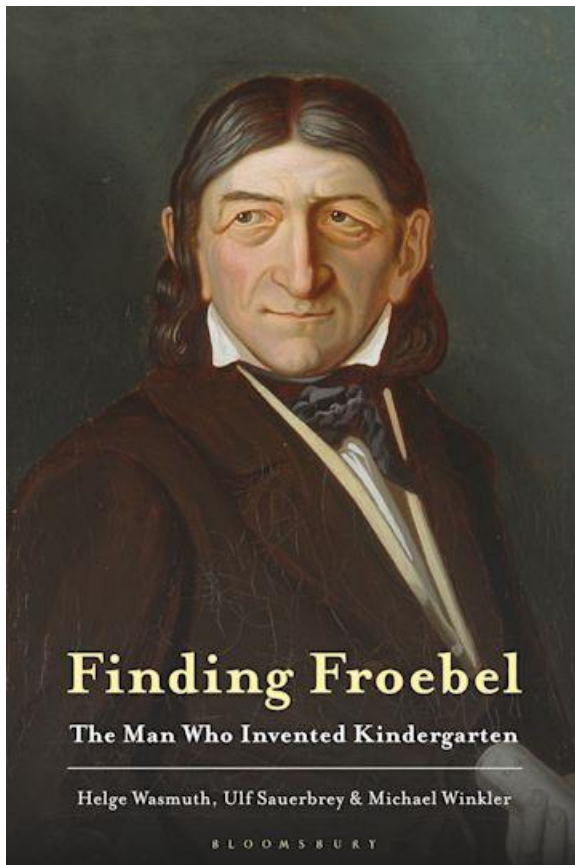


Book Review

The Man Who Invented Kindergarten

“Finding Froebel” by Helge Wasmuth, Ulf Sauerbrey, & Michael Winkler

By Elena Nitecki



Finding Froebel: The man who invented kindergarten pulls back the curtain on Friedrich Froebel, the “father of kindergarten” and one of the most influential pedagogues of the 19th century. Froebel is a familiar name in the field of early childhood education, but seldom do

readers of theory become so intimately acquainted with the person behind the ideas. This unique biography is based on previously untranslated and unknown letters and sheds light on the man behind the kindergarten movement. This book reveals the details of Froebel’s flawed and remarkable life, which gave birth to brilliant ideas that revolutionized approaches to working with young children.

We teach Froebel’s theories as a foundation of early childhood education to understand the nature of how young children live in our world and how we as adults can nurture their growth and development. As fascinating as this may sound, it is still theory—from a 19th century German thinker whose writing is complex and convoluted at times. Many readers of theory absorb and apply concepts, simple or complicated, while enduring the sometimes-dry nature entailed in theoretical reading. Many students struggle to grasp theory, often saying it is abstract, irrelevant, and even boring. Some students complain about the detached nature of theory, asking how old ideas from dead white men are relevant today. How do we make theory come alive? Contextualize it! Get to know the history, setting, and the author’s story, all of which are reflected in the ideas of such thinkers. That is exactly what Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, and Winkler did with this book on Friedrich Froebel’s life.

Froebel is described by some, many years after his death, as “a pedagogical genius who came up with a brilliant idea that would change the world of early childhood education forever but was misunderstood and mostly ignored during his lifetime.” Like any creator—artists, architects, musicians and so on—Froebel was not only misunderstood, but his work was rooted in the soil of his own life experiences, for better or for worse. That is where the seeds of a creator’s ideas develop, underground, maybe for years, until they bloom into a beautiful and unique flower for the world to enjoy. This book tells the story of Friedrich Froebel—who he was, where he lived, and how he revolutionized the developing field of early education. This background contextualizes his theories and one can draw direct parallels between the soil of his experiences and the seeds of his ideas. Froebel’s backstory is also intriguing—so much tragedy, drama, and the unquenchable push and pull of everyday life. Froebel is suddenly a person, with serious baggage, genius, yet flawed. Many of his life experiences illuminate the depth of his theories, how they were shaped, and why they are timeless and still applicable in the 21st century.

There are three specific examples that illustrate how Froebel’s background and experiences, his soil if you will, nurtured and developed the later ideas evident in his philosophy. As the authors state, Froebel’s “daily life...was shaped by two aspects: his mother’s early death and his father’s dogmatic Christianity.” I would add a third outcome related to these two: his complicated personal relationships.

Traumatic childhood. Froebel’s early years are described as an “unfortunate childhood” in the book, and that is an understatement. Growing up in midst of the French Revolution and social and political upheaval in Germany, Froebel’s mother died

when he was an infant. He and his five siblings were raised by a cold-hearted and rigid Protestant pastor, and later a stepmother, both of whom made his life miserable. Even by 19th century standards, much of what Froebel described can be classified as abusive. Froebel credited this difficult upbringing as a reason he became “an educator of humankind.” His writings allude to a persistent hope of salvation, that deep down, he wanted children to have a better life than he did as a child. Noble as that may seem, the authors recognize both sides, noting that Froebel also “used [his mother’s] death to justify his wrongdoings, again referring to the sacrifices he had to endure.” In any event, it is curious that early childhood professionals now understand the powerful impact of early trauma on a child’s development, especially in terms of social-emotional development and personality. Some of the eccentricities in Froebel’s life, most notably his inability to trust others or accept constructive feedback, may well have been rooted in his traumatic childhood. One can see in his theories that Froebel values childhood, almost as a golden age of life, one he never had. Placing children and childhood on a pedestal was certainly not common in that historical time, but a priority for Froebel, who seemed to dwell on this scarred period of his life, well into his old age.

Christian beliefs. As described artfully in the book, Froebel had a very religious upbringing, “growing up in the pastoral milieu of a rigid Protestant pastor shaped how he thought about the world.” The authors note that the father’s “sermons terrified but also fascinated the young child and molded Froebel’s understanding of faith and religiosity. Listening daily to the catechism and torments of hell, to sin and punishment as essential parts of Christianity, to the dualistic idea of a sinful world and godly afterlife, of the gap between God and men, such thoughts were ubiquitous in

Froebel's childhood." Like most people raised in religious homes, such beliefs become part of who you are. The eternal struggle between good and evil, Heaven and Hell, reinforced a dualistic way of thinking, which shaped Froebel's ideas early on. As Froebel matured, he overcame some of his religious upbringing, as his ideas became less rigidly dualistic, and he attempted to create a kind of religion of his own. His theory of the "law of the sphere" and an "education of humankind, a real education that would help every human being to fulfil their potential," was unique, and has religious undertones. "Living in 'unification' with God was always the goal of his educational endeavors, the purpose of kindergarten, or the gifts and occupations." Religious themes are evident not only in his theory, but in his behavior and leadership, often framing himself as a kind of religious founder and undisputed community leader. The soil of his heavily Protestant upbringing brought a spiritual dimension to his philosophy, at a time when other 19th century philosophers were dispensing with any relation to traditional religious ideas, or at the very least, morphing their religious beliefs in new ways.

Complicated relationships. Not surprising, given the trauma of his youth set against a rigid religious worldview, Froebel had complications in many personal relationships. Obviously, his relationship with several family members was strained. The authors also discuss Froebel's relationship with the women at Keilhau, the institution he founded, as a mix between an authoritarian and an inspiring leader who convinced his people that they were taking part in something unique and special. Even in his somewhat unconventional special relationships with his first wife, Wilhelmine, and later, the much younger second wife, Luise, as well as his nieces, there is ambiguity and palpable tension. The theme of relationships and the resulting drama reads like a soap opera.

While this can be entertaining and engaging, these complexities and Froebel's struggle with "normal" relationships have roots in his background and emerge as a strand in his philosophy as well. He lived the complexities of human relationships in many forms, but his theories extend beyond human relationships to the human interacting with the divine, recognizing the potential for a united and exemplary life. Anyone who has spent time around young children can probably attest to the innocent, delightful, and at times, seemingly ethereal nature of innocent young children. The inclusion of divine elements seems to be not only related to his religious background, but also to his own difficulty with human relationships throughout his life.

Today. As I reflect on *Finding Froebel* for this article, appearing in the tenth anniversary issue of the *Global Education Review*, I am reminded of my own work with one of the authors, Helge Wasmuth, over the past decade. Just as Froebel's thinking developed from who he was, the work that Helge and I have done was also nurtured by our life experiences. Helge and I have different backgrounds and upbringings, as a German and an American, but we share a common concern about the problems in early education and care in the US and Europe in terms of how the field is changing—not for the better. We also had a personal stake in this issue, as Helge's child and my children were of this age when we started working together.

In 2017, we co-edited a double issue in this very journal, the *Global Education Review*, examining how the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has dire consequences in terms of policy and practice. Our two issues, one focused on policy and one on practice, contributed to an international conversation that led to much more. In that same year, we were invited to write for NORRAG (Network for international policies and cooperation in

education and training) in Geneva, Switzerland. That led to the World Bank including our work in the *Early Childhood in the World Development Report, 2018*. We met other colleagues in various countries who shared our concerns. We became part of an international research group examining global issues in early childhood education and care, leading to conferences, books, articles, and grants. Eventually, we even partnered with a university and co-taught an international course for students in early childhood, one of the first of its kind at this university. The last six years, since Helge and I first edited issues of the *Global Education Review*, have not only been intellectually exciting, but also hopeful, in that we are collaborating with so many bright minds who share the same concerns and may possibly be in a position to change the status quo, to reverse course on how global educational “reforms” are making early childhood education and care worse off.

Helge and I, like Froebel, place a high value on the early years of life and will defend young children. We see the immense value of childhood and that this special period of life should be protected by adults who hope for better childhoods than they may have had. Froebel was on to something when he recognized elements of the divine in young children, and that should be treasured. Just as Froebel reframed his own religious beliefs to create a new view of childhood and personhood, we discovered that one cannot take the status quo for granted either. It is incumbent upon us as early childhood researchers to question what is “given,” and consider alternatives, even if they are within in the context of complicated relationships. While the echoes of Froebel’s complicated relationships are evident in his story and theories, advocates for young children also must manage the complexities of social, political, and economic relationships that impact

young children and their families. Despite Froebel’s shortcomings, he brought the value of childhood and play to the forefront, during a time when children were not highly valued. He is an inspiration to early childhood professionals, advocates, and researchers, who are trying to protect these sacred years of human life.

On the 10th anniversary of the *Global Education Review*, and its role in our own academic and philosophical development, I would encourage anyone with ideas (all of us!) to dig down, nurture those ideas with others, and let them flower so that you can share them with the world. Froebel’s ideas, which valued the exceptionality of young children, became a gift to the field of early childhood education. Only with a diverse array of ideas, grown from our unique backgrounds, can we begin to find solutions to the vexing problems of education and society.

“Finding Froebel: The Man Who Invented Kindergarten.”

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