independence of the ball and the persons playing with the ball.

The shape of the ball has a special spiritual significance to Froebel, because it is a shape that freely allows the child to experiment with movement in space (compared to the cube, which is the shape of several of the other gifts), but also because of the special geometric qualities of the sphere. In the *Education of Man* (c. 1826) Froebel discusses the ball, as a sphere, which he believes to be the original/universal shape. He explains that the ball can be used to understand 'energy' which goes forth in all directions equally (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 103). He explains that the ball, as an object of play, 'constantly enters into fresh relations with the child' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 174). It is these fresh relations, that inspire our earliest forms of discovery and imagination:

'but above all, for the freest exercise of his activity he prefers the ball, which can be shown to be to him the unifying centre and representative of all which he seeks as complimentary to the impulses of his nature towards development. For in it he finds at once exclusiveness and a general representation of all things, rest and motion, generality and particularity, all-sidedness and singleness of surface, visibility and invisibility (for it has invisible centre and axes). So by means of the ball a child can represent outwardly many things which he finds in his own soul as desires, ideas, or thoughts, and he can also

imitate countless things that he sees around him. Thus the ball is at once a means of representing outwardly his inner life, and of bringing into that life by imitation the external world' (Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 172-173).

While Froebel had some advice for play, such as slowly swinging the balls for the child to follow the object, telling stories, and singing rhymes, there aren't any 'rules' for this kind of play; only that it should bring joy and pleasure, and help our souls to find expression, and help us to develop our sense of spiritual 'unity'.



Froebel's second Gift is a set of wooden objects: a sphere, a cylinder, and a cube. The second gift builds in the first gift, which are soft spheres, and demonstrates the unity or connection between the shape of a sphere and the shape of a cube, in the form of a cylinder (which is similar to the sphere, and similar to the cube). This gift is specifically designed to help the child to recognise the connections, or the 'unity' of these shapes, and is based on the principle of 'mediation' which is the link between what might be thought of as opposites. Froebel writes that 'the law of mediation is the most important law of the world, of humanity, and of life in general' (Friedrich Froebel, c. 1826, trans 1912, Fletcher and Welton, p. 187).

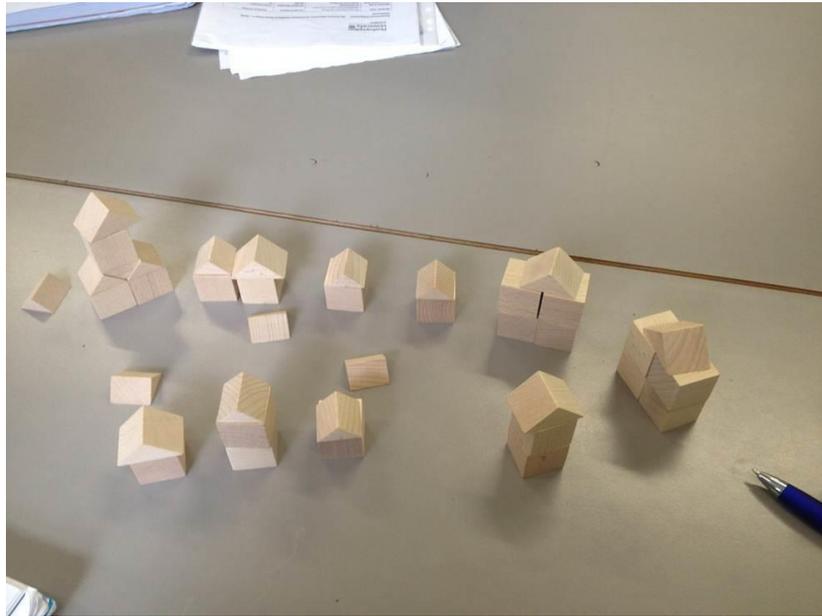


Froebel's third Gift is a cube that is bisected in each direction, therefore, it is comprised of 8 smaller scaled, (geometrically similar) cubes. The third gift is the first in a series of four block sets (gifts 3-6) that increase in complexity. These gifts are meant to demonstrate the relation of whole to parts, the concept of transformation, and the different properties of shapes. The third gift should be carefully presented to the child with a demonstration of the shape of the whole, and the shapes of the parts, which are similar to the whole. It may be observed that the second gift had mediated between the first gift (the sphere) and the third gift (the blocks). It is these kinds of connections that can be made by children in their thinking as they use the gifts. The third gift can be used to create simple structures or designs of objects the child observes in his or her environment. For example, the child might use the third gift to create a representation of a chair or a bed. The properties of the blocks, as 'loose parts' which can be transformed are thought to place a cognitive demand on the child's imagination. When finished playing, the third, and subsequent gifts should always be returned carefully to their original form in the box that it is stored in, so that the child can recognise the transformational properties of the objects.



Fröbel's fourth gift is the same cube in size as the third gift, but the pieces are divided into 8 rectangles. As with all of the gifts, the fourth gift should be carefully presented to the child with a demonstration of the shape of the whole, and with attention to the shapes of the parts, which, in the case of the fourth gift, the smaller shapes are identical to each other, but are not similar to the whole. It may be observed that the fourth gift is similar in whole shape to the third gift, but that the parts have different surfaces. This will help the child to recognise that objects with the same 'area' can be shaped differently, and that we can think about things in different ways. This is a different kind of connection that can be made by children in their thinking as they use the gifts. As with all of gifts 3-6, the fourth gift can be used to create simple structures or designs of objects the child observes in his or her environment. For example, the child might transform the third gift into a representation of a small house, and might imagine a small version of the world and tell stories involving the house. As with all of the gifts, the child would take care to return the planks to the original form in the box where they are stored, and could use the blocks at another time to create an alternative world, using the same objects, which are never destroyed, nor changed, but manipulated in a variety of ways to create multiple representations that are expressions of the child's growing understanding of him/herself and the world around. As Fröbel explains, the gifts: 'present as a fact the fundamental principle 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' (p. 202).



Froebel's fifth and sixth gifts are larger in the size of the whole and greater in complexity of the loose parts compared to gifts three and four. As with all of the gifts, the fifth and sixth gifts should be carefully presented to the child with a demonstration of the shape of the whole, and with attention to the shapes of the parts, some of which are similar to the shape of the whole, and some of which are not. It may be observed that some of the shapes within the fifth and sixth gifts can be combined to create identical shapes, but can then be separated into different shapes. That is, there are different surfaces with identical areas, some of which can be combined to create identical shapes. This will continue to help the child to recognise that objects with the same 'area' can be shaped differently, and that there are a variety of ways to combine and transform objects in relation to one another. This will encourage increased complexity in the child's thinking. Building on the ideas that were generated with the use of the third and fourth gifts, the fifth and sixth gifts can be used to create more complex structures or designs of objects the child observes in his or her environment, or imagines. For example, the child might transform the fourth and fifth gifts into representations of villages of small houses, or into a castle or cathedral with several chambers – ever increasing his or her imagination of possible versions of the world, with numerous possible stories to be told about these worlds. As with all of the gifts, the child would take care to return the loose parts to the original form in the box where they are stored. The blocks can be used time and time again, in open-ended ways, to create never-ending alternative representations of his or her imagination.

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