

Finding Froebel: National and Cross-National Pedagogical Paths in Froebelian Early Childhood Education

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Our shared fascination and admiration for the philosophy of the radical educationalist, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) combined with deep-seated concerns about prevailing constructs of early childhood is the catalyst for this special issue of *Global Education Review*. As co-editors, our interest in “Finding Froebel” is simultaneously situated within scholarly debates concerned with the prevailing neo-traditionalist approaches to teaching young children, behaviorist theories of learning and modernist constructs of early childhood in our own and other countries (Benn & Downs, 2016; McLaren, 2020; Moss, 2015). Along with the authors whose work is included in this issue, we share deep concerns about the characteristics and effects of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and its key features of standardization, “core” subjects, learning trajectories and outcomes, profit-focused business models, and regimes of testing and accountability (Sahlberg, 2012). Alongside the proliferation of GERM, Froebel’s ideas continue to be built upon and translated both intentionally through Froebel inspired programs, and unintentionally through the taken for granted tradition for care and interest in children as the basis for early childhood

education (Aslanian, 2015), as well as the practices of arts, crafts, outside play and pedagogic learning materials in early childhood education. Most importantly, the underlying impetus of Froebel’s work, the desire to offer children a holistic, fertile environment to grow in as human beings continues to inspire the work of early childhood practitioners.

This philosophical rooting engenders an “intellectual heart” through the Froebelian traditions of professional unity, reflection and action for social justice. Biesta et al (2020, p.456) have lamented the decline in such scholarly criticality from contemporary education in which published research ranges between distinct polarities: notably, perspectives that reflect and activate “principled, critical and politically aware” positions; or those that represent a “strongly practice-focused” stance, including preoccupation with “what works” in educational systems and settings. Czerniawski (2016) notes that the latter opens up spaces in which teaching as “craft” and knowledge as practical wisdom gain traction to the detriment of more expansive and circumspect professional learning. The destruction of autonomous, intellectual, caring educators drives and is

perpetuated by the construction of education as highly regulated, performative steps in a journey towards economic productivity and social control. Wasmuth and Nitecki (2017: 5) have noted that “the child’s well-being and education are convenient and socially acceptable reasons to support programs that have a less appealing motivation: to shape and control the formation of children into law-abiding, socially acceptable adults, which are necessary to keep countries economically competitive in an increasingly competitive global market.” Looking far beyond the classroom for inspiration, questioning inequalities, speaking out and acting up are not part of the performance demanded by these desired outcomes of the GERM movement.

We would not disagree with Biesta et al.’s (2020) assessment of the erosion of conditions in which educators’ status is typified as intellectually astute, curious, rebellious and even revolutionary. But we would situate the articles in this special issue differently. While eschewing the GERM-related “what works” mantras, the authors who share their intellectual and indeed emotional, ethical and spiritual hearts, have been inspired by and are closely focused on deeply principled practice. Such a foundation for education and learning makes criticality and political awareness (and often resistance and activism) part of its *raison d’être*. A principled Froebelian approach generates dynamic, situational, relational and existential questions, tentatively offering (or avoiding giving) conclusive interpretations in “writerly” ways (Barthes, 1970) that draw readers into sophisticated dialogue and complex interpretation.

As this special issue makes evident, a grassroots movement of educators and scholars is actively reigniting Froebel’s holistic philosophy for early childhood pedagogies,

seeking to foreground young children’s histories and human condition; and respecting the particularities of each child’s environmental, sociocultural and politico-economic circumstances. It is from this complexity that a Froebelian approach seeks to nurture each child’s educational drive. Consequently, lexicons for early childhood education find close correspondence between the humanistic maxims of Froebelian education and contemporary concerns such as social justice, fairness and sustainability, which apply in equal measure to early childhood systems and young children’s living and learning.

Interest in Froebel’s work in the 21st century is not in itself new, as intellectual leaders have time and time again written about Froebel (most recently, Wasmuth, 2020; Bruce, 2021), and contemporary early years practitioners recurrently embed his principles into practice (McNair & Powell, 2021; Siraj & Kingston, 2015). A Froebelian approach is a part of mainstream provision for many young children’s early learning, and a dominant pedagogical approach in numerous educational spheres. This special issue tells varied stories of how educators interpret and manifest Froebel’s ideas today within the context of a global climate crisis and GERM policies.

Judging by the number of submissions to this special issue, there is significant interest in the life and work of the early years pioneer Friedrich Froebel. These articles from academics, educators and practitioners working in many different countries provided insight into how Froebel’s seminal ideas have been “transferred, translated and transformed” over time (Nishida, 2014).

The special issue will be published in two parts, due to the tremendous response to our call

for papers, and thanks to the generosity of the journal's editorial board. This first is a collection of papers, which coalesce around critical social justice perspectives that are "close to practice." Each draws on Froebel's principles and philosophy as a source of analytical inspiration and examination of contemporary education in its socio-political milieu. Part 2 includes Froebelian interpretations of global concerns, such as climate change. Collectively the articles cover work in Europe, East Asia, North America and Oceania. Future collections would benefit from examples of Froebelian scholarship and pedagogical approaches in parts of the world that are not represented in this special issue.

As an introduction to our youngest community members, who are frequently overlooked in research, Cooper, Siu, McMullen, Rockel and Powell invite us to rethink and reformulate early years practice with a focus on very young children. The authors' reflections on pedagogies in "typical" early childhood education and care settings in their four respective countries – New Zealand, Hong Kong, USA and England – thoughtfully and respectfully interpret cultural nuances in pedagogies of care for one-year-olds. Autonomy and freedom with guidance form the pedagogical focus for their observations, which are brought to life in vignettes accompanied by the authors' multi-layered dialogue.

Contestations, and moral and political permeations infiltrate this special issue. For example, McNair, Blaisdell, Davis and Addison express their expansive struggle with the overused word of "quality" by policy makers, regulators and educators. The authors challenge polysemic understandings of what makes a "quality" early years setting; arguing that the lack of definition is not at all helpful. McNair et al stress that ideas of quality are not neutral, and can be linked to political practice, e.g., issues of politics and power and neoliberal ideology. The fundamental challenge facing the researchers

was defining a meaningful understanding of quality, a definition that was consequential to the practitioners themselves. Central to such a challenge was unravelling practitioner definitions of the word. The data then enabled McNair et al to connect their findings with Froebelian principles.

After comparing Froebel's philosophy with that of other influential theorists and thinkers on education, Castner & Puntarelli bring readers along into an imagined dialogue between Froebel and a contemporary director of an American early childhood center. The dialogue brings to light the uniquely humanizing perspective Froebelian pedagogy offers amidst a field dominated by GERM policies. In conversation with the Head, Froebel's seminal ideas are highlighted and exposed in this creative scenario.

Illustrated with examples from contemporary empirical study of two-year-olds using slow video ethnography, MacLure and MacRae bring Froebel's thought into dialogue with the recent "ontological turn" in the social sciences via Gilles Deleuze. Exploring the common interest and roots of Froebel's holism and Deleuze's immanent ontology, the authors tease out points at which the thought of these two very different thinkers collide and reveal rarely discussed theoretical underpinnings of Froebel's holism and relationships between children and their environments.

While Froebel's ideas and his followers' work developing kindergartens have received attention, the practitioners who brought and continue to bring those ideas to life in children's everyday lives often go unnoticed. May's article sheds light on one such "foot soldier," Isobel Little, a Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh who migrated to Aotearoa-New Zealand. We follow her career along with the development of Froebel's ideas as they were adopted within a Māori framework. May discusses kindergarten teachers' continued role as quiet but effective "front-line workers" performing community outreach for kindergarten families in usually

unnoticed ways, but most recently made visible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The value of outdoor play in early childhood education is perhaps the most widespread relic of Froebelian pedagogy. At the same time, it is evident that children spend less and less time outdoors, in connection with their natural environments, and have less access to play. Watts' article describes the use of sensory ethnography and GoPro cameras to access the joy and magic children experience during outdoor play and explores how parents and teachers partake in that joy, exploring how our holistic capacities can serve as everyday activism for sustainable futures.

Where have we "Found Froebel" through work with this special issue? Contributing authors connect Froebel to global concerns, such as the current climate crisis and nature's important role in children's growth and learning; to paradigmatic turns that bring the child's unique polyvocal and embodied expression into focus; to the professional resilience and resourcefulness of educators; and to critical and political questions about the character and purpose of early childhood education. Arguably, Froebel's invention of the kindergarten has been colonized by neoliberalism, while at the same time educators find in his ideas a source of resistance and sustenance. Despite the proliferation of kindergartens and international charters for children's rights, Froebel's holism and relational ontology, which he encapsulated in his vision of a garden for children, remain radical ideas in education policy rhetoric and its enactment in practice.

Nishida (2014) reminds us of the need for widespread critical thinking, not only processing knowledge but transforming it. During our process of work on this special issue, writing about Froebel has compelled us to think holistically, as well as critically: asking what are we doing, why, for whom and to what ends? What also became clear from the submissions is that a Froebelian approach - curriculum, pedagogy, principles and environment - can be

connected to moral and political practice. Despite the changing contexts of educational practices and transnational politics, all the articles discuss the relevance and applicability of Froebelian knowledge, values and relational practice today. More specifically, the authors do not simply resurrect Froebelian principles, but by presupposing a vision of the future, argue the principles are pedagogically sited over time; reconsidered and reconceptualized.

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