

Finding Froebel in the environmental and economic climate of the 21st Century

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There are some crucial questions that every editor has to ask when deciding what manuscripts will form a publication. Questions include identifying the relevant content, of course, but also, to ensure a balanced equipoise, the number of manuscripts is key. The aspect of balance can never be lost. Our call for papers revealed a significant corpus of rich, diverse, flavored manuscript submissions. Our greatest challenge was selecting only a few. Each submission made for fascinating reading. The review system was, of course, extremely helpful in the selection process, the various analyses and subsequent opinions of our reviewers were informative indeed. However, like us, the reviewers accepted a higher number of manuscripts than we had space for. Due to the merit of the manuscript submissions, we found ourselves planning this Special Issue Part 2 of Finding Froebel: National and Cross-National Pedagogical Paths in Froebelian Early Childhood Education.

In this issue we bring together researchers and practitioners who share an interest in Froebel's ideas in the context of economic pressures and environmental challenges in the Anthropocene. These different positions include environmental concerns, neoliberalism, and the fragility of how methods and curriculum issues can be interpreted, all which took us towards the complexity of life in the Anthropocene.

Froebel, nature, and the Anthropocene

Combining Friedrich Froebel's "silent teaching of nature" (Froebel 1826/2005, p. 8) with Richard Louv's "nature deficit disorder" (Louv, 2009, p. 157), authors Joanne Josephidou and Nicola Kemp make meaningful connections between young children and natural spaces. Whilst there exists an impressive body of literature on the benefits of children being outdoors, the authors argue that the literature is ominously silent about the experiences of babies (0-12 months) and toddlers (13 -24 months) and their exposure to natural spaces. The authors stress that the aesthetic enhancements of being in nature is inherently healing and promotes all-round health and holistic development; further, it is argued that natural spaces can add meaning and substance to young children's experiences. Specifically, the authors note that being in natural spaces is hugely beneficial for children living in homes with a lower socio-economic status. In the article titled "A life 'in and with nature?' Developing nature engaging and nature enhancing pedagogies for babies and toddlers," the authors wisely recommend that young children should spend more time in nature, and in stressing this the authors align themselves with the ideology of Froebel (1826/2005). Froebel had a deep love of the sciences and nature, and his immersion in the sciences was fundamental to the naturalistic shape of his educational practice (Watts, 2021). He

encouraged young children to explore plant-rich settings, use all their senses, and develop an appreciation of the natural beauty in the world (Froebel, 1826/2005). The article integrates an impressive number of findings which reveal concerns that young children are spending more time in environments described as having “saturated air” and being “disease contaminated.” Interspersed throughout the article the reader is drawn to the health and well-being of our youngest members, and the benefits of being in nature for all.

In “What does it mean to be a Froebelian in the 21st Century?” Helge Wasmuth, invites readers to consider: Why is Froebel’s pedagogy still of interest? What does it mean to think and act in Froebel’s spirit, to advocate for young children, to question the current status quo, and to wonder about new ways of educating young children - Wasmuth does not profess to answering these questions he invites us to interrogate critically, he aims to leave the reader with more questions than answers. What Wasmuth does in this article is give the reader a sense of his moral and political values, which appear on the surface, to echo with Froebel’s ideas of moral and political practice. First of all, Wasmuth rejects the technicist discourse, the human capital perspective, where a practice of domination exists, as children are taught to the test, and where teachers are held accountable for children achieving “good” results in identified subjects (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2020). Instead, Wasmuth invites the reader to consider the meaning and substance of education, the specificity of difference, and respect for individual children and their interests (Froebel, 1826/2005). This article offers a spirit of hope, as Wasmuth invites the reader to deeply consider the work of Froebel, whilst at the same time he challenges the status of utopian thought - he asks the reader to push against the grain of simple acceptance and to be open to change through critical thinking. Drawing on other critical and radical Froebelian authors McNair & Powell (2020) Wasmuth brings attention to the fact that education is a struggling terrain. By presenting his own deep

analysis of Froebel today, he invites the critical practitioner to explore Froebel’s principles and use these to guide them on their journey.

Sally Howe brings together the ideas of The Common Worlds Research Collective (hereafter The Common Worlds) (www.commonworlds.net) and Froebel. The Common Worlds emphasizes the importance of educators’ awareness of ontological frameworks that education builds on, arguing that the global climate crisis demands a new responsibility from the field of education. One important tenet is to foster children’s sense of relationship to nature through de-centering the human as measure for normalcy or value. In the Common World’s posthuman context, Froebelian philosophy is situated within a humanist framework that places the individual, the human at the center of education practices. This human-centered perspective seems to challenge the work The Common Worlds are trying to achieve. Howe challenges the idea that Froebel’s ideas build solely on a humanist basis and explores some crossroads between Froebelian philosophy and the philosophy underlying the Common Worlds Research Collective to foster environmental education. Drawing on Spinoza’s philosophy as a common, underlying link, Howe argues that while Froebel’s philosophy was developed in an era charged with a humanist understanding of humans and nature, Froebel’s thinking transcended his time, and was immersed in ideas of the interconnectivity of humans and nature.

Sophie Flemig and Lynn Mc Nair’s article uses a Froebelian lens to reassess how nature and nurture have been emphasized differently throughout the history of education from the Enlightenment perspective of the child as “tabula rasa” to Piaget and Vygotsky’s developmental theories that emphasize an interplay between child and environment, emphasizing either the material environment or the social environment. Modern research findings within for example the field of epigenetics, point to the mutual shaping that occurs between the material, the biological and the social (Youdell & Lindley, 2019). While the

role nature and nurture play in human development has long been discussed and explored in the field of education, Froebel's pedagogic ideas seemed to intuitively grasp the interconnectivity of the material, the social and the biological long before science could provide such perspectives. Froebel's personal background and his historical situation is offered as a backdrop from which to understand his pedagogical ideas which Flemig and Mc Nair present and analyze in terms of the ideas' underlying kinship to a modern understanding of the mutual shaping quality of the biological, the material and the social. Flemig and McNair find that Froebel's ideas predate the nature/nurture debate and are particularly well suited to address social inequality, specifically the persistent consequences of child poverty on children's possibility to thrive and flourish to their highest potential.

Interpreting Froebel's philosophy and pedagogical ideas in an economic climate

Under-funding of early childhood development and "pre-primary" education is a global issue (with a minority of exceptions) that disadvantages 50 million young children (Zubairi & Rose, 2021) and inhibits initial and ongoing professional learning of educators and carers. In his article, Johansson elucidates Froebel's play theory as curriculum and pedagogy in contemporary early learning contexts in connection to Klafki's concept of categorical *Bildung*: the words, concepts, and tools for thinking that we develop when we open ourselves up to the world around us, and when the world opens itself up for us. Interaction with the world then, situates children within the economy of early childhood education (ECE) - the "outer" in Froebel's terms - which is internalized by the child before the "inner" is re-externalized through symbolic activity. For Froebel, Johansson notes, the kindergarten curriculum must encompass all aspects of a child's life. In the 21st century as it was in the 19th, educators and children contend with worldwide inequality and inequity, which are

whitewashed by the global education reform movement - an "ideological agenda that emerged from the crisis of capital in the late 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent abandonment of Keynesian economic orthodoxy" (Fuller & Stevenson 2019: 2). Johansson contrasts the openness of categorical *Bildung* and Froebel's pedagogics with the "direct and scripted instruction" of the Head Start program in the USA. The sad irony of this program has been its ineffectiveness "as a means of lifting children out of poverty or reducing intergenerational poverty" despite investment of £8.5 billion per year (Rashid, 2022).

The content of what children learn in today's kindergartens is the focus of Aske Haberg's article. Her study is situated in Scandinavian early learning contexts where spending on ECE is higher than most other countries (OECD, 2021). She explores whether 23 kindergarten teachers' views about valued early learning topics mirror the inherent values of the national curricula of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In these countries, as in many others, she notes that teachers operate within the "knowledge economy" where influential, international comparisons of educational performance have been introduced by an economic body: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. She concludes that teachers' expert knowledge may conflict with government imperatives despite its necessity for enabling children to develop categorical *Bildung* for what and how to learn.

Kristen Cameron and Deron Boyles also examine dissonance and discomfort in Froebel-inspired practice, which finds itself situated within a policy context that espouses values and perpetuates discourses of accountability, competition, and assessment. Their critical policy analysis is illuminated by case study examples from one pre-school in the United States. They highlight the challenges for sustaining Froebelian education in the face of many external pressures to conform to a dominant neoliberal regime; but they also identify possibilities for resistance.

With this, the final issue in our two-part special issue, we invite readers to immerse themselves in current discussions surrounding Froebel's ideas in the context of the Anthropocene. Along with the liberating ideas of the Enlightenment and humanism comes a human centrist ideology that privileges ideas that support efficiency, productivity, and economic growth. These ideas fuel the proliferation of global neoliberal education movements and global climate catastrophes. Authors in this two-part special issue share a commitment to exploring how Froebel's holistic and visionary pedagogic ideas can inform practitioners' politicians' and researchers' understandings of the relationships between children, education, the environment, and lifelong flourishing. Looking back and forward simultaneously, we aim to encourage questions that don't necessarily have specific answers, but that may lead to fresh perspectives on what early childhood education is and can be and how the early years can plant seeds that grow something new, rather than merely- and dangerously reproducing the same ideas that fuel the Anthropocene.

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