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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

# THE IMPACT OF FRIEDRICK FROEBEL ON EDUCATION THROUGH THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

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## Introduction

It is true that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represent a period of most radical changes in educational theory and practice. This was a period known as the “age of reason” or “enlightenment” because rationalism and humanism influenced intellectual life. A shift from traditionalism to the emergence of liberalism proposed many philosophical doctrines and educational practices that culminated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dupuis 1985, 114). Many questions raised during this period include: What is man? What is truth? What is good? What is education? What is the purpose of school? What should be taught? How should one teach? How should learners be evaluated? and How are freedom and discipline to be harmonized?

In answer to the above questions, many educators have come up with theories that have helped shape the development of education throughout the centuries. Elmer H. Wilds and K. V. Lottich (1961, 291) capture this atmosphere by stating that even in the late eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, while nationalists engaged in organizing educational agencies for the effect of attaining patriotic ideals, thinkers and teachers were concerned with reform of the educational process itself, with the hope of bringing it into accord with the laws of human development.

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This article examines Friedrich Froebel's theories, contributions and influence upon education. Froebel was a great German educational reformer whose philosophy of education is still alive today even in African countries with the introduction of formal education. The examination takes the form of an interview with an educator with the focus that much can be accomplished from harsh circumstances.

### **Friedrich Froebel's Background**

**Interviewer:** Mr. Educator, what has drawn you to do studies on Friedrich Froebel? Can you tell us about his background – family life, education and work?

**Educator:** As an educator, we always enjoy studying great philosophers with aims of finding out what their contributions to society were and the impact of their theories upon our systems of education. We believe there is a lot we can learn from the past in terms of content and methodology. We at times investigate, like in this case, how such studies have influenced a certain period of time. Froebel is known for his kindergarten (a German word for 'garden of children'), the inclusion of manual instruction in school curriculum, and his philosophy of education has emerged as 'an autonomous discipline,' an education that symbolizes the whole fabric of educational systems round the world.

Froebel's background is a study that has captured many educators' interest. He was born on 21<sup>st</sup> 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 overworked 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 that early age, he was left to the 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). The following statement made by Kenneth Gangel and W. Benson (1983, 211) very well captures this scenerio of emotional separation from parents of a child who needs love:

Friedrich was deprived of companionship . . . forced to depend on his own resources [and as a result] he grew melancholy, lonely, shy and introspective and became maladjusted at school, home and society.

The effect of these unpleasant home circumstances, and the deep introspection, made Froebel develop a tendency towards mysticism. He also became moody and subjective. His emotional needs turned him to a love of nature where he found his only companionship.

**Interviewer:** The father of kindergarten!

**Educator:** Oh Yes! Despite this, he studied divergent fields of thought. As a youth he was

apprenticed to a forester and acquired a thorough knowledge of plant life and a deep appreciation of nature. His scientific interests took him to the University of Jena, where he enrolled as a student for a brief period until he was forced to withdraw because of financial indebtedness . . . He drifted from occupation to occupation, working as a naturalist and then as a chemist before fixing his attention on educational study and practice. (Gerald Gutek 1995, 257)

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 nurturing 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 the mother’s knee, which confirmed Froebel’s belief that the earliest years of childhood were the most important in the education of a child.

However, Luella Cole (1950, 507), 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was greatly influenced by the philosophical idealism and romanticism of the day.

**Interviewer:** That is a very good description of Froebel's background. It helps us understand him better. From your research, what was it that made him be what he was? What was his philosophy of life, education and pedagogy?

**Educator:** Froebel's religious beliefs form the basis of his **educational philosophy**. For him, God is at the very core of the universe as well as the core of education. (Reed and Prevost 1993, 252) He asserts that

All existence originates with, and is united in God, the divine and universal presence. All beings comprise an external natural dimension and an internal spiritual dimension and are sustained by the divine energy . . . that is their essence. Since the purpose of existence is to reveal God, it is the person's destiny to become conscious of his/her divine interior essence and to reveal this dynamic inner force through its externalization. (Gutek 1995, 258)

Upon this premise, 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*, 1899, 2)

For Froebel, natural phenomena makes concrete what is in the mind of God. All existence including human nature is subject to the universal law of development that manifests itself in divine essence. Development occurs when this unfolds according to a prescribed, patterned sequence. Education is the exposure of the divine presence in the universe to the child. This is to

begin in childhood. An early education is important because children by nature are good

**Interviewer:** If development occurs in a prescribed pattern, what is the role of the teacher?

**Educator:** Using educational imagery developed from his background as a forester working with seeds, he saw plants develop perfectly from what is already within. Froebel says that the teacher's role is to care and nurture the child in a manner that the child's in-built goodness unfolds and blossoms in a realized potential (Reed & Prevost 1993, 253). As a cooperative agent, the teacher stimulates and encourages the process of unfolding by controlling the growth of the child by enabling him or her to discover internal dimensions through spontaneous and self-initiated activities. For Froebel, education – instruction and training – should be passive rather than prescriptive. While guarding and protecting, the teacher's major obligation is to provide space and time for the child to develop properly according to the laws of nature that are working within.

He sees failure in education as consisting of neglect and prevention of such development, thus distorting the original good human powers and tendencies. (Wilds & Lottich 1961, 302). But for such a growth to develop, the teacher "must study the laws of human development, construct an educational theory that specifies directions in line with the human development, apply these directions and direct education to the realization and actualization of the innate potentialities of the child." (Gangel and Benson 1983, )

He adopted this theory of 'natural goodness' from the writings of Jean Rousseau on the nature of child development. Basic to stages of development is "the doctrine of pre-formation which defines human development as the unfolding of potentialities that are preformed in the person." (Gutek 1995, 258) The unfolding of potentialities has its roots in naturalism where "the aim of education is to help the child learn and develop naturally, free from the corrupting influences of society." (Reed & Prevost 1993, 242)

He rightly states that play is not only the child's medium of learning but also his or her work. Without it there is no development. "A child that plays thoroughly, with self-active determination, perseveringly until physical fatigue forbids, will surely be a thorough, determined . . . [person] capable of self-sacrifice for the promotion of himself and others." (Froebel 1891, 54-55) We all know of cultures that require children to play so as to develop their body muscles. To Froebel, play brought fulfillment to the child's humanity, revealing peace, joy, harmony and contentment within the surrounding. (Gangel & Benson 1983, 214)

Froebel's play materials were two-fold: fixed and symmetrical objects, which he called gifts (e.g. balls, cubes and spheres) and malleable materials, which he rendered occupations (e.g. clay, sand and mud). By manipulating these gifts and occupations, the child would be creative and perceptive. Hence, through "creative self-expression of those inner capacities and abilities the child develops into a fulfilled adult." The implication of this creativity from within is that the teacher may guide, direct and even stimulate the child toward fulfilling certain goals and objectives in learning, but there is no complete instruction until the child is involved in the process of the learning – self-active behaviour.

**Interviewer:** What educational theories did Froebel develop out of this concept of the child and the teacher?

**Educator:** In many of his writings, for example, *The Education of Man*, *Pedagogic of the Kindergarten*, *Education by Development*, and *Mother Play and Nursery Songs*, appear his educational theories as follows:

1. Natural development
2. Motor expression
3. Self-expression
4. Self-activity
5. Creativeness and
6. Social participation.

All these are expressed in his *Pedagogic of the Kindergarten*.

Froebel was the first to perceive the significance of socialization as a basic principle in teaching. He exalted the interests and spontaneous

activities of the child. The child as the sole source of educational principles led, and became educated, by developing himself or herself through his own creative activities. Education for Froebel was a constant progressive adjustment of an individual to the world around him by which he discovers his true self. Two principles stand out: one, humankind is nurtured from within; and two, the purpose of instruction is to bring out not to put in.

In this concept of self-activity, an activity is “determined by one’s own interests, sustained by one’s own power and carried to conclusion in an atmosphere of freedom from interference by others.” (Cole 1950, 528)

**Interviewer:** What did Froebel’s school curriculum look like? What were the objectives of their content?

**Educator:** On the basis of his observation of nature and stages of human development, Froebel’s curriculum incorporated principles of self-development, 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)

Play was at the core of the curriculum, as the most valuable form of self-expression (Wilds & Lottich 1961, 319). For Froebel, this stimulated motor expression, skill, and developed the child’s symbolic, constructive and aesthetic powers.

Froebel’s kindergarten centred around three procedures: use of gifts, singing of his songs and the playing of various educational games. Discussing these in order, the gifts – consisting of geometrical patterns – awakened the child’s power to conceptualize and lead him or her to recognize ultimate truths.

Activities such as modeling, drawing, sewing and coloring (Cole 1950, 530-31) were occupations that enabled the child to act out his or her observations of adult life (Gutek 1995, 262). They also filled and absorbed the child’s mind giving him or her many sided results due to their creative powers (Jarret 1969, 545)



Songs and stories stimulated the child's imaginations and introduced him or her to their cultural literature.

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 (Gutek 1995, 262). Games also built relationships and provided a group of ideas (Jarret 1969, 545).

**Interviewer:** From what you have discussed, what contributions, influence and impact has Froebel had on education in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?

**Educator:** The idea of development, interests or activities of the child and the fact that the teacher is to provide an environment that is conducive to the child's 'unfolding,' point out clearly that Froebel was at heart a developmentalist and/or progressivist.

His aim of education as the development of the child's inborn capacities and powers, the unfolding of what is within the child, together with the rejection of depravity in children, are emphases found in progressivism.

Apparently, Froebel was against memorization. His concern was that education avoid memorization as found in traditional education. Learning was to develop the child's creativity and perception. What was learned at school was to be enjoyed (Reed & Prevost 1993, 253). Learning was not to be painful or boring but enjoyable and useful. Play aided learning. Like Locke, Froebel stands as a forerunner 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 child's 'natural inclinations.' This idea resembles contemporary child growth and development theories (Ulich 1975, 546).

His influence spread to schools in Europe through his travels as he gave lectures and demonstrations. And in America as early as 1855, through migrations and people who had connections with his schools. In the use of the materials, his influence extended into grades one and two of the elementary school.

The educative activities of child-centredness, 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 symbols in kindergarten or pre-schools is an impact from Froebel. An emphasis of this is found in the construction of wooden blocks, numbers and word games, drawing, singing, dancing and nature study.

As a result of Froebel's work, educational theorists and reformers have come in great numbers. Educational practices have greatly improved. For example, from Jean Rousseau's days, attitudes toward children and child-life has become more intelligent (Knight 1940, 369); knowledge of the nature and needs of children has increased; discipline by suppression has decreased, though to its disadvantage; and the personality of the child has come to be more fully respected.

Another great influence is the importance of the relation of the school to life outside it. This importance has been recognized more than before. The view of education as growth has gained a wider perspective, and self-activity as a law of growth has come to be accepted. The production of common schools, especially in America, is a result of these influences.

Froebel's technique and use of material objects was years later promoted by Maria Montessori in educational process as well as interest. In an expansion of Froebel's idea, her method employed the use of all sorts of experiences with blocks, cylinders and geometric patterns. These experiences assist in the cognitive development of the child as well as in his or her physical development (Ozmon & Craver 1981, 63).

**Interviewer:** The monument over Froebel's grave is, "Come let us live for our children." If you were to summarize his influence so as to capture his aim in the education of children, what would your summary include?

**Educator:** My summary would include five principles: self-activity, connectedness and unbroken continuity, creativeness, physical activity, and happy and harmonious surroundings. The influence has come about through the study of Froebel's principles, the description of his kindergarten,

interest in the formation of such schools, and because of their nature the kindergarten as an integral part of school systems.

**Interviewer:** From the works of Froebel, what is his greatest contribution to Christian education?

**Educator:** Froebel's theories contain positive as well as 'Christian' contributions. The greatest of this is the encouragement children should receive so as to give expression to their religious observations and feelings. But I would caution parents and teachers alike to beware of elevating goodness in humanity, be it a child, a youth, or an adult. For the Bible rightly says that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). While there is good in the distorted human nature, even after the fall, which needs to be cultivated, Froebel did well to focus his education on the whole person and not just on intellectual concerns. Religious sensitivity should be upheld and provided with good Christian teaching.

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