

# What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century?

## An essay

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### Abstract

What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century? It is not a new question but one that is more urgent than ever. Not only since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic but for years, young children and their well-being have been thrust aside, and Early Childhood Education and Care worldwide has been treated as subordinate. The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has negatively impacted early childhood education over the last decades, and these tendencies have only exacerbated during the pandemic. This essay centers around what it means to be a Froebelian and what role Froebelian thinking can play in the 21st century. The focus is on the questions and not the answers. The essay asks what it does and what it does not mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century. It finishes by reflecting on the role that Froebelian thinking can play today to advocate for young children's well-being in a post-pandemic world by resisting current GERM thinking and developing alternatives.

### Keywords

Fröbel, Froebelian principles, ECEC, GERM

### Introduction

“For quite some time, more often and repeatedly, the word Froebelian (*Fröbelianer*) has been used to initiate our inner and outer life unification. This word is not only against my feeling, not only against my conviction, but also life in its facts does not speak for, but against the same. [...]

The expression Froebelian even separates me from you, separates you from me; [...] I hope and wish, though,

that we are united, a united, one to the other equal in striving for essence and life, as equal and united regarding the fundamentals and principles of our doing and work...” (Fröbel, 1852, p. 16/16R).<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Fröbel<sup>2</sup> obviously didn't like the word “Froebelian<sup>3</sup>” (*Fröbelianer*). I suspect he rejected it because the term wasn't his word-invention. In the same letter he suggested “the United” or “Peace-Joyfilled” (*Friedigfreudigen*)

<sup>1</sup> All translations, if not marked otherwise, are made by Helge Wasmuth. The citation method corresponds with previous letter editions of the German Fröbel research. R stands for “Recto” and indicates the back of a page. V for Verso, and the front of a page is omitted.

<sup>2</sup> I use the German spelling of his name. However, because names and their symbolism were important

for Fröbel, I feel it is appropriate to use the original spelling.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this text, I use the English term Froebelian and not the German *Fröbelianer* as the term isn't very popular in the German-speaking Fröbel community anymore.

(Fröbel, 1852, p. 16/16R) as umbrella terms for his following. This was a typical Fröbel behavior, not only to insist on his terms but also to invent words such as “Peace-Joyfilled” to describe what can’t be expressed in common German. He didn’t convince his following, though, and ironically, the letter mentioned above was addressed to his grandniece Henriette Breymann who later became one if not *the* most influential German Froebelian in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the term “Froebelian” is still used today, maybe not as much in Germany, but in the Anglo-American context, and especially in the UK, where a Froebelian “revival” has been noted (Bruce, 2021).

While Fröbel didn’t like the term “Froebelian,” he was undoubtedly intrigued by the idea of a united following that would adhere to his “fundamentals and principles.” Fröbel believed that he was destined to lead others who must follow him: “Everything that concerns education and teaching is determined solely and exclusively by me and everything happens under my specific direction, where I cannot personally work directly” (Fröbel, 1817, p. 7), so he wrote during the establishment of the General German Educational institute in Keilhau to Heinrich Langethal, one of his closest associates. Within the Keilhau community, it was never a question of who was in charge. If you disagreed with Fröbel, you left. Fröbel was not looking for equal partners among his associates, even when he was in close exchange with Middendorff, Langethal, or later Barop. What he really wanted was a close following: men and women who devoted themselves to spreading his words, preserving his ideas’ purity, and establishing the kindergarten. That’s what Froebel expected from his followers and many of the early Froebelians saw exactly that as their role and their life’s purpose.

Today, the self-conception of a Froebelian is a different one. However, what does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is not a new question but one that is more urgent and timely than ever (May, 2006). For decades, young children and their social-emotional well-being have been thrust aside, and ECEC systems worldwide have been treated as subordinate to what many policy makers see as “real” education and economic concerns. Not only is ECEC treated as subordinate, in many countries now educational policies and practices prevail that can be summarized as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), a term coined by Pasi Sahlberg (2011). GERM is an “unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions to improve education systems” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 99) that are presented as ways to “reform” and “improve” education. It has resulted in the standardization of teaching and learning, the over-emphasis of the core subjects of mathematics and literacy, testing and high-stakes accountability, prescribed curricula, teaching to the test, increased teacher control, technology, and privatization (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2017, 2019; Moss, 2014; Penn, 2011; Zhao, 2017). GERM has detrimentally affected the field and led to reframing, homogenizing, and normalizing ECEC policies and practices worldwide (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2017, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these tendencies. Examples include the never-ending debate about an alleged “learning loss” and the push for now established technology to stay.

This dominant and narrow way of thinking about ECEC, the “story of quality and high returns, the story of markets” (Moss, 2014, p. 6), is the narrative of the previous decades. And while most professionals would probably grudgingly accept GERM policies if they at least

worked and generated the promised results, that has not been the case (Hargreaves, 2009; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2020; Zhao, 2017). Such policies don't make children happier, healthier, or smarter; often, it's the reverse. Instead, they ignore or at least do not value the fact that children are human beings, and therefore must be treated and as respected as human beings, and that childhood has value in itself. The dominance of GERM has furthermore led to a loss of utopian visions and alternative thinking about how we can raise, educate, and live with children – questions that were also at the heart of Fröbel's thinking and that need to be reflected on critically today.

Hence, what role can Froebelian “fundamentals and principles” play in an ECEC landscape in the clutches of GERM? Why is Fröbel's pedagogy still of interest? What does it mean to think and act in Fröbel's spirit, to advocate for young children, to question the current status quo, to wonder about new ways of educating young children, or simply put: What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This essay centers around such questions. The emphasis is on the questions and not their answers, and to reflect on such questions critically. The questions themselves are essential, as it is vital for critically reflective educators to ask in what relationship we want to be with Fröbel's work and writings (or *not*), what Fröbel's ideas mean today (or *not*), and how such a relationship enables us to think deeply about today's educational issues.

To approach such questions, I will start with remarks on why it is necessary to read Fröbel. I continue with a discussion of which key ideas of Fröbel's kindergarten pedagogy that I feel are worth considering today. I then briefly reflect on what to do, if you can't agree with Fröbel's deep religious thinking, before again

asking why and how we should read Fröbel today. The essay concludes with thoughts on what it does and does *not* mean to be a Froebelian and what the role of a Froebelian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be.

### **Why should you we bother to read Fröbel?**

How many people interested in his pedagogy are actually reading Fröbel today, the complete original texts and not only hand-picked excerpts or concise summaries? What is known about Fröbel's pedagogy and what is ignored? There seems to be a tendency to refer to prefabricated assumptions that have been regurgitated for quite a while. There are, of course, reasons for it. Reading Fröbel is not always a pleasure. He is a difficult-to-understand, ambiguous educational thinker who could never express his ideas with clarity of language. His incomprehensible writing style, the non-systematic nature of his writings, the fragmentary character, and the foreign and literary-inspired terminology deny easy access to his thinking. That is even more true for the non-German speaking context, as many translations are outdated or essential writings have never been translated (Wasmuth, 2020).

I am not arguing for going back to Fröbel in the sense of a rigid exegesis. However, Froebelians also shouldn't ignore Fröbel's writings. And they should also not pick whatever seems suitable and then calling it Froebelian. Instead, a deep understanding is a prerequisite to evaluating whether modern interpretations are merely eclectic abridgments of Fröbel's complex educational thinking. Therefore, to understand Fröbel and do justice to his ideas, the “authentic Fröbel” (Heiland, 2010; Wasmuth, 2020) still matters. The aim is to look “at his work as an interconnected whole, and not in fragmented pieces” (Bruce, 2021, p. 1). It

means to be interested and open to Fröbel's thinking. A curious reading, an intellectual relationship to Fröbel's work, enables rethinking how professionals can live with young children, raise them, and educate them.

However, to think about what Fröbel means today, you first need to grasp the fundamentals. In-depth knowledge of Fröbel's thinking is vital for thinking about what his ideas can mean in today's modern world and act accordingly. Therefore, what can be seen as the key ideas of his thinking?

### Essential Froebelian principles

What exactly is the core of Fröbel's pedagogy of kindergarten and play? It's an old question as a clear consensus based on his essential writings doesn't exist. Fröbel was probably never interested in such clarity as ambiguity served him better (Wasmuth, 2020). Nevertheless, certain core ideas can be identified, not only in selected text excerpts but in the entirety of his writings: the "authentic Fröbel." Those can be called "Froebelian principles" (Bruce, 2021; Tovey, 2020).

Not all ideas, of course, have stood the test of time. That is especially true for Fröbel's idiosyncratic language, which "has, until recently, been regarded as having little or no place in modern-day education, regarded as arcane" (Bruce, 2021, p. 99). Fröbel's texts are only partially attractive today (Wasmuth, 2020). Nevertheless, the ideas behind the unwieldy terminology are worth considering today, and it is important "to decide whether the work pioneered by Fröbel is rendered obsolete and therefore needing to be discarded, or whether his values about children and women can be transformed into current educational contexts in ways which remain useful today" (Bruce, 2021,

p. 14). Hence, what is obsolete, what essential, and what seminal?

Due to the limitations of this paper, it is not possible to do justice to the "manifoldness" and "link-total" of Fröbel's thinking. In outlining selected principles, I am not suggesting that other key ideas, such as engagement with nature or the blocks, are less important. They are simply less relevant to the central argument of my paper (and, so one might argue, my understanding of Fröbel). Those that are discussed, though, furthermore serve as an illustration of what Fröbel stands for in contrast to contemporary thinking about ECEC.

First, Fröbel always emphasized that *all* children have the right to education. Kindergarten, or to use the modern term ECEC, is essential for *all* children. It must "provide children of all living conditions a humane education and edification," one that is justified by the "essence and the general as well as individual destination of the human being" (Fröbel, 1841, pp. 170/171). All children, not only a few privileged ones, have a right to education. And not only that: *All* children have the right to humane education, an education which deserves the word. It is a remarkably modern idea, especially in light of the pandemic and the failure of many societies worldwide to provide such free education to all young children, not only those who have the means to ensure it.

Furthermore, humane education needs to be general and holistic. Education must embrace the child "in the totality of his being and acting" (Fröbel, 1842a, p. 223). While education can occasionally cater to a child's preference, "the wholebeing (*Ganzwesen*) of the child has to [receive] his formation and for each one of his abilities—especially according to the three main directions: mind, temper and energy

(*Tatkraft*), thinking, feeling and doing—complete nurture and acceptance,” Fröbel wrote in the essay on the meaning and essence of kindergarten (1842a, p. 223). ECEC is needed “so that every child, regardless of social background, can grow according to his being, destination, and profession, may educate himself and be educated; this is the simple purpose of the ‘kindergartens’ [...]” (Fröbel, 1844, pp. 240/241). Those statements are true until today, as, for example, UNICEF’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes (UNICEF, 2021). All children have the right to a holistic, general, and well-rounded education and not only a basic education that prepares them for later working life. Education – in its whole meaning, one that merits the term education – needs to be concerned with more than preparing children for the future or socialization. It must include the development of the self in the world.

Third, Fröbel argued that children need to be self-active during the learning process. Only through and in self-activity can a child construct their self as a part of the world to grasp and make meaning of the world – to live life unification, as Fröbel would have phrased it. Only through self-activity, children learn and develop, make sense of the world. Children, therefore, want and need to be active. Self-activity allows them to internalize their experiences and express their thoughts and feelings by creating something independently out of themselves. Or, with a typical Fröbel quote: Children want to “expresses the nature and human world creatively out of himself and through observation absorbs it into himself, develops out of the unity a manifoldness and rediscover for each manifoldness again the unity” (Fröbel, 1842b, p. 28).

However, to be self-active, children need to be enabled to do what Fröbel is famous for: They need to play. That is real play, not educational instruction that tries to disguise dull memorization or boring activities in the form of “fun activities.” Play must be a young child’s principal activity because play nurtures all the child’s aptitudes and strengths; it is crucial “for the first care/nurturing, education, and edification (*Bildung*) of the child” because it “occupies the child at all times simultaneously in the totality of his activity as well as in the various directions of the activity, as a simultaneously acting, feeling and thinking being” (Fröbel, 1842a, p. 221). Play allows holistic and well-rounded learning and development. There is more, though. Through play, the child penetrates reality constructively. Thus, the world’s regularities become transparent, and children become aware of these regularities, and at the same time, gain awareness of themselves through and in play. Play enables children to make sense of the world and their place in the world. Hence, play is not a pastime, never just a frivolity but “rather a continuous learning, but one at, around and in life itself” (Fröbel, 1842b, p. 92). Young children need to learn in and through play. It’s a timeless but often misunderstood idea, and Fröbel was the first who tirelessly advocated for it. The idea was unheard of at the time (Wasmuth, 2011, 2020) and remains valid today – even if it is increasingly forgotten or simplified.

Self-activity and free, real play are not sufficient, though, and this is another of Fröbel’s remarkable pedagogical insights. Unfortunately, the idea is not always recognized when discussing Fröbel. Children need guidance and nurture through a stimulating environment and intentional interactions organized by a cognizant and intentional adult. Self-activity needs education, or as Tovey (2020) and Bruce (2021)

call it, “freedom with guidance.” Yes, the child constructs reality alone; only the child can do it through self-activity and play. However, the child needs guidance or real education, understood as a relational process in which someone (such as a cognizant and intentional professional) educates (in the whole meaning of the word) someone (a young child). Children can become conscious and understand reality only through the support and guidance of such an education. The child cannot achieve this alone, only through education and care “children are nurtured and educated for [...] the awareness and conscious living of their actual human nature, the divine in human appearance” (Fröbel, 1841, p. 155). And young children unconsciously ask for it, hence Fröbel’s conclusion. Young children possess a “need for help (*Hilfsbedürftigkeit*)” (Fröbel, 1846). Education as an intentional professional’s external action must correspond to this inner “need for help.” The child in their helplessness needs support, the suggestions, the impulses of an adult or educator – they need education.

Children need both: Fröbel’s pedagogy allows children to be self-active but at the same time emphasizes support in becoming a part of the world, or as Fröbel would say, unity with nature, society, and God. Fröbel’s idea of play was never about totally free or random play. It is indeed about “freedom with guidance” (Bruce, 2021; Tovey, 2020).

Lastly, there is Fröbel’s insistence on the dignity of the child. You can find this notion throughout his work, although it isn’t always expressed explicitly. An example is found in a late letter to Baroness von Marenholtz-Bülow in which Fröbel states that the primary goal of kindergarten is and must be the “education of the human being to be a human being” (Fröbel, 1851, p. 727). Children are human beings, first

and foremost, and must therefore be treated and respected as human beings. The child exists in the here and now; each child is a full-value human being with the right to be themselves. Each child is an autonomous person with dignity, interests, needs, and rights. Furthermore, childhood has a value of its own and purpose in itself. It must not be reduced to a period of life that only serves as preparation for future life and work. Children are not objects; they are not not-yet-adults, not future workers, or people who need to be made “college and career ready.” Children have the right to childhood and to be children, as well as the right to humane education.

Such a notion has not lost its relevance. On the contrary: in an ECEC landscape shaped by GERM with its focus on functioning, competition, and “being ready,” Fröbel reminds us of what is lost. It is a remarkable statement, not only in the context of his time but also in the present—one that is worth relentless reiteration today.

### **Can Non-Christians and Atheists be Froebelians?**

While many of Fröbel’s pedagogical ideas are remarkably modern, they all were embedded in his episteme. And while this essay has no room to discuss Fröbel’s panentheism in detail,<sup>4</sup> there is no question that Fröbel was a deeply religious person (Wasmuth, 2020). For him, everything only made sense as a part of what he called the law of the sphere. Everything – educational philosophy, school pedagogy, and kindergarten pedagogy – was a result of this thinking. For Fröbel, kindergarten was never a place only to take care of children or educate them, but always a necessary extension of his spherical thinking with the goal of life

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<sup>4</sup> See Bruce, 2021; Wasmuth, 2020

unification (Wasmuth, 2020). For him the “last, the total purpose of the whole,” meaning the kindergarten, is to educate the child early on through “doing, feeling, and thinking, according to his being and his relationship with the human-nature and thus for true unification with God, to well-rounded life unification” (Fröbel, 1840, p. 119). The ultimate goal of all Fröbel’s educational endeavors was to support children in achieving life unification, unification with nature and society, but especially God. God is the “primal reason, primal beginning, and primal origin of all existing (*Daseiende*),” so Fröbel wrote in his brilliant letter to Max Leidesdorf, “the self-conscious, self-determined, in itself united and therefore good, God” (Fröbel, 1846, p. 190).

Such thoughts aren’t anything that I would emphasize; I rather disagree with them as I feel discomfort with Fröbel’s episteme and deep religious thinking. Therefore, an interesting question is: “Can non-Christians be Froebelian” (Bruce, 2021, p. 21)? And what about Atheists like myself? Can you and do you even want to consider yourself a Froebelian if you don’t agree with Fröbel’s religiosity – and do you even want to? Why would non-Christians and Atheists wish to call themselves Froebelian?

I don’t have an answer to this question, only thoughts. I believe that Fröbel’s “fundamentals and principles” go beyond any religiosity. It is not his religiosity but his views on young children, young children’s learning, the importance of play, and the value of childhood that appeal until today and make him matter. His thoughts have meaning even if you are an Atheist. In this sense, being a Froebelian today doesn’t mean adhering to Fröbel’s episteme; but insisting on and advocating for “Froebelian principles.”

Of course, there is a relevant objection: Why use the term “Froebelian” if Fröbel’s fundamental assumptions, his religiosity and the

goal of life unification, aren’t valued? Aren’t thoughts on ECEC such as holistic education for all children, play, self-activity, or treating children as human beings shared by everyone within our field anyway? What’s so “Froebelian” about these principles?

Again, I don’t have a satisfying answer. However, there is value in sticking to the term as it connects like-minded thinking and advocacy for young children’s well-being across cultures. You shouldn’t be naïve; many outside of, and unfortunately even within the ECEC profession, *don’t* share such ideas, even if they pretend to do so. It is *not* what many stakeholders value and *not* what shapes current policies and practices. For this reason alone, it is worth emphasizing Froebelian principles continuously and being aware of their meaning – even if there is discomfort with Fröbel’s deep religious thinking. In the end, it is these principles that continue to be essential and connect like-minded Froebelians worldwide.

However, to do so, the goal can’t be to parrot well-sounding Froebelian buzzwords without a deep understanding of what they mean and how they are connected. To develop such an understanding, you must start with what seems rather tedious today: Reading Fröbel.

### **Again: Why should you read Fröbel today?**

I would like to go back once again to the question of why you should read Fröbel today and what you can expect from such readings. Being a Froebelian in my eyes does *not* mean turning towards Fröbel for practical guidance. You can’t read Fröbel in the hope of finding answers and solutions to today’s pressing issues. Unfortunately, this is what many expect and why historical, philosophical, or theoretical work is so often deemed irrelevant. What many want to hear is: What does Fröbel mean for everyday

classrooms? How can I apply his principles? How can I use the occupations or blocks? How can I implement Fröbel's idea of play in my practice? Or even better, what would Fröbel want me to do in this specific situation?

Fröbel can't help in such a sense. I'm not arguing that you can't apply Froebelian principles today; the renewed interest in Fröbel has undoubtedly enriched practices worldwide. Nevertheless, the expectation shouldn't be to find quick and easy solutions in Fröbel's writings. Neither can it show the right direction nor tell us what to do today in a specific situation. To that effect, Fröbel is useless. Developing a relationship to Fröbel's thoughts, reading, and thinking with Fröbel can't be reduced to a "practical method" (Tesar, 2020). The field can't solve the problems that it is facing today by merely going back to Fröbel.

If true, then why bother to read Fröbel? The benefit lies in developing a certain mindset, or what Tesar calls an "ethical relationship with a thought" (2020, p. 1). Creating an intellectual relationship with Fröbel by reading his works doesn't provide practical guidance but prompts the reader to think about the profession's aim, role, and methods. It is thought-work that inspires the development of a mindset that is Froebelian. Through studying Fröbel, (and as a historian, I would like to add history in general) you create a "habit of reflection and deliberative inquiry, which is holding up the taken-for-granted world to critical scrutiny" (Kliebard, 1995, p. 194). Thinking with Fröbel "leads us to formulate questions, rather than articulate clear answers to the problems that we study" (Tesar, 2020, p. 2). That is essential. To ask questions and not to wait for answers. Understood this way, thinking with Fröbel reveals problems while simultaneously working towards their solution.

### **What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century?**

How can such a Froebelian mindset help? To use an infamous Froebelian term, the answer to this question is manifold and depends on your role(s) in the ECEC field.

First and foremost, there is practice. Without any question, it is the most crucial level. Being a Froebelian as a practitioner, among others, means to actively work on and fight for the implementation and adherence of Froebelian principles. Connecting theory and practice, thinking about what a practice that values children, their lives, and their holistic learning can look like is now, as before, paramount. While buzzwords like play-based learning, child-centered education, developmentally appropriate practice, etc., are frequently mentioned, their use doesn't mean that they do justice to Froebelian principles. The words may sound similar, but it's not necessarily Froebelian (or even desirable for young children).

Furthermore, there is the level of education and professional development. To be a Froebelian on this level means to familiarize future (and veteran) professionals with Fröbel's ideas and enable them to reflect on their role as an educator and advocate of young children's learning. Today, where many professionals feel emotionally drained, displaced, and disembodied (Scacchi, unpublished) because their emotional and mental well-being is only an afterthought, it is crucial to support professionals in developing critical self-awareness.

Then, there is the level of advocacy. As Helen May (2006) wrote some 15 years ago: "'Being Froebelian' is also about advocacy for social and political change" (p. 245). That is still true today. It means to advocate for young children, to "join in and protect" (May, 2006, p. 247), as well as to advocate for children's rights (Krappmann & Petry, 2016; Swadener et. al,

2013), women's rights, and ECEC professionals' rights and well-being (Scacchi, unpublished).

You can think of many more levels. Ideally, these levels are interwoven and interconnected with the well-being of all young children in mind: "Educators are deriving inspiration for *constructive* revolutionary practices from Fröbel's principles for early childhood education. These practices have ranged from advocacy to innovation and activism through various phases of Froebelian education" (McNair & Powell, 2020, p. 2).

However, I am not a practitioner. Therefore, for the rest of this paper, I mainly argue as an academic who thinks about Fröbel's educational philosophy and theory and what it means today, even if questions of practice and advocacy are on my mind.

### **What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century?**

As said earlier, Fröbel is an ambiguous educational thinker who is not easy to understand. That is even more true today, as many of his thoughts are foreign and not easily applicable. It is not a new problem, though. In a certain sense, the history of the Fröbel movement was shaped by fierce debates about who understood his pedagogy correctly and best. One example is the infamous "Fröbel-orthodoxy" dispute of the 1870s (Denner, 1988; Heiland, 2017; Wasmuth, 2020), a term coined by Gustav Steinacker at the Second Annual Convention of the General Education Association in Kassel in 1873. The term was directed at Baroness von Marenholtz-Bülow, who had claimed that orthodoxy is necessary to preserve the purity of Fröbel's core ideas (Denner, 1988). The controversy didn't help the emerging Fröbel movement. It only led to heated quarrels which mainly centered around two issues: First, if it is legitimate to modify Fröbel's pedagogy at all (which all the early

Froebelians did) and second, and even more importantly, who had understood Fröbel best (I'm inclined to say no one as they all emphasized their distinctive interpretations).

Orthodoxy prevailed in the years after. Froebelians worldwide have insisted on the importance of preserving Fröbel's "pure" ideas as well as the correctness of their interpretation (Wasmuth, 2020). None of it has much appeal today. There is not much to aim for by insisting on a rigid exegesis of what Fröbel allegedly has meant or in taking his words literally. Going back to Fröbel to restore his original idea for today's early childhood is fruitless, or as Bruce points out: "There is no wish to return to the rigid prescription of earlier times" (2021, p. 101).

The same is true for a stubborn insistence on the alleged superiority of one's interpretation. Today, it is dogmatic to insist on how Fröbel has envisioned using the gifts and occupations, for example, the blocks. Using blocks in a way as prescribed by Fröbel seems rather pointless. Instead, you need to ask what the blocks mean in today's world, how they can be applied in a modern and meaningful way and adapted to each child's learning community's strengths and needs. In this sense, being a Froebelian doesn't mean to insist on purity and orthodoxy but to be open to modification in Fröbel's spirit. Change is necessary, and even if Fröbel wasn't open to criticism, he was continually evolving the "whole of gifts and occupations."

Second, being a Froebelian today does *not* mean being narrow-minded and focused on Froebelian thinking only. Once again, looking at the past is enlightening because such narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and devaluation of the "competition" was a common mindset of many leading German Froebelians. A prominent example is the so-called "dispute about Montessori" in the 1920s. Just the thought that a

new pedagogical concept could be equal to or even better than Fröbel's pedagogy was enough to outrage someone such as Eduard Spranger. It resulted in fierce and disrespectful comments (Konrad, 1997, Wasmuth, 2011).

Today, a question such as which pedagogy is "better" (whatever that would mean) seems pointless. There isn't anything to gain by denigrating other worthwhile pedagogical ideas. New thoughts can only help to expand critical thinking about the current status of the field. As a Froebelian, you shouldn't only be open to Fröbel's thoughts. You should also listen to other ideas and how they can help to develop alternative thinking. Such a mindset is in Fröbel's spirit. You shouldn't forget, he developed his new concept and institution of ECEC because he was dissatisfied with the contemporary form of institutionalized early childhood education, as documented in his dislike of the day nurseries (*Kleinkinderbewahranstalten*). Besides, Fröbel created a new name and a new language because he deemed the existing one insufficient to express his thinking. While I don't necessarily want to argue for the development of a new language of ECEC – even if the idea seems enticing – what is needed is openness for new ideas and thinking outside the box to conceive alternatives, and, most importantly, revive "real utopia" (Moss, 2014).

Third, being a Froebelian does not mean idealizing Fröbel. Yes, Fröbel expected blind loyalty. However, such an attitude can't be the goal today. One's relationship with Fröbel and his work today must be a critical one. Such critical thinking is not only warranted but desperately needed, and it should start with Fröbel and Froebelian practices: "Criticality ensures that practice is simultaneously cognisant of Froebelian histories and vigilant against stultification that arises from wallowing

in orthodoxy" (McNair & Powell, 2020, page). There is no worth in parroting Froebelian buzzwords without understanding.

Besides, you shouldn't put Fröbel and his pedagogical ideas on a pedestal, as Froebelians of the past have often done. Many biographies present an uncritical, almost cult-like glorification of Fröbel as a person and pedagogue, and analyses of his work often conceal the inconsistencies in his thinking. In addition, the writings' incomprehensibility is often excused by Fröbel's alleged "genius," merely assuming that there is a hidden, deeper meaning in his ideas. Danger lurks in a failure to acknowledge Fröbel's flaws and contradictions, and the ambiguity of his pedagogical thinking.

However, such a mindset is neither needed nor helpful. There isn't anything to lose by admitting, revealing, and analyzing the contradictions in Fröbel's work and his thinking, including the inconsistencies. On the contrary, such openness helps to better understand the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness of early learning (and education understood as the conscious support of such learning). The same is true for Fröbel, the person: he was a flawed personality and probably not even the "born" educator as he is often idealistically represented (Wasmuth, 2020). Why, though, should his flaws, ambiguities, gaps, shortcomings, and outdated ways of thinking be ignored? They do not detract from his rich and fascinating thinking.

Being critical, however, can't stop with Fröbel; it needs to go beyond. Being a Froebelian means critically questioning the current status of ECEC and taken-for-granted assumptions shaped by GERM, especially those that hurt young children. Criticality demands "political and cultural contestation when 'regimes of truth' lose sight of children's humanity" (McNair & Powell, 2020, p. 8). It means advocating for young children, to "join in and protect" (May,

2006), and to resist policies and practices contrary to children's well-being. Understood this way, being a Froebelian means "to swim against the tide of educational doctrines that promote reductive and transmissive views of young children's capabilities and signs of learning" (McNair & Powell, 2020, p. 9). It means advocating for children's rights, women's rights, and ECEC professionals' rights in the times of GERM's neoliberal agenda (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

### **What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st century?**

I will conclude by asking one more time: What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The focus, though, this time is on the *now*.

This essay's purpose was to ask questions without giving conclusive answers. However, such questions alone enable the profession to reflect on the genuine essence of ECEC, and to unite everyone in upholding Fröbel's ideas in today's world. It might furthermore help to emphasize which essential ideas of meaningful ECEC are worth fighting for. And fighting seems to be the proper word because what is needed is to resist the current attacks from GERM while simultaneously developing new ideas.

Without any question, ECEC is in an age of crisis; a crisis that didn't begin with the pandemic. The neglect of young children's social-emotional, as well as their physical well-being began before. The current crisis results from decades of educational policies and practices shaped by GERM with its key features of standardization, the over-emphasis of the core subjects of mathematics and literacy, testing and high-stakes accountability, prescribed curricula, increased teacher control, technology, and privatization. It has detrimentally affected

ECEC. The pandemic has furthermore revealed stark disparities. That is especially true for countries that regard young children's extra-familial education as a private matter rather than a public good. Young children and their institutionalized education and care, as well as their social-emotional well-being, aren't being prioritized. And all the current talk about the nebulous "learning loss" that needs to be offset in the near future shows the direction we are headed for: More technology, more standardized learning, more outcome-orientated "education." That is especially true for countries like the US. After almost one year, a plan to reopen ECEC institutions (and schools) safely for all children, families, and especially professionals is non-existent. And neither contains a vision of what a meaningful system of ECEC might look like after the pandemic. The crisis is here, and ECEC is more than ever "in need of transformative change" (Moss, 2014, 73). Froebelians shouldn't be quiet spectators of what is to come. As May wrote 15 years ago: "Being Froebelian' at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to keep alive the dream and determination to 'make our own alternative'" (May, 2006, p. 247). I believe it is true today more than ever.

I want to end by outlining only one idea. To keep the possibility of such change open, we need to revive alternative conversations and ideas (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). That is one way in which Froebelian thinking can play a role; not by going back to Fröbel but by insisting on the timelessness of his ideas as a reminder and orientation of what ECEC can mean. The intellectual exchange with Froebelian ideas can help to become aware of such alternatives and at the same time help to resist the current ways of thinking. ECEC doesn't have to be as it is today, and the insistence on Froebelian principles shows exactly that. Furthermore, it means resisting the language and the underlying

assumptions of what it means to be a child, a parent, or an ECEC institution in today's GERM-dominated world and what should be considered vital when raising children in an educational setting. It means to rethink how we can live with children, find new ways and new approaches, or as Moss (2014) calls it, a "new utopia." And Froebelian thinking, as Bruce argues, can help: "There is now an urgent need to develop something which is true to his vision [...]. There has been a serious loss of Froebelian treasure here" (Bruce, 2021, p. 84).

New visions are needed because ECEC has been manipulated by borrowing methods, approaches, and terms from neighboring (and sometimes dominant) disciplines. Like many other educational fields, ECEC is shaped by a language that "stresses economics, accountability, and compliance" (Rose, 2009, p. 25). Terms such as "quality," "standards," or "accountability" are not helpful when speaking about the essence of our field and make us helpless in the face of human capital theory and neoliberal thinking (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2021). Our discipline has never been a stronghold of philosophical thought. Today, ECEC as a profession and discipline still struggles to "think and speak for itself" (Urban, 2018, p. 314). What is lacking is what could be called a language of ECEC, a genuine pedagogical voice that embodies what our field stands for. Froebelians can play a role by emphasizing such a genuine pedagogical perspective that should be paramount when describing, analyzing, and speaking about our ECEC. And it means to identify and maybe even revive terms and perspectives that empower our field to speak for itself. Froebelian principles are such a perspective. The profession can't continue to ask the wrong questions, questions of efficiency, accountability, or "learning loss." The salient question is "what we don't read and hear" (Rose, 2009 p. 27). Using Froebelian thinking, we can

ask: What *should* a kindergarten (or ECEC institution) be? What does real play mean, and how can we support it? How can we as conscious professionals support such play without turning it into meaningless "fun activities"? The pandemic has drastically altered how society thinks about many areas of life, such as health, work, family life, or school. It is an opportunity to rethink our image of the child, adults' relationships with young children, and what it means to live with young children in educational settings. It might mean questioning what is happening with the children's well-being in mind and advocating for real "high-quality," or as Fröbel would have called it, "humane education" for all children.

Fröbel might not have liked the term "Froebelian." However, he would have been thrilled by a profession that advocates for young children's well-being, dignity, and play as the means of young children's self-active learning as the appropriate way to make sense of the world and find their place in this world. He would have been fond of advocates who resist treating ECEC as a commodity, advocates who don't think about ECEC in terms of standardized learning and testing, and advocates who ask and think about such questions.

For all of these reasons, it might be worth wondering: What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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