

An Explanation of My Educational Principles: Friedrich Fröbel's Letter to Max Leidesdorf

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Abstract

Access to Friedrich Fröbel's essential writings continues to be a challenge for non-German-speaking scholarship. Many essential writings have never been translated, and existing translations are outdated. This article discusses the challenges of translating Fröbel by translating and analyzing one of the essential letters during the establishment of kindergarten. The article demonstrates the benefits of such modern translations by translating essential parts and arguments of this letter. Furthermore, the article discusses key ideas and terms of Fröbel's pedagogy of kindergarten and play by comparing key passages from the letter with Fröbel's general concept, as outlined in his various writings on kindergarten.

Keywords

Friedrich Fröbel, play, law of the sphere, kindergarten, translations

Introduction

Friedrich Fröbel undoubtedly tops any list of so-called "classics" in early childhood education. That is true not only in his origin Germany, but worldwide. Because, in the end, he is the so-called "father of kindergarten." However, Fröbel is not only of interest as a historical figure. Without question, there has been a resurgence of Fröbel in the last years. The recent publications on various topics, such as Fröbel's life, educational theory, and Froebelian practices, are impressive (as examples, see Bruce, 2021; Bruce, Nishida, Powell, Wasmuth & Whinett, 2023; Wasmuth, 2020; Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023).

Nevertheless, issues regarding access to Fröbel's writings and thinking still hinder a deeper understanding of his difficult episteme and pedagogy. There is, of course, Fröbel to blame for it. Fröbel is not an easy-to-read and understand thinker. That is no news, of course, as Maria Kraus-Boelté, the most respected American Fröbel authority around the turn to

the 20th century, already bemoaned: "The difficulty of understanding Fröbel's writings in the original is so great that there are few persons who would attempt to interpret his meaning; and the difficulty would be further increased in an exact translation" (1907, p. 32). His complicated writing style, the idiosyncratic diction, duplication, and triplication of words, as well as the never-ending nesting of sentences, all make it challenging to read Fröbel. Then there is the sermonizing tone, the esoteric thoughts, and the difficult-to-understand spherical law, which makes his thinking foreign, not to say incomprehensible today. Furthermore, how can one make sense of it if one does not buy into Fröbel's religious, or rather esoteric beliefs? Do they make his educational thinking ridiculous and worthless? Finally, there is the non-systematic nature and fragmentary character of his writing. Fröbel, who barely systematically published anything, never managed to combine his thoughts into a coherent book on kindergarten pedagogy, even if his closest supporters must have urged him to do so.

Allegedly, Fröbel refused to write it, afraid such work would only result in more misinterpretations (Wasmuth, 2020). However, he probably was also never interested in writing such a book, as both *Education of Men* and *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs* had been financial disasters (Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023). Thus, a systematic book on his kindergarten pedagogy does not exist.

Therefore, where can one find Fröbel's kindergarten pedagogy? One source is the smaller essays, especially the publications on the gifts, such as *Die Kindergärten als um- und erfassende Pflege- und Erziehungsanstalten der Kindheit, der Kinder bis zum schulfähigen Alter und der deutsche Kindergarten als eine Musteranstalt dafür insbesondere* (Fröbel, 1841), *Über die Bedeutung und das Wesen des Kindergartens überhaupt und das Wesen und die Bedeutung des deutschen Kindergartens insbesondere* (Fröbel, 1842), or *Eine vollständige briefliche Darstellung der Beschäftigungsmittel des Kindergarten* (Fröbel, n.d.). In addition, magazines such as *Sonntagsblatt* give great insights into (the development of) his thinking. However, especially in the 1840s, Fröbel used letters to develop and disseminate his pedagogy of kindergarten and play. Fröbel wrote approximately 2,000 letters between 1836 and 1852 alone. The number of letters sounds extreme today, but was not unusual for the time. Goethe and Schiller wrote more than 30,000 letters (Krone, 2016). Nevertheless, Fröbel's letters are important as they were not a means of typical communication. Instead, he often used them to illustrate his pedagogical ideas systematically. Examples are the two letters from January 20, 1842, to Nanette Pivany and Countess Therese Brunsvik, the correspondence with his "Muhme" Friederike Schmidt, and the long letter to Marenholtz-Bülow (Wasmuth,

2020). In such letters, Fröbel developed his entire play pedagogy, usually based on the philosophy of the sphere. Thereby, he articulated a substantial part of his evolving kindergarten concept in these letters. Often, they were essays on his developing kindergarten pedagogy (Wasmuth, Winkler, & Sauerbrey, 2023).

The nonexistence of systematic writings on kindergarten pedagogy and an annotated edition of his complete works, already a challenge for the German Fröbel research, is intensified in the English-speaking context by the even bigger issue of translations (Engelmann, 2023). Translating Fröbel means dealing with language that downright refuses to be translated. Fröbel invented terms to express his unique thinking, often changing verbs into nouns or using pairs of terms that were in contrast and seemed to express the opposite. Terms such as *Gliedganzes* and *Entgegengesetztgleiche*, to name only the most prominent ones, have no counterpart in other languages. Furthermore, Fröbel often used terms with a meaning that goes beyond the original use in the German language. That makes various translations possible, and the (hopefully conscious) decision should be addressed openly as they shape the understanding of Fröbel in a language other than German. A good example of this issue is the term sphere, in the English often used for both Fröbel's episteme, the law of the sphere, and one part of the second gift. In German, though, Fröbel uses two different terms: *Ball* and *Sphäre* (Engelmann, 2023; Wasmuth, 2020).

These challenges are not new. As Emilie Michaelis and H. Keatley Moore stated in *Fröbel's letters on the kindergarten* (1891): "We have, therefore, left unaltered the peculiarities of our Sokrates [sic!], even such as are most unattractive; that is, we have not abbreviated Fröbel's diffuseness, nor omitted his repetitions,

not cleared his mysticism, nor modernized his antique philosophy, nor corrected his absurd symbolic etymology” (1891, p. viii). And while one can applaud this approach, unfortunately, their translation was based on Hermann Pösche’s edition from 1887. Pösche’s edition, though, was not source-critical but rather a modification to adapt Fröbel’s writings orthographically as well as syntactically to the spirit of the time (Heiland, 2010). Thus, this early translation was never one of Fröbel’s original writings, which can lead to problems, as this article will show.

A more recent edition, *Friedrich Fröbel. A selection from his writings* by Irene M. Lilley, published in 1967, is even more worrisome. As Lilley explains in the preface (1967, p. viii):” I have therefore compressed statements and eliminated repetitions and digressions in an attempt to establish the main lines of thought and indicate those elements in his work which account for Fröbel’s enduring influence.” Hence, it is not Fröbel in the original but Lilley’s interpretation. As we can currently witness an increased interest in Fröbel’s educational thinking, especially in the UK and Ireland, this is an issue.

Hence, modern translations of at least Fröbel’s essential writings regarding his kindergarten pedagogy are desperately needed. With this article, I hope to demonstrate why. In the following, I will translate and discuss essential parts of one of the most insightful of Fröbel’s letters: his letter to Max Leidesdorf

from March 21, 1846. To my knowledge, this letter has never been published as a translation and is thereby unknown to the only English-speaking audience.¹ Translating parts is, of course, not a replacement for a desired careful translation of this letter. And even less a replacement for the desperately needed modern translation of at least his most essential writings, if not his complete works. That, however, is a desideratum for the international Fröbel scholarship.

The chosen primary source

However, why this letter² and not another one? As said, a systematic translation of this letter has never been published so far. However, I have previously included quotes in Wasmuth, 2020 and Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023 but have not translated more extensive parts systematically. The letter was also ignored for a long time by the German Fröbel research (Heiland, 1998). Nevertheless, the letter is remarkable as it contains concise and comprehensible remarks on the spherical law, Fröbel’s anthropology, and the connection to the Whole of Gifts and Occupations³ and Fröbel’s concept of “play care” (*Spielpflege*), respectively (Heiland, 1998; Wasmuth, 2020). Especially the explanation of the spherical law and the theoretical thoughts about gifts and occupations make it valuable.

Apart from its interesting content, the letter further exemplifies the above-mentioned issues regarding Fröbel’s work. The original has not been preserved; only a draft and a transcript

¹ Norm Friesen from Bosie State University has worked on a translation of the letter. In 2021, I met with Norm Friesen, Daniel J. Castner (Indiana University Bloomington), Karsten Kenklies (University of Strathclyde), and Fernando Murillo (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) to discuss the letter and a possible translation. However, all translations in this article are my own and not based on the translation we worked on in 2021. However, these meetings motivated me to do this work.

² The various versions of the letter can be found in BN 707a ,B1 46-51; BN 41, B1 1-13; and Lange, 1862

³ Fröbel preferred to use the term whole instead of system (*Ganze der Spiel- und Beschäftigungsgaben*). See Wasmuth 2020, p. 75)

that includes a treatise titled *Explanation of my Educational Principles*, or *Darlegung meiner Erziehungsgrundsätze*, exist. The transcript does not have a beginning and end; still, it is evident that Leidesdorf was the addressee. In a letter to Leidesdorf on April 8, 1846, Fröbel refers to the treatise: “I hope you will have received my letter and enclosure, in which I promise to send you an exposition of my educational principles this Easter; I am now fulfilling my promise, which I have no doubt will be particularly dear to you as the bearer of these lines and enclosure is Mr. Barop himself” (Fröbel, 1846d, p. 111). It must have been a draft because, as Fröbel pointed out to Leidesdorf: “I don’t even have a clear copy of it myself” (Fröbel, 1846d, p. 111). He hoped Leidesdorf would give it back to Barop. Johannes Barop, who was married to Fröbel’s niece Emilie, had assumed responsibility for Keilhau’s administration in 1830. While always supportive of Fröbel and his pedagogical endeavors, Barop had always been able to maintain a professional distance from Fröbel, contrary to Fröbel’s closest employees Wilhelm Middendorff and Heinrich Langenthal (Wasmuth, Winkler, & Sauerbrey, 2023).

The letter to Leidesdorf was first published by Wichard Lange in 1862 as *The fundamental principles of F. Fröbel. A letter*, or *Die Grundgedanken F. Fröbels. Ein Brief*. This edition is more extensive than the existing transcript. However, it is not clear if Lange made these changes. The Fröbel researcher Helmut Heiland reprinted the letter in 1992, which made it more popular within the broader German Fröbel research community.

In my analysis of the letter, I refer to the transcript version and not the more extensive version published by Lange, as it cannot be decided if Lange made the changes. My analysis in this article is based on often extensive translations, which will allow the reader to get

access to unknown Fröbel's original writing. Still, due to the scope of this article, it is only possible to highlight certain parts of the letter. My summary is, hence, only another interpretation and an abridgment and omission. The only solution to this problem would be to translate the whole letter or, even better, all his essential works regarding kindergarten pedagogy. As mentioned already, this is a desideratum.

Methodology

The method is historical and hermeneutical (George, 2021; Zimmermann, 2015). Hermeneutics, as a theory and methodology of interpretation, seeks to uncover and understand the meaning embedded in texts, symbols, or cultural practices by examining them in their historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. In the case of this article, it means the close reading of Fröbel’s important letter to Max Leidesdorf. I interpret this primary source by considering Fröbel’s living and professional situation, his intent, and his prevailing understanding of kindergarten pedagogy during the 1840s. To learn more about the relationship with Leidesdorf and the purpose of writing the letter, I have further analyzed all letters to Leidesdorf, letters that mention his name, and Fröbel’s letters from the spring of 1846.

My new translation and interpretation follow the “hermeneutic circle,” the process where the understanding of individual parts informs the interpretation of the whole, and the whole, in turn, shapes the understanding of its parts. That is certainly true for my work, as my previous interpretations of this individual letter have shaped and deepened my understanding of Fröbel’s episteme, anthropology, and pedagogy.

The deepened understanding now informs my anew interpretation of the letter.

The context: Fröbel's personal and professional life while writing the letter.

A few words on Fröbel's personal circumstances while writing the letter. Since the death of his first wife Wilhelmine in 1839, Fröbel had devoted himself entirely to his newest idea: Kindergarten. He spent the following years in Blankenburg, opening one of the first kindergartens there but giving up his home in 1844. At this time, and although he was over sixty years old, Fröbel changed his lifestyle drastically. He became a "business traveler" and often went on long, arduous journeys to give lectures and presentations, meet with influential people to initiate kindergarten openings and create networks. His lifestyle was nomadic and chaotic: there was always a new idea, nothing was ever fully thought through, and everything was constantly evolving. And while he was constantly promoting his idea, the kindergarten movement was still in the fledgling stage. In the spring of 1846, only a handful of kindergartens existed, and more than a few thought of Fröbel as an eccentric and pedagogical hoax (Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023).

When not traveling, Fröbel lived in Keilhau. That was also true for the spring of 1846; Fröbel had returned from a journey in November and December 1845 on New Year's Eve morning (Fröbel, 1846a). Keilhau was the only home Fröbel had, but Barop was now in charge, and Fröbel was merely a tolerated guest. The women, especially his nieces Albertine and Emilie, looked critically at everything he did because Fröbel had been responsible for the ongoing outflow of money. Even more worrisome for them was the fear that their

husbands, Barop and Wilhelm Middendorff, would follow Fröbel on another adventure.

Fröbel had begun to give courses for kindergartners in 1843 (Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023). These courses served not only for the training of kindergartners but helped Fröbel, together with the constant travels, to create a widespread kindergarten network. Thus, Fröbel was constantly thinking about and refining his pedagogy of kindergarten and play in the spring of 1846. Kindergarten was all he had, all he was thinking of – and that was true when he wrote this letter.

Fröbel's relationship with Max Leidesdorf

Fröbel and Leidesdorf had met in the summer of 1845. Leidesdorf must have lived in Keilhau for a few weeks, where he "familiarized himself very seriously and carefully with the principles, ways and means of my child guidance method (*Kinderführungsweise*)," (Fröbel, 1847) Fröbel later wrote in a letter to Karl Hagen. After leaving Keilhau, Leidesdorf stayed in Rudolstadt in the inn The Golden Lion in November 1845. In a letter written to Leidesdorf while he was staying in the inn, Fröbel addressed Leidesdorf with „Mr. Well-born Candidat" (*Wohlgeboren Herr Candidat*) Leidesdorf from Berlin," (Fröbel, 1845a) certainly a sign of respect. Fröbel had lent Leidesdorf two smaller journals written by a Dr. Berger and wanted those back, but he also hoped to see Leidesdorf again before Leidesdorf would leave for Berlin. In a letter to the Keilhau community on December 22, 1845, Fröbel mentioned that he had visited Leidesdorf's bride and her father the day before, but neither of the two knew what happened to Leidesdorf since he left Keilhau. Apparently, Leidesdorf had not written a single word to them and was still missing. "Heaven knows what happened to him physically, emotionally or otherwise; the poor,

apparently good-natured, delicate and natural girl was quite worried” (Fröbel, 1845b, p.1).

Thus, Fröbel and Leidesdorf were not very close. Leidesdorf was one of Fröbel’s many acquaintances at this time, and as usual, Fröbel was interested in maintaining the relationship because he hoped that Leidesdorf would support the kindergarten movement. Fröbel did not even hide his intentions. “If you have any friends in Berlin who are particularly interested in the development and implementation of my endeavors and the actual introduction of kindergartens,” he wrote to Leidesdorf in April 1846, “please do not neglect to introduce Mr. Barop to these people, be they men or women, educators in the field or laypeople, for the sake of further mutual understanding and perhaps also for the sake of handholding” (Fröbel, 1846d, p. 111).

That was most likely the main reason why Fröbel drafted the treatise. Not only was the explanation of his educational principles supposed to help Leidesdorf understand Fröbel’s (educational) theory better, but Fröbel hoped that Leidesdorf would help spread the word.⁴ However, Fröbel must have realized quickly that this treatise might not only be helpful in achieving such goals, but was actually one of the most clear explanations of his worldview and educational theory. When he wrote to pastor Hildenhagen in Quetz, a close Fröbel supporter who would later fall into disgrace when he dared to recommend improvements to Fröbel, on March 30, 1846, Fröbel mentioned having taken “the liberty of enclosing a short letter explaining (*briefliche Darlegung*) my educational principles” (Fröbel, 1846c, p. 1) – which must have been the same ones as in the letter to

Leidesdorf. “It is still a very rough product of the pen;” Fröbel wrote, “however, I believe that it might contain something that could be useful for the achievement of our joint project and for the discussion in Halle, which should be considered in advance. I must therefore ask you to kindly take these sheets on board” (Fröbel, 1846c, p.1). Fröbel might have hoped that he had finally succeeded in what had been a struggle throughout all these years: creating a comprehensible written expression of his episteme, anthropology, and educational theory. The explanation had limits, though, as Fröbel had not been able “to descend to the implementation of the application (*Ausführung der Anwendung*)” (Fröbel, 1846c, p.1), meaning his kindergarten pedagogy. That is the reason why the letter ends with relatively short references to kindergarten. The treatise might not have been ready for a „bigger publication,“ but Fröbel felt it had value.

The interpretation of *Explanation of my Educational Principles*

Fröbel titled the transcript “Explanation of my educational principles, explanation of the point of interpretation (*Auslegungspunkt*) of my educational endeavors, as well as their goal, their purpose and the means to its achievement” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 1). The title alone shows that Fröbel did not consider it a typical letter but a treatise. After a few short introductory remarks that emphasized that the following is nothing but undisputable truth, Fröbel began to speak of what had been on his mind for the last 35-40 years: The law of the sphere.

⁴ In a sense, Fröbel was successful. Leidesdorf later discussed Fröbel’s educational theory in *Betrachtungen und Vorschläge zur Förderung der sittlichen Erziehung und Tugend, so wie der sozialen Verhältnisse* (1846), likely based on the letter treatise.

The law of the sphere

The law of the sphere was the foundation of Fröbel's thinking. Only with this episteme in mind can one understand his general educational theory and the pedagogy of kindergarten and play. For Fröbel, everything was related and always and only made sense in such connections. Through the law, Fröbel aimed to describe what he saw as the essence of all that is, as well as the aim of living a conscious life, a life in "life unification" (*Lebenseinigung*).⁵ Expressing this all-encompassing universal truth had been a constant struggle, and Fröbel had never felt entirely successful in putting those deep thoughts and truths into words.

Fröbel had been contemplating the essence of such a law in sincerity since he left the von Holzhausen family in 1810 to move to Göttingen. Between July and October of 1811, he had reflected on such thoughts in his journal almost daily. Ten years later, between July 1820 and May 1821, while struggling with his strange feelings for his niece Albertine, Fröbel again used his daily journal to express his metaphysically theologically founded anthropology. Fröbel had wanted to turn these notes into a book called *The Striving of Humankind*, or *Das Streben der Menschen*; however, it never happened. Instead, he first shared thoughts on the law of the sphere in the second Keilhau pamphlet titled *Education that is thorough and exhaustively sufficient for the German character is the basic and source need of the German people* or *Durchgreifende, dem deutschen Charakter erschöpfend genügende Erziehung is das Grund- und Quellbedürfnis des deutschen Volkes* in 1821. Fröbel had begun to write the pamphlet around 1819 and based it

on drafts of the spherical law from the Göttingen period and the daily papers. Together with the notes in his daily journal written at the same time, the pamphlet's §§19-52 might be the most concise and comprehensible depiction of the spherical law. Another attempt was, of course, the introductory paragraphs (§§ 1 - 23) of *The Education of Man*, Fröbel's main work. Later, while living alone in Switzerland in the early 1830s, the spherical law and an according life were a constant topic in the long letters to the Keilhau community in which Fröbel tried to justify his behavior and life as an exemplary example of a conscious life; a life lived in life unification (Wasmuth, Sauerbrey, & Winkler, 2023).

There is no doubt: The idea of the law of the sphere and the related concept of life unification shaped Fröbel's thinking and living until the end of his life. For Fröbel, everything was a logically necessary extension of his metaphysical-religious worldview. Anthropology, general pedagogical theory, school pedagogy, and then later kindergarten practice - it all derived from his specific view of the world, humankind, and the human being. And it is remarkable how consistent his thinking stayed over a period of 40 years as the letter to Leidesdorf shows. At the same time, the letter is one of the most concise explanations of the spherical law.

“One reason, One source, One origin (*Ausgangspunkt*) only has all that exists (*Daseinde*), has all, that we call nature, world, creation, universe; has all essence, all being (*Sein*), all living, wherever it appears and manifests itself, or wherever it lies – foreshadowed or

⁵ *Lebenseinigung* is often translated with life unity, and so is his whole concept of the law. However, I believe unification is the more appropriate translation as it emphasizes a process, and not a final product. I think this is what Fröbel had in mind when creating this term.

unforshadowed (*ungeahnt*) – dormant” (Fröbel 1846b, p. 1/1R).

Throughout the next nine paragraphs (§§2-9), Fröbel elaborated on the law. “This primal reason, primal beginning, and primal source of all that exists,” Fröbel continued, “is the in itself and through itself conscious essence, being, and living, the itself conscious in itself united (*Einige*), therefore good, God.” And because everything contains the “essence of its reason in itself,” Fröbel deduced, “all that exists” is of “godly essence” (Fröbel 1846b, p. 1R). God is the “primal source and creator” (Fröbel 1846b, p. 1R) of all that is. That is true for all that exists, for nature and humanity. Everything is created by God. Thus, everything is divine or, in Fröbel’s thinking, spherical.

God and living in unification with God as the center of the law and Fröbel’s educational theory does not come as a surprise. Fröbel was a deeply religious person. From a purely formal point of view, he was a Protestant. However, like many others at his time, Fröbel wanted to find “true” Christianity, alternatives to the existing models, which he found in the law of the sphere.

Fröbel’s religiosity is usually described as panentheism.⁶ Panentheism goes beyond pantheism by claiming not only that everything is God but that God is greater than the universe, a universal spirit that is present everywhere and all the time but transcends all things created. Fröbel combined thoughts from his Christian upbringing with ideas of contemporary philosophy such as (Absolute) Idealism, Panentheism, Romanticism, and the Enlightenment. Additional influences were

Pestalozzi’s pedagogy, Arndt’s national education, a bit of Schiller, and (somewhat weaker) Fichte, Novalis, and Schelling’s natural philosophy and natural-philosophical speculation in a very individual reprocessing. The result was what Fröbel called the law of the sphere, even if he used different terminology throughout his life.

For Fröbel, everything is divine – nature, humanity, and human beings – but only humans have a higher task:

“As God, as the primal source and creator of all that is the oneself-self-conscious (*sich-selbst-Bewußte*), so is the human for us the crown and blossom, creation’s fruit in the divinity of their essence called not only to self-consciousness, but also that they⁷ in themselves become conscious of the creation” (Fröbel 1846b, p.1R).

Humans are the crown of God’s creation, and contrary to things and other living beings, humans are tasked to realize the divine in themselves. Yes, humans are part of everything that exists, but they are special. Thus, and because God is “an inner unity (*innig Einiges*),” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 1R) humans, as the ones who are called to consciousness, must “become conscious of the unity of their being, essence and living of the unity in themselves of each thing and of the unity in themselves of all things” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 1R/2). It is one of the weaker parts of the letter, and Fröbel got lost in his jargon of incomprehensibility.

⁶ “Panentheism” is a constructed word composed of the English equivalents of the Greek terms “pān” (pan) meaning all, “en” (en) meaning in, and “θεός” (theós) meaning God.

⁷ Fröbel used, as it was common in German at that time, the male pronoun when referring to all human beings or all children. However, I am using mostly using gender-neutral pronouns when translating specific quotes or referring to humans and children in general

Still, the few paragraphs summarize Fröbel's lifelong episteme well. Humanity is tasked to grow in the realization that God is and can be seen in everything. However, that is not enough; humans must live accordingly. Humans are the only living things that not only perceive their environment with their senses but can understand it. Hence, they can understand the connections among all that exist. Only humans can realize what blindly happens in the rest of nature. Humans do not only live in the sphere; it is their task to comprehend that they exist as a unity, just as all that exists (*Daseiende*) exists as a unity. Furthermore, humans are tasked to become conscious of this unity of all that exists. Any human being has the possibility to form their inner by reflecting on their spherical essence and acting spherically – to live in life unification.

One cannot emphasize it enough: The letter's first pages are remarkable for everyone interested in Fröbel's episteme. In only a few paragraphs, Fröbel expressed the essence of the foundation of all his educational thinking, and this time, it is mostly comprehensible.

The law of the sphere and its connection to education

The introductory comments on the law serve a purpose, though. As indicated by the title, Fröbel's reason for writing the letter was to give an "explanation of my educational principles." However, the explanation of the law was necessary for the later understanding of Fröbel's educational ideas – as mentioned, all is connected in Fröbel's thinking and based on the spherical law. In the letter, Fröbel now began with the transition to education by asking how humans can achieve it to live in life unification. While God is inner unity, Fröbel stated, it can only be recognized as the "opposite" (*Entgegengesetzte*). Thus, even "God's united

being" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2) appears as such an opposite, as the opposite to unity: "With the manifestation of the in itself united living, with the announcement, revelation of God in nature, world and creation at the same time the opposite [is, H.W.] necessarily given" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2).

And that is essential for education. Since "separation and opposition" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2) exist, mediation is needed. Through God's revelation in and through nature, world, universe, and creation, unity and separation are given, and at the same time, "through living, love and light" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2), mediation is also given. Education must consider this truth, so Fröbel's argument, and be designed accordingly, which is "the key for the holistic appropriate and sufficient education of the human" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2). Without an understanding of the law and how an according life can be lived, education can never be natural and follow the natural development of young children and human beings in general. Only an education that is built on the truth that Froebel was convinced to have found can be natural and thus a real humane education. The "world and living law" is the "key to the true knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) [...] thereby also the key to the well-rounded (*allseitig*) corresponding and sufficient education of the human being" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 2R).

Key terms and Fröbel's unique language: linktotal, premonition, and helplessness

In the following paragraphs, Fröbel continued to lay out his (educational) foundations. In doing that, Fröbel introduced key terms of his late work; another reason that makes this specific letter worth reading. One of

these terms is *Gliedganzes*, or “linktotal,”⁸ which is introduced in sections 13 and 14.

“What, though, is true of humanity as a total in itself and at the same time as a link of the great lifetotal (*Lebensganze*), that is equally true of the individual human being as a total in himself and as a link of humanity; the individual human being, precisely as a link of humanity, also grasps the whole essence, being and living of humanity and thus also the in themselves living creating and working divine being completely in themselves and can therefore also develop, express, manifest and reveal it again completely from within themselves” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 3)

What did Fröbel mean when speaking of the linktotal? Humans can only live spherically if they live a conscious life and understand themselves as a part and a unity of a larger whole – as a linktotal. Humans are a link of the total multiplicity of the entire humanity and simultaneously a link of everything that is, including nature and God. Thus, humans can comprehend the entire nature, being, and living of humanity, as well as the creating and working divine life that lives within humanity. When humans “work” - a term that in Fröbel’s thinking goes way beyond the idea of working for a living - humans recognize themselves; they feel in and through their work that they are a link of humanity and a divine being. That is already true for young children, whose “work” is play. Through play, children intuit that humans are a linktotal. Thus, children need to be recognized

and treated as such a linktotal (Wasmuth, 2020).

In connection with the term linktotal and to elaborate further on this children’s intuition, Fröbel introduced another key term, *Ahnung*. *Ahnung*, in my mind, is best translated as “premonition” and not as “intuition;” however, an English verb that expresses the German verb *ahnen* does not exist. *Ahnung* is a term that Fröbel frequently used in his later writings (Heiland, 2003).

“It appears as the first dark trace of the awakening of a premonition of the unity of all manifoldness outside themselves; just as, in contrast, a child also strives early on to express and manifest their in themselves united essence in the greatest possible manifoldness of its actions outside themselves” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 3R).

Interestingly, Fröbel spoke of darkness, a dark trace, even if something positive is connoted with the concept of premonition. It is possible that he used dark trace to contrast it with the above-mentioned idea of light connected with the idea of mediation. What did Fröbel mean when he spoke of premonition, though? While children are not able to cognitively understand that they are a linktotal or that the spherical law is in everything that exists, they already possess the possibility for such an insight. Fröbel used “premonition” to express this possibility with one word. Premonition means that every child can feel, not understand, the spherical law. It is a pre-knowledge about the world structure or, in

⁸ *Glied* is translated best as “link” and *Ganzes* as “total.” Thus, the reader-friendly translation of *Gliedganzes* would be “link of the total.” However, Fröbel probably had a reason for inventing the word *Gliedganzes* instead of using the German counterpart of “link of the total,” which would be *Glied eines Ganzen*, a term Fröbel used only seldomly. In Wasmuth, 2020, I translated *Gliedganzes* with “linkwhole”. Today, I believe linktotal is the better translation.

Fröbel's terminology, the law of the sphere. Without really knowing, children sense what is coming and what they later should seek to understand more fully. It is an early form of conceptual understanding and insight into the spherical law (Heiland, 1989); however, not necessarily one that is less worth than one that can take place within adults. Nevertheless, and this is important, children not only possess such a premonition but are eager to express themselves and want to create. That, though, needs to be nurtured and supported.

Children, Fröbel wrote in this letter, yearn for "a counter-image, so to speak a mirror for their, in manifoldness expressing, in themselves carrying life unity" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4). What they want and need is a symbolic means of perception of the manifoldness' unity that exists outside of them and within them. And in the early years, that is a child's body, especially their hands. Later, though, children need appropriate materials that allow them to verify their premonition and recognize regularities. Education needs to build on a child's premonition, but if education wants to elevate such premonition to a level of understanding, insight, and awareness, education needs to offer an already abstract representation of the law of the sphere. While Fröbel did not mention it here in the letter, it is clear what he refers to: the Whole of Gifts and Occupations.

It is an idea that is often forgotten or at least underemphasized when Froebel's kindergarten pedagogy is discussed, but in his letter to Leidesdorf, Fröbel is clear about it: Children depend on education; children are in a state of "helplessness" (*Hilflosigkeit*). Helplessness is another important term in

Fröbel's thinking at the end of the 1840s;⁹ one that might come as a surprise for many interested in Froebelian pedagogy. Fröbel, the advocate for the self-active child, saw children as helpless?

It is an interesting term indeed, not only to understand Fröbel's educational thinking but also regarding the difficulty of translating Fröbel's work, including my work. I have previously used the translation "need for help", which was based on the German word *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit*, which can be found in the above-mentioned Lange edition of Fröbel's letter to Leidesdorf, as well as in Heiland's reprint. However, the term is missing in the transcript on which this interpretation of the letter is based on. The explanation is simple: Lange added the word *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit*, which can be translated as "need for help." *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit* has a different meaning than *Hilflosigkeit*, though. *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit* has a much more positive connotation, it presents a child that is much more capable, a child that might need but also demands such a help in a certain way. While it may be innate, it does not portray a child as weak and incapable. *Hilflosigkeit*, on the other side, is clearly more negative. It portrays an image of a child that is incapable of acting independently and consciously; while similarly needing help, not necessarily a child being able to ask for such help. Thus, the addition of *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit*, especially as it is placed prominently at the beginning of the paragraph, changed Fröbel's writing and how one understands it. At least it did for me. The word *Hüfsbeduerftigkeit* might be what Fröbel had in mind, so at least my interpretation; however, it is not what he wrote in the letter's transcript.

⁹ The idea finds its reverberation today in one of the Froebelian principles promoted by the Fröbel Trust: "freedom with guidance."

However, what does Fröbel mean when he speaks of a child's helplessness? For him, "the helplessness in which the human child is born" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4R) is essential for various reasons. It is a necessary precondition if any educational activity shall "awaken the idea of the high essence, dignity and destiny of the human child and the ways and means to achieve them, and to bring them to realization" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4R). Furthermore, such helplessness allows children to see themselves "as a part of the great whole of life and the universe, first the earth, which carries it and through it the whole solar and world system." And finally, helplessness "appears as a sign of their self-determination, self-choice and freedom, of their independence to be attained in order to rise from and through themselves through caused self-power" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4R).

One cannot deny it: Fröbel did not envision helplessness in the sense that children are incompetent or cannot do anything for themselves. He does not even see it as a weakness but rather as a necessary openness. "The helplessness of the human child is therefore not a sign of the weakness of the human being (*Menschenwesen*), but of the still dormant human power, which, however, is to be awakened with self-respect and to self-dependent and self-activity and thus raised to clear insight and conscious use" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4R). In addition, children's helplessness enables children to realize and live morality, as well as to understand that the human being is "not called by physical and bodily strength, but by the power of his¹⁰ mind and disposition, by his thought, by the use of his reason (*Vernunft*) to reach the goal of his destiny" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 4R). And this goal, of course, is living in life

unification, meaning living in the consciousness of human's unification with nature, society, and most importantly: God. In a long and winding argumentation, Fröbel unveiled that a child's helplessness enables them not only to understand but intuit that human beings are created by God but also to follow and live according to God.

"Helplessness makes us ourselves find, feel and sensible of God's nearness; can there therefore be any greater proof of the divinity of the human being (*Menschenwesen*) than that which lies in the helplessness in which the human is born and in which he appears in the earliest period of his life?" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 5)

A child's helplessness is a prerequisite for first the premonition of the law, then its understanding, and finally, the conscious living according to the law: to live life unification.

"Thus, the helplessness in which the human is born and in which he himself remains for a long time after his birth remains actually the base, the sprout- and source-point of genuine human education, the education of a child of his destiny and his vocation, of God-likeness, of the realization (*Darlegung*) of his divine nature, towards God unification, in and through the all-round life apprehension (*Lebenserfassung*), life care, and life unification" (Fröbel, 1846a, p. 5R).

Children possess premonition, more of a feeling of the possibility of life unification. Nevertheless, this premonition must become

¹⁰ In this case, I have used the translation "his" as Fröbel wrote "seines Geistes," referring to a male. That was common German at Fröbel's time. However, he often used to "es" ("it"), when referring to a child, again common German. In these cases, I have translated it with "they," "themselves," etc. as discussed earlier.

consciousness, insight, and reflection – through education. A child cannot achieve this alone; with Fröbel’s words they are helpless. To develop and learn in a way as envisioned by Fröbel, children need support and stimulus from an adult in the form of appropriate, meaning humane education. Yes, children want to be self-active and express their inner selves, but they still need stimulation, suggestions, and support, or, as we would say today, education. Education as an external action corresponds to a child’s inner demand for support and nurture, or as Fröbel would say: helplessness.

Fröbel’s concept of play and the Whole of the Gifts and Occupations.

With section 23, the numeration and, in a certain sense, also Fröbel’s, until this point, more or less systematic approach comes to an end. Fröbel now changes the structure, first by discussing seven aspects that education needs to embrace, followed by again seven aspects that early education needs to consider. Due to the limited space of this article, I will not translate and analyze those passages. The statements partially repeat what Fröbel has explained before and are the more difficult-to-understand parts of the letter. To sum it up, Fröbel argued, based on his edifice of ideas, for the necessity of a natural and holistic education.

Such ideas also permeate the last four pages of the letter transcript (9-13R). Finally, Fröbel came to speak about what had been on his mind for the last few years and what had been the reason for writing the letter: play care¹¹ or, more precisely, the gifts. During the 1840s, Fröbel constantly modified his pedagogy of kindergarten and play, even if major elements were remarkably consistent. The numerous

essays and letters of this period, especially the ones to Nanette Pivany and Theresa Brunzvik, and the correspondence with his “Muhme” Schmidt give insights into Fröbel’s complex pedagogical thinking and its development. For Fröbel, kindergarten was not simply a place to look after young children, care for them, and teach them basic academics and morality. Instead, he saw it as a necessary piece of his concept of humane education with the goal of life unification. For Fröbel, kindergarten is a place to understand or, at least, sense the law and to live a corresponding life.

In the letter to Leidesdorf, Fröbel expressed such thoughts. Convinced to have outlined irrefutable truths, and based on those, Fröbel now explained what an education that follows children’s natural development needs: The gifts. The ball, the “child’s sweetheart (*Liebling*),” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 9) or more precisely, colored balls, is what young children need and want as they demand “the round, movable” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 9). However, with “increased strength,” a child needs and requires “the dormant (*Ruhende*), the standing” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 9) – the cylinder followed by blocks: Fröbel’s gifts 2 to 6. These materials give children what they need:

“We see thereby how a child finds Everything in One makes Everything out of One, how they create with so Little a rich world within and without themselves; this, though, makes now a child as later the adults rich with few satisfied.”

For rich and satisfied is the human, when he is in full possession, of what he necessarily needs according to the total

¹¹ Play care is a term that Fröbel preferred to use when referring to his concept of play in his later writings. See the works by Helmut Heiland, Sauerbrey & Winkler, 2018; Wasmuth, 2020

demand of his whole being, their whole nature necessarily requires and what he possesses according to the demand of his nature and his being using and applying” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 9/R).¹²

Such is a natural education, as it follows a child's natural development and gives a child what they need. Education must, thereby, follow these natural laws and a child's natural development. “A child is content, when they possess what they need as a human being, and can treat and use this possessing in accordance with the demands of their innermost being (*Wesen*)” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 9R/10). Only then can education succeed. However, what is the demand of a child's being? For Fröbel, there is only one answer: their play drive.

“Above all, a child must be allowed to be true to the innermost demand of their nature, their nature and life drive, which expresses itself early as play drive and in play drive, to be allowed to be active” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 10).

It is, of course, one of Fröbel's most famous statements. Like every human being, a young child wants to be active, inner the outer and outer the inner, and a child's activity drive is the play drive. Children want to be active; they want to “work” – and their work is to play. According to Fröbel, play is a young child's main activity. It is not a didactic tool to instill desired behavior or values; it is also not a motivational tool to help with child supervision, nor is it solely for recreational purposes. It is not a pastime, never just a frivolity or devoid of learning. Play is a child's learning, a child's work.

However, “a child must be given objects, be allowed, by which and through which they can create their inner life, in accordance with the conditions of the same, outside themselves” (Fröbel, 184b, 10). Children need the right means to play. Children need a learning environment and materials that consider everything that Fröbel has outlined in this letter so far: Linktotal, premonition, opposite and mediation, manifoldness, making the outer inner and the inner outer. Play materials must be representative of the spherical law. Hence, the “play drive of a child” must be allowed

“to get to know all these common qualities and relationships only through a few objects, to illustrate themselves only through a few objects; indeed, those objects - toys - through which and by which a child gets to know the outside world, which are actually a child's means of introduction into the outside world, must be quasi the all-revealing mirror of it, likewise also be those through which and by which they (*a child*, H.W.) reveals their own inner being according to strength and will, etc.; so that they - these objects - toys – manifoldly (*mehrfach*) mediate a child between their inner, their own life and design drive instinct (*Lebens- und Gestaltungstriebe*) and the essence of the life and design expression of the outside world and thus it becomes multiply (*vielfach*) to a child a mirror of their inner, and their inner a mirror of the outside world to the true understanding of both and a child thus comes to the experience and premonition of the unison (*Einklang*) and the higher unity of the two, whereby

¹² The sentence is not fully clear in German origin as well.

a child reaches that higher and inner peace, which becomes the same through the life drive corresponding activity and occupation” (Fröbel, 1846a, p. 10R).

In typical fashion – the complicated writing style, idiosyncratic diction, the duplication and triplication of words, and the never-ending nesting of the sentence – Fröbel sums up the importance of his gifts and occupations. While they are means of playing, they are much more than toys, even much more than materials to understand geometrical or mathematical concepts. It is an abstract representation of the law of the sphere; they are the means that a child’s premonition demands and will support a child in developing an early form of insight into and later internalizing what can be found in everything that exists: the law of the sphere. The Whole of Gifts and Occupations is not arbitrarily put together; they are a means to recognize reality and the self, and if guided correctly, playing with it enables a child to make the structure of reality, the sphere, more transparent. However, children, in their helplessness, as Fröbel called it, need education. Fröbel’s idea of play was never about totally free or random play; it has clear and strong didactic elements. Self-activity and play are crucial, but at the same time, a child needs stimulation and support from an adult who acts consciously. Playing, designing, and building with these play materials prepare a child for the later insight into reality’s structure. In this sense, the Whole of Gifts and Occupations, as well as kindergarten in general, serve the primary of all of Fröbel’s educational endeavors: To find unity within themselves, humankind, nature, and God - to support life unification.

Finally: The goal of kindergarten

Only at the very end of the letter does Fröbel use the term kindergarten. In Fröbel’s

logic, it all made sense, and he has prepared Leidesdorf for this final argument. Supporting life unification is the goal of natural and humane education, and thereby, it is also the goal of kindergarten.

“This now is the fruit of an early beginning child care and education that fully corresponds to human nature and human being; shows at least the way and the possibility, to initially achieve this goal, this fruit, to lead a child, the human being, step by step according to his nature to self-consciousness, to an action always corresponding to it thus in and through conscious fulfillment of all life duties to all-round life unification and God unification, thus leading in his inner being in his soul, to true bliss” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 12).

Only a humane education that leads to life unification is a natural education, and the appropriate place for such a humane education that follows the natural laws and leads to life unification is kindergarten.

“This all now demands an education of a child in which they are perceived in their essence, grasped in their double destiny, nurturing and following (*nachgehend*) treated according to their own as well as the general laws of development like the plant in the garden, an education, in which children resemble the tender plants and the educators the careful gardeners - therefore, educational relationships which hence cannot be described more comprehensively than with the expression, with the name kindergarten, as this has been in the most various ways expressed and proven by me” (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 13).

This final argument is consistent with other Fröbel's writings of this time (Sauerbrey & Winkler, 2018; Wasmuth, 2020). Kindergarten's goal is humane education with the goal of life unification. That is the higher reason why kindergarten exists. Kindergarten must achieve unification with nature, society, and God, or at least work towards achieving it. Kindergarten, as envisioned by Fröbel, is not about the early learning of academics, practicing specific skills and preaching moral lessons, not about preparation for school and doing well on tests, not about becoming school-and-career ready. Kindergarten, as well as any educational practice, so Fröbel in the letter's final words, must "educate the human race towards its goal, humanity towards its calling (*Berufe*) and its destiny" (Fröbel, 1846b, p. 13R).

As usual, Fröbel was convinced to have shared an absolute and indisputable truth. And so, at least in his letter to Max Leidesdorf, he had nothing to add.

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