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Educational thoughts of Friedrich William A. Froebel: A Theoretical study

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Introduction

Friedrich William A. Froebel (1782-1852) was a German pedagogue who laid the foundation for modern education based on the recognition that children have unique needs and capabilities. He is most famously known as "the father of kindergarten"; it was due to his contributions that the notion of early childhood education was born. As a keen observer of nature and humanity, Froebel approached education from both a biological and a spiritual perspective. According to him, "mind unfolds from within according to a predetermined pattern. The development and formation of the whole future life of each being is continued in the beginning of its existence. "He was in the view that all things are developing according to specific divine laws and so there should be no external interference in the process of development. He believed that all things of the universe have different entities, yet they all have originated from God. Thus, all objects, however different they look in appearance are essentially the same. This philosophical view of life influenced on his educational thoughts and practices. This article intends to analyze how Froebel's educational thoughts influence upon the theoretical and practical aspects of education.

Froebel's Background

Froebel was born on 21st April, 1782 at oberweissbach, a village in the Thuringia, in the mountainous forest of Germany. His father was, in the words of Wilds and Lottich, "an over worked Lutheran pastor in charge of an extensive parish consisting of six or seven villages (1961, 295). His mother died when he was nine months old. At an early age, he was introduced into difficult life situations as his busy father gave him little time. In fact, at the early age, he was left to care of servants. Later, when his father remarried, the situation grew worse as Froebel was now under the unsympathetic control of a harsh stepmother who invested all her energies in her own natural son." Quoting from Froebel's autobiography, Robert Ulich (1982, 523-24) writes that the loss of his mother was a hard blow that influenced his whole environment and the development of his being. Christopher Lucas (1972, 403) adds that his childhood was "an exceptionally unhappy one, filled with loneliness and frustrations... and poor school performance." Further Edgar Knight says, "as a boy in school, he was considered dull, without interest, and with little ability." (1940, 365) Froebel was also greatly influenced by educators of the time. From Jean Rousseau's works, Froebel was captivated by the concept of nature, goodness and naturity of the child; from Basedow, on natural methods of teaching; and his own tutor Pestalozzi, on the natural model of education and elementary school practice. He associated with Pestalozzi a lot. He was also attracted to the writings of John Comenius, especially the description of the school of mother's knee, which confirmed Froebel's belief that the earliest years of childhood were most important in the education of a child.

Luella Cole (1950, 507) ^[2], in describing a history of education, states that the violence of the French Revolution together with the aggressiveness of Napoleon set Europe into a strong reaction against liberalism. It was in this war of liberation that Froebel volunteered as a young soldier for military service. Though this service interrupted his studies, his years as a soldier proved to be of great educational value. The reason for this is twofold: one, Froebel met two men who later became his 'ardent disciples', second, his seclusiveness was broken

into, as he was forced to be constantly with people. Since he lived in the 19th century, he was greatly influenced by the philosophical idealism and romanticism of the day.

Aims of Education

Froebel's goal of education is stated in terms of a relationship to God. Education consists in "leading man, as a thinking, intelligent being, growing into self-consciousness, to a pure and unsullied, conscious and free representation of the inner law of divine unity, and in teaching him ways and means thereto." (The Education of Man, 1826, 2) [7]

According to Froebel education is to awaken spiritual nature of man, enable the child to realize the God and to identify himself with nature. Moreover, education is to enable the students to realize the fundamental unity of all living being with God.

School Curriculum

On the basis of his observation of nature and stages of human development, Froebel's curriculum incorporated principles of self-developed, activity and socialization, whose content was made up of all types of self-expression activities. The aim was to lead the child into a knowledge of self, human relations nature and the external world and to God as the divine source and cause of all existence. (Gutek 1995, 261-62) [3]

Play was at the core of the curriculum, as the most valuable form of self expression (Wild & Lottich 1961, 319) [5]. For Froebel; this stimulated motor expression, skill, and developed the Childs symbolic, constructive and aesthetic powers.

Subjects like modeling, drawing, sewing, painting, gardening, and nature study are taught along with formal subjects like religion and philosophy, natural sciences, mathematics and languages. All these subjects should possess internal unity and high degree of correlation.

Kindergarten

The school opened by Froebel in 1840 at Blankenburg to educate the children is known as Kindergarten means Garden of small kids. His educational thoughts applied through this school. In this very school he provided full and free opportunities to children for the expression of their self activities. Child was educated and guided on the principles of self experience, observation and socialization. Child expresses himself through activities and plays. Mother's play and nursery rhymes together with gifts, and occupation were used as means of educating the child.

Gift and Occupation

The gifts and occupations were a series of twenty devices and activities, essentially a hand on curricular system, intended to introduce children to the physical forms and relationship found in nature. These tangible objects and activities assumed that there was a mathematical and natural logic underlying all things in nature -one which Froebel ascribed to God's handiwork. The gifts literally functioned as tools with which to awaken and develop a child's recognition of the common, God given elements found in nature. Froebel was concerned with sharing the interrelationships between living and inanimate things. His gifts helped him do so by instilling in children an appreciation of natural forms and harmonies.

In fact, we still use many of Froebel's ideas and materials without acknowledging their source. We considered block play, for example, as a basic learning activity in early childhood education. It was Froebel who introduced the use of blocks on a wide scale into early childhood education (third, fourth, fifth and sixth gifts). Likewise, the use of parquetry and pattern recognition (seventh and thirteenth gifts) is one of his important contributions, as is the use of structural design toys similar to Tinker toys (nineteenth gift).

Teaching Methods

Froebel's teaching method was Kindergarten centered. Mainly three methods were employed there: a) use of gifts, b) singing of his songs and c) the games. Discussing them in order, the gifts-consisting of geometrical patterns-awaken the child's power to conceptualize and lead him or her to recognize ultimate truths.

Activities such as modeling, drawing, sewing, and coloring were occupations that enabled the child to act out his or her observations of adult life. They also filled and absorbed the child's mind giving him or her many sides' results due to their creative powers.

Mother play and nursery rhymes is a small book which contains 50songs. These songs establish affectionate bond between his sense organs and helps in the physical, mental and spiritual development of the child.

The games gave the child a sense of community as well as an opportunity to share in cooperative activities that contributed to his or her socialization and motor competencies. Games also built relationships and provided a group of ideas.

Discipline

Froebel's concept of discipline is the same as that of Pestalozzi. Self discipline is learned through self activities and outside interference. Compulsion and control are avoided. Social discipline is more important than individual discipline according to him, which is brought about through group activities and teamwork.

Evaluation

Froebel's educational thoughts can be evaluated in the following way:

Froebel's aims of education as the development of child's inborn capacities and powers, the unfolding of what is within the child, together with the rejection of depravity in children, are emphasized in the educational system of 21st century.

Froebel was against memorization. His concern was that education avoids memorization as found in the traditional education. Learning was to develop child's creativity and perception. What was learned at school was to be enjoyed. Froebel stands as a pioneer of modern educational theory, especially in his recognition that a child should not be pushed beyond his ability and readiness; and in his sensitivity to the Childs 'natural inclinations'. This idea resembles contemporary child growth and development theories.

The creative activities of child centeredness, self activities, and the place of a 'felt need' are principles that have had great impact over the centuries, developed and modified further by philosophers like John Dewey.

The use of symbol in present schools is an impact from Froebel. An emphasis of this is found in the construction of modern blocks, numbers and word games, drawing, singing, dancing and nature study.

The concept of 'social discipline' is much adaptable in the present days school system to avoid unwanted chaos and to make the pupils as a social being and responsible for their activities around school surrounding.

As a result of Froebel's work, educational theorists and reformers have come in great numbers. Educational principles have greatly improved.

Another great influence is the importance of the relation of the school to life outside it. This importance has been recognized none than before. The view of education as growth has gained a wider perspective, and self activity as a law of growth has gained a wider perspective, and self activity as a law of growth has come to be accepted in the century we live and before.

Conclusion

To conclude then, Froebel was a pioneer of several educational theories such as natural development, motor expression, self expression, self activity, creativeness and social participation. His educational thoughts greatly influenced not only the theoretical aspects of education but also on the practical aspects of education. His thinking and practices on education paved the way of child centered education after Rousseau and Montessori and gave strong base for pre-school education upon which thousands of pre-school institutions are running across the world considering the liberty and spontaneity of the child.

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