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Understanding of Froebel's doctrine in primary school teachers of rural Kashmir: A pilot study

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Abstract

This study is a pilot study conducted on rural schools of Kashmir in a specific area in order to evaluate the understanding of Froebel's theory by primary school teachers of rural Kashmir. The study is based on answering of preset questionnaire which was given to various primary school teachers in order to investigate their understanding of Froebel's theory and its implications in practice. Analysis of data shows professional priorities of teachers, their respect of student's ideas and their concern of student's safety.

Even though many teachers have an idea about Froebel's theory, but majority did not know their practice is based on this theory. This study argues about the need for training of primary school teachers in rural areas with a focus on Froebel's doctrine in order to generate trained teacher population who are well aware about the origin of their practice and can provide a rich learning experience.

Keywords: Froebel's theory, primary school teachers, rural Kashmir, student safety

Introduction

Froebel's principles are based on the concept that learning and development of children are best accomplished through play and creativity and should be child initiated and child directed^[1]. Each child should be understood as unique and their engagement in outdoor play, nature and to the rest of community form basis of Froebel's concept.

Friedrich William A. Froebel was born on 21st April, 1782 at Oberweissbach a village in the Thuringia in the mountainous forest of Germany. His mother died when he was nine months old and his father was an overworked Lutheran pastor^[2]. At an early age he was left to care of servants and later he was under unsympathetic control of harsh stepmother. At the age of ten years, he moved to his uncle's house in nearby city and went to school of boys. At age of 15-17 years, Froebel underwent apprenticeship with a forester, where he got chance to be in contact with nature and it broadened his knowledge. During this time, he spent enough time to study Bible. All these childhood events provided the foundation stone for Froebel's philosophy. Then he spent many years on studies which gave his philosophy a precise and practical shape. Due to financial constraints he could not complete university education and started to work as an actuary at faculty of forestry and as an accountant and surveyor. He then moved to Frankfurt and worked as a teacher. This was a breakthrough period for him and during this time he discovered the views of Johann H. Pestalozzi.

In 1811 Froebel continued his university education at Gottingen University where he developed philosophy of upbringing. The scientific theory of Froebel is based on relation between subjective perception and pedagogical activity. In 1817 Froebel opened a boy's school at Keilhan which incorporated his principles of elementary education. This school was a failure and he went to Switzerland in 1831. He returned back to Germany after 5 years. In 1837 he opened his first Kindergarten in the mountains of Blankenburg and devoted his rest of life in founding Kindergarten, the training of teachers and elaborating his principles and methods. His ideas were not fully accepted in Germany but received a good response in America. He died at age of seventy years in 1852.

Froebel wanted to liberate children from rote learning and to acknowledge and respect children's own ideas. All aspects of learning were linked through first hand experience and play by child who is primary focus. These sentiments which were described by Froebel made a distinctive change in the approach of education of young children.

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Froebel's concept was that self-directed play of children was an expression of their imagination, understanding and creativity. Extracurricular activities like dance, music, art nourish inner life of children and also provide means to express and transform their understanding. This was his basis of creating wooden blocks which was most known gifts of his principle. Each child was given a garden plot in kindergarten as their responsibility. Froebel respected young children and considered them as independently minded people and valued members of the community^[3].

Froebelian approach is based on the concept that understanding of young children should guide adults' interaction with them. Adults should be able to judge when and how to intervene to support children's learning^[4].

Research taken in primary schools of UK found that ongoing policy pressure to focus on targets and student performance was at odds with the teachers' own value and principles. The complex relation between theory and practice of Froebelian concept was obvious in the research from UK where early year teachers faced difficulty in articulating pedagogical values. Similar concerns about teachers' ability to theorize play exists in other parts of world making it obvious how widespread is this issue.

With this context in mind, I conducted this study to investigate understanding by primary school teachers in a rural area of play and their ability to theorize it. My study investigates the ways in which teachers are able to articulate a theory of play that identifies areas where the relationship between theory and practice could be strengthened.

My study was done on teachers of primary schools in rural Kashmir in a specified geographic area. It is a pilot study done on small population and results can be assumed as sample of rural schools but in no way can be considered as representative of whole educational system of Kashmir valley.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative methodology and written interview, which enabled me to gather data to examine participants' understanding and theoretical perspectives. I personally contacted primary school teachers in adjoining rural neighborhood. The area was planned as it was easily accessible. But it should be noted that limitation of study is that data is drawn from a particular geographical area. After personally visiting these schools, a preset printed questionnaire (fig. 1) which was devised by me from the study of Smedley and Hoskins^[5] was handed over to these teachers to fill them and the questioners were collected back after one week. All participants were assured that their identity will be kept confidential and will not be revealed under any circumstances. A total of 30 teachers volunteered to fill the questionnaire and have completed the response in a week's time. A verbal consent was taken from each participant that results of this research will be published. Care was taken to exclude identifying information in order to protect confidentiality and ensure anonymity.

The questionnaires were semi structured and were digitally transcribed. There was enough space so that participants will write their own experiences and quotes. The questions include demographic profile, qualification, training, and approach of practice. As questioners were semi structured, this provided the participants to elaborate on issues of importance to them or to introduce a different focus.

Results

Out of 30 participants who volunteered and completed the questionnaire, 20 were working in government schools and

10 were working in private setup. 20 teachers were females and 10 were males. 15 teachers were having master's degree and 15 teachers were having bachelor's degrees. All teachers were having two years B.Ed. educational training. All teachers were actively involved in primary education and were having minimum of three years teaching experience. After completion of formal education training, only 5 teachers out of 30 attended at least once a year courses designed for teacher training. No teacher has ever attended a seminar or conference aimed at teacher education.

This data showed the participants' implicit and explicit understanding and enactment of Froebel's theories in relation to learning through a play. Data was based on five key themes.

- 1. Commitment to play in general sense:** Analysis of data showed that there is a strong investment among teachers to the importance of play, and for one of female teacher it is so important that she wrote, that learning is all from play. Majority of participants mentioned that learning through play is associated with independence and enjoyment. Two of respondents mentioned play is centered on children. One respondent wrote wanted children to play and be children. One respondent wrote children should play together and outdoor play was considered positive experience.
- 2. Knowledge about Froebel:** Only 3 participants have a full knowledge about Froebel's theory. These participants were aware about relation of Froebel with nature. One participant was of opinion that presenting natural things to children have better impact of learning than artificial toys. Two participants made connection with Froebel's ideas in description. Other participants lack a theoretical knowledge and were unable to articulate their ideas. So, Froebel's ideas were made explicit by some, but majority of participants could not spontaneously articulate his concept. Perception of theory did not justify their practice.
- 3. Respect for child's ideas:** Majority of teachers were of the opinion that children should be allowed to impose their own ideas in play and nothing should be imposed from outside. One participant wrote that everything should come from children and they should take lead. One participant wrote that teachers should wait till children invite them in play. One participant mentioned that teacher should guide them but give them time to find themselves.
- 4. Risk and safety:** Majority of participants were of opinion that environment should be safe and promote independence. Five teachers commented that protecting children is a priority and it is essential to keep them safe from dangers. One participant has mentioned that children should be watched from safe distance in outdoor play in order not to hurt them.
- 5. Froebel's theory and practice:** The investigation results suggested a limited impact of theory compared to the ideas that shape teachers' professional principles, which becomes more complex by a separation between theory and practice. Majority of participants wrote that practice is more important than theory. Few participants consider theory and practice separate entities. An awareness of Froebel's ideas could have supported teachers in theorizing pedagogical principles. Their awareness of Froebel's ideas would have been associated with rich learning experiences.

Topic of study: Understanding of Froebel's doctrine in primary school teachers of rural Kashmir: A pilot study	
Primary investigator: Nahida Shafi	
Note: - kindly fill this questionnaire within one week. It will be collected by primary investigator personally	
Part 1	
Name of participant (optional).....	Age Sex- Male / Female
Work setup- government run /Private	
Qualification – Bachelor/ Masters B.Ed. done- Yes/No Years of teaching experience..... Number of Annual training courses attended.....	
Number of seminars aimed at teacher training attended per year..... Number of conferences aimed at teacher training attended per year.....	
Part 2 (participants' understanding of Froebel's theory) Kindly answer in your own words. You can use quotes and your own ideas.	
1. Explain learning from play	
2. Featuring of Froebel's theory	
3. Explain understanding of respect for children's own ideas	
4. Risk and safety for children	
5. Froebel's theory and practice application	

Fig 1: Questionnaire

Discussion

Bruce [6] and Tovey [7] argue Froebel's theories are not frequently articulated by practitioners even though their practice suggests that his ideas are widely accepted. Tovey mentioned that word kindergarten is widely known today, the name Froebel is less well known. The complex relation between theory and practice is noted by Moyles who described the difficulties English Practitioners face in articulating pedagogical values. Wood and Attfield justified playing in children learning.

In this study and study done by Brostorm, [8] it was mentioned that commitment of play if not theorized could be considered a romantic argument for play that will contribute to development of child.

It is very important to feature the theory of Froebel in one's life. Murray [9] mentioned how learning these principles changed her way of teaching and helped her to identify her values.

Tovey [4] describes the Froebelian approach as inherently respectful of children based on a connectedness that focuses on children's own experience and supported by adults who are deeply informed about distinctive self-learning of children. Our study also supports this observation.

Kleppe [10] studied young children in Norway and concluded that autonomous play might seem to justify no interaction, but on the other hand low interaction might suggest low quality experiences in children. Froebel wanted children to face challenges in the play and argued that by doing so they are safer, and they learn potential risks. In our study participants were very much concerned about children safety and it was their topmost priority.

Knowledge of Froebel theory and its implications in practice makes teachers more confident and competent. Urban mentioned that stream of knowledge increases pressure on practitioners if they are not implementing in practice. So, to be a confident practitioner a theoretical background is important to apply in real practice.

Conclusions

This study shows the subjective opinion of teachers which help them to maintain their commitment to provide experience of play for children. Children's autonomy was restricted by taking consideration of children safety to avoid any risk.

Very few teachers committed about Froebel's theory and practice, while as others describe the theory but were not knowing that it is Froebel who devised it. Some teachers were practicing the Froebel' doctrine but were not having idea of theory while as vice versa is also true.

From our study it is evident that a robust training is needed for teachers in order to conceptualize Froebel's ideas and implement in real practice. An in-service training sessions and regular refreshment courses will help to achieve this goal.

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