

EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL IN THE PEDAGOGY OF FRIEDRICH FROEBEL

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ABSTRACT

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), has been an enormous influence in primary education. As the inventor of the *kindergarten*, his emphasis on *child-centredness* and *play* were central to the progressive movement throughout the world, and much has been written about his educational thought and practice.

The concepts of *unity* and *wholeness* are highly visible in Froebel's theoretical writings, such as *The Education of Man* (1817). Religion is addressed in both his own work and that of his followers, and his Lutheran heritage is often mentioned. However, little attention has been paid to spirituality *per se* in Froebel's thought, and he is rarely mentioned in the literature of spiritual education.

This paper is an initial exploration of the place of the *spiritual* in Froebel's scheme and in some of what has been written about him. After a brief resume of his life and influence, the paper notes his use of concepts of the spirit and spirituality, and considers the relationship between his faith and the Christian religion. It discusses the principles which Froebel enunciated: the law of Divine Unity or wholeness; the laws of opposites and the connection of opposites; the principle of self-activity; and the process of 'unfoldment' of the inner life of the child through engagement with the world. The translation of these principles into practice in his teaching methods and resources, specifically in the *Gifts* and *The Mother-Song Book* of 1844, are then exemplified and considered.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of Froebel's thought for such concepts as the *spirit of the child* and the *spirit of the school*, and of what might constitute a *spiritual education*. The picture that emerges is of a child-centred and progressive education which honours the integrity of childhood. It is argued that such an education, fully embraced, is a spiritual education.

Key Words: Friedrich Froebel; child-centred education; unity; spirituality; spiritual education.

Introduction

Like much research, the work reported in this paper began with a puzzle.

On the panelled walls of the 'Portrait Room' at Froebel College, hang the portraits of the great and the good: Madame Schwabe, the founder of the Froebel Educational Institute, Madame Michaelis, its first Principal, Claude Montefiore, a life-long supporter of the Institute whose munificence more than once staved off financial crisis, and several past Principals from later years including Eglantyne Mary Jebb, whose family had founded the Save the Children Fund. To teach in that room was to experience mixed emotions: on the one hand, it was exhilarating to feel *part* of that history, and I felt proud to be working in that tradition of teacher-training; on the other, it was daunting to be operating under their gaze, and especially that of Emilie Michaelis, whose portrait faced the lectern from the opposite wall. Was she following my every word? Dare I depart from the child-centredness of the Froebelian 'script'? What if I got it wrong?

At times, the Froebelian tradition was like a collective conscience which pervaded the College, placing in people's minds the question: Is this in-keeping with the values and beliefs of the Froebelian community? At others, it did not seem fanciful to speak of the spirit of Froebel (at least metaphorically) being 'alive and well' and moving through the college and through our work.

When, in 1993, we instituted a series of annual conferences under the title: *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child*, the keynote lectures were held in the Portrait Room with paper-presentations in adjacent rooms. One might have expected references to Froebel to abound in such a context, but although lip-service was occasionally paid and there were presentations which were informed by Froebelian thinking - often from teachers and lecturers in Early Years education - it is my impression that participants were more often concerned with the development of young children and the 'nuts and bolts' of how best to teach them, than with spirituality. With the exception of one paper (the very first keynote lecture from the philosopher Terence McLaughlin), the indexes of the two volumes of conference papers which were subsequently published (Best, 1996; Best, 2000) show no references to Froebel at all.

So here's the puzzle: Why, in the context of a College founded by followers of Froebel and still bearing his name, with many presenters from the College itself, was there, over ten years of conferences, so little reference to the man himself? Why was he not central to the discussion? Perhaps the answer lies in the conference title: *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child*. Since nothing could be more natural than to think of Froebel in regard to 'education' and 'the whole child', was it the 'spirituality' that 'shut him out'? From this other questions arose: What place had the concepts of the 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' in Froebel's thinking? Did he have a concept of the 'spirit of the child', and if so, what was it? Was Froebel's concept of spirituality necessarily 'tethered' to religion? What might an examination of Froebel's life and work offer to our understanding of 'spirituality in education'?

Froebel and his work

Froebel (1782-1852) is remembered chiefly as the 'inventor' of the *kindergarten* ('children's garden') and thus as a founding figure in the organized, institutional provision of education in the early years. His philosophy of education, theory of the growth and development of the young child, and

prescriptions for pedagogy, were promoted both during his life and later, by individuals and groups who fell under his influence. From their efforts, Froebelianism spread internationally, influencing the development of early years and elementary/primary education in many countries, not only in Europe but in Australia, USA, New Zealand and elsewhere. Although now rather out of fashion in the regressive political regime of neo-liberalism with its emphases in education on competition, more formal teaching of 'the basics', rigidly-defined outcomes and oppressive testing and assessment regimes, Froebel's influence in the child-centredness of English primary schooling in the 1970s and '80s was considerable, not least through the contribution of prominent Froebelians, notably Molly Brearley, who served on the Plowden Committeeⁱ (Liebschner, 1991, p. 153).

A good deal is known about Froebel's life. As well as memoirs by those who knew, lived or worked closely with him in later lifeⁱⁱ, details of his earlier life are contained in his long, unfinished, autobiographical letter of 1827 to the Duke of Meiningen (whose support for Froebel's educational project he sought), and a shorter version written a few months later to the philosopher Krause (Froebel, 2005)ⁱⁱⁱ. In these and other sources (e.g. Liebschner, 1992) can be found more and less lengthy accounts of Froebel's childhood as the son of a Lutheran village pastor in the Thuringian Forest in what is now central Germany. We read of a religious upbringing characterised by the literal interpretation of the Bible (Liebschner, 1992, p. 1), the death of his mother just nine months after his birth (an event which Froebel considered to have 'decided more or less the external circumstances of my whole life' (Froebel, 2005, p.8)), his unhappy relationship with his stepmother, the strained relationship with his father, his inner struggles and outer rebelliousness (of which, Froebel says: 'In short, I was set down as wicked' (Froebel, 2005, p. 13)), the love he found from and for the maternal uncle (also a pastor) who took him under his wing, and who, with an elder brother who appears from time to time in the narrative, provided the sense of acceptance and value which his home-life failed to deliver.

The narrative from the end of his schooling presents a picture of a disjointed life, as Froebel was (amongst other things) variously: apprenticed to a forester; an autodidact studying botany and mathematics who went on to study a wide range of subjects at the University of Jena (including mathematics, architecture, natural history and mineralogy); a teacher in a school in Frankfurt, a private tutor to two boys whom he took with him on his second visit to Pestalozzi's school in Switzerland; an architect; and a clerk and land surveyor in local administration. A return to university (this time in Göttingen, where he studied language and linguistics, but later returning to the sciences and natural history), a spell in the army in 1813 (where he entered a lifetime friendship with Langenthal and Middendorff, who later joined him in his mission), and a return to university study (this time of crystallography in Berlin where he was offered an academic post) were further twists in a life in which Froebel struggled between the practicalities of daily life and a burning inner desire to understand all that comprises life, Nature and the world.

Throughout his letter to the Duke of Meiningen, we can see Froebel's search for knowledge and understanding, together with his own educational experiences as student, teacher and tutor morphing into the dream of an educational community which would embody his philosophy, and a vision of such an education becoming the accepted, universal form of schooling throughout the land. The first step in realising this dream was the establishment of a community of family and close friends at Keilhau, and later the first kindergarten in Bad Blankenburg. The changing fortunes of these ventures, with precarious domestic, political, philosophical and financial challenges and tensions, meant that they were rarely secure, but this did not stop the success of those involved and the supporters they attracted in laying the ground for the spread of an enlightened approach to

education which, as noted above, became international and enduring.

Froebel and the Spiritual

My early trawl through the literature for references to Froebel and spirituality suggested that this was, indeed, a neglected field. I could find no references to Froebel in the various books dealing with, or cognate with, spirituality and education which I have acquired over the years^{iv}. Nor did searching the web for combinations of 'spirit', 'spirituality', 'spiritual development' and 'Friedrich Froebel' yield much, with only one scholarly article which seemed pertinent^v. Academic scholarship of this specific aspect of Froebel's work seems singularly lacking.

Wondering whether and how spirituality figured in the work of the Froebel movement, I looked at the first ten volumes (1891-1900) of the Froebel Society's journal *Child Life*. I found few articles or resources which explicitly mention the spiritual and those that do lack depth. That said, there are quotations from Froebel which have religious content, references to the Christian religion, and suggestions for 'seasonal' activities which relate to the Church calendar^{vi}. However, the *Christian* character of such activities is not unambiguous.^{vii}

Froebel himself used the words 'spirit' and 'spiritual' - or, more accurately, their German equivalents - frequently. In translation, his usage seems unexceptional, corresponding closely with the English equivalents^{viii}. For example, in his major pedagogical work, *The Education of Man* (Froebel, 1887), he writes that 'Education, in instruction should lead man to see and know the divine [*das Göttliche*], spiritual [*das Geistige*], and eternal principle which animates surrounding nature...' (p.5); he describes the spirited [*der muthige/mutige*, meaning courageous or adventurous] free boy' sparing the flower as the 'spirited horse spares the child that lies in the path of his dashing career' (p.113); he writes of 'religious spirit' in the sense of religiousness [*Religiosität*], and of 'The genuine schoolboy [who] should never be dispirited [*kopfhängend_und lebensträge*], meaning life-weary disheartened, 'hanging one's head'] and indolent, but full of life and spirit, strong in body and mind' as is the case with the 'truly high-spirited [*geistes- _und lebensfrisch*] boy who follows his natural vivacity full of joy and never thinks of any injurious effects on outer life' (p.133); and in the section on 'Religion and Religious Instruction' he writes of 'All things that the living spirit [*der Geist _und das Leben*, the spirit of life] creates, produces and represents....' (p.153).

Positioning Froebel theologically is not easy. That Froebel's concept of the spirit is founded in his religion, and specifically a part of his Christian faith, are frequently asserted and/or taken-for-granted. For example, Provenzo (2009, p.85) writes that 'Froebel was profoundly shaped by his religious beliefs and his experiences as a child'; given his upbringing by two Lutheran pastors, albeit contrasting strongly in their interpretations of the Bible as lived out in their actions, it would be strange if this were not so. In the Preface to the American edition of Froebel's letter to the Duke of Meinengen, C. W. Bardeen contrasts the religious scepticism of Pestalozzi with the religious convictions of Froebel who 'was deeply pious, and made it fundamental that education should be founded plainly and avowedly upon religion' (Froebel, 2005, P.3). In Chapter 1 of *The Education of Man*, entitled 'Groundwork for the Whole', the translator says of Froebel's principle of 'the unification of life': 'With reference to God, it means perfect faith as Froebel finds it realized in Christianity' (Froebel, 1887, p.3).

And it is true that references to Jesus and Christianity are prominent in certain passages of Froebel's

writings. In Chapter 5 of *The Education of Man*, Religion and Religious Instruction is the first of four 'Chief Groups of Subjects of Instruction'^{ix}. Here he says:

If man consciously and clearly recognizes that his spiritual self proceeds from God, that it is born in God and from God, that it is originally one with God, and consequently that he is in a state of continuous dependence on God, as well as in a state of continuous and uninterrupted community with God; if he finds his salvation, his peace, his joy, his destiny, his life....and the source of his being in this eternally necessary dependence of his self on God, in the clearness of this knowledge, in living and constant obedience to this knowledge in all he does, in life, indeed fully unified with this knowledge and conviction - he truly, and in the full sense of the words, recognizes in God his Father. *If he acknowledges himself to be a child of God, and he lives in accordance with this, he has the Christian religion, the religion of Jesus.* (Froebel, 1887, p.144, italics in original).

However, Froebel's version of Christianity was clearly at odds with the orthodoxy of the time, and brought him into conflict with the church on more than one occasion (Barop in Froebel, 2005, pp. 62-63; Liebschner, 1992, p.11).

Although references to God greatly exceed references to Jesus, there are passages where Froebel's Christianity is *prima facie* beyond doubt. But on closer inspection, his concept of Jesus is not necessarily that to which many Christians subscribe. In particular, I don't find in Froebel's writing much (if any) reference to *sin* or *redemption*, and certainly not to Christ as the Redeemer^x. As Jebb (1953, p.11) put it: 'He threw hell overboard as he threw original sin, but he kept heaven. A Christian spirit but not Christian dogma marks his religious attitude'. Rather than a redeemer of sinners, Jesus is seen as epitomising the perfect, fully lived life, the example which, internalized, provides the ideal of one's self to which the fully human life can but aspire:

Jesus himself...in his life and in his teachings, constantly opposed the imitation of external perfection. Only spiritual, striving, living perfection is to be held fast as an ideal; its external manifestation - on the other hand - its form should not be limited. *The highest and most perfect life which we, as Christians, behold in Jesus - the highest known to mankind - is a life which found the primordial and ultimate reason of its existence clearly and distinctly in its own being; a life which, in accordance with the eternal law, came from the eternally creating All-Life, self-acting and self-poised* (Froebel, 1887, pp.12-13, my italics).

The reference to an 'eternally creating All-Life' is significant. According to von Marenholtz-Bülow (1891, p.29), this particular 'take' on religion led to accusations of pantheism, although by her account Froebel fiercely rejected such a suggestion (pp.29-30)^{xi}. But as his denial makes no mention of *Christ*, some doubt about the place of Jesus (as opposed to his faith in God) in Froebel's belief system may be justified. This may be at the bottom of the decision of his long-standing friend and colleague, Langenthal (who is described as a 'brilliant theology student' at the time of their first meeting) to break from Froebel when he 'was unable any longer to accept Froebel's humanistic Christianity' (Liebschner, 1992, p.23).

Provenzo (2009, p.87) says that '[f]or the modern educator and reader, Froebel's ideas are highly abstract, metaphysical, deeply religious, and spiritual'. Froebel's God - this 'eternally creating All-Life' with its 'eternal law' - is a complex and challenging concept which needs to be considered in the context of what Froebel had to say about nature, and about the great, general 'laws' which he

concluded were at the heart of all that exists. To understand the development of the individual (and, specifically, the individual child), it is necessary to accept the idea of some kind of pattern or template according to which our being unfolds, and which seems to presume a great plan or divine design.

Froebel certainly seems to have felt his fate to have been pre-destined and (we may infer) a part of that design. Thus, in the *Letter to the Duke of Meiningen* (Froebel, 2005, my italics), he says of the stages in his life: 'I thankfully acknowledge how my ever-tending loving *destiny* took pains kindly to prepare me for each vocation next to come' (p.25); how, on occasions, '*Providence* willed it otherwise' (p.26); and later, how '*fate* itself, though in a manner so deeply affecting, provided me with the means for working out my next plan' (p.27); and later, how 'my kindly *fate* came lovingly to my help' (p.35).

Sometimes this God seems to be equated with Nature; at other times, it is through Nature that God is revealed to the world. Whether God is another name for Nature or vice versa matters little, since in Froebel's view there is a unity to all things.

Divine Unity and Eternal Law

The Education of Man begins thus:

In all things there lives and reigns an eternal law. To him whose mind, through disposition and faith, is filled, penetrated, and quickened with the necessity that this can not possibly be otherwise, as well as to him whose clear, calm, mental vision beholds the inner in the outer, and sees the outer proceeding with logical necessity from the essence of the inner, this law has been and is enounced with equal clearness and distinctness in nature (the external), in the spirit (the internal), and in life which unites the two. This all-controlling law is necessarily based on an all-pervading, energetic, living, self-conscious, and hence eternal Unity..... This Unity is God.....

It is the destiny and life-work of all things to unfold their essence, hence their divine being, and, therefore, the Divine Unity itself - to reveal God in their external and transient being. (Froebel, 1887, pp.1-2).

The first principle in Froebel's thinking is, therefore, that of the Unity of all things, and that this Unity is, for him, what God is all about. Froebel came to see his mission in life as to seek this unity in all that is diverse in the world, and through education to promote the realisation of the inner unity of the person, and his realisation of the unity between the inner and the outer aspects of his existence. Liebschner (1992, p.8) calls this the 'spherical law' or 'spherical view of all aspects of nature and of human life':

a law which demands that objects and events be experienced, viewed and recognized intrinsically, leading to the realization that every phenomena (sic) in its essence is unique and yet part of the whole, all emanating from one source and returning to this source; a conviction that the essence, the substance, the reality of things has to be grasped from within.

Liebschner concludes: 'Froebel's spherical law recognized the uniqueness of each individual but only in as much as it contributes to the law of nature, which is *unity*' (Liebschner, 1992, p.9, my

italics).

The second great principle in Froebel's philosophical system is the Law of Contrasts (or of Opposites), and its corollary, the 'law of connection of contrasts', at work in understanding and the acquisition of knowledge:

Every thing and every being, however, comes to be known only as it is connected with the opposite of its kind, and as its unity, its agreement with its opposite, its equation with reference to this is discovered; and the completeness of this knowledge depends upon the completeness of this connection with the respective opposite, and upon the complete discovery of the connecting thought or link. (Froebel, 1887, p.42)^{xii}

Thus, Froebel subscribes to the principle of the *dialectic* which, following Hegelian thought, had much currency in Germany at that time (Froebel, 1887, P.73, end-note 101), although it is doubtful that Froebel knew Hegel's work at first-hand^{xiii}. In any event, Froebel believed the child to have a natural predisposition to see 'the truth', and thus to make the connections between the contrasts necessary for understanding. A failure to bring the 'whole' with its contained opposites before the child would only 'perplex' the 'healthy mind' (von Marenholtz-Bülow, 1891, pp. 151-152).

Such understanding is achieved by the individual's own experience of the world, and by self-analysis, reflection and the contemplation of sensory experience (Froebel, 2005, p. 11). It is only by what von Marenholtz-Bülow (1891, p.135) terms 'self-activity', the individual's self-directed engagement with the world, and reflection thereon, that understanding is achieved. Throughout the *Letter* and elsewhere, Froebel writes repeatedly of the way his experience of nature, from walking through the forests as a child to his study of crystals in his academic life, has been the raw materials for his understanding of both nature and humankind (e.g. Froebel, 2005, p.17). Since the Divine Law or Unity is to be found in all things, the development of Man according to the Law can be comprehended best by observing the revelation of the law in Nature. That 'learning succeeds best when undertaken by a searching and self-active mind' (Liebschner, 1992, p.16) which engages the world of nature and the senses, is the third great principle in Froebel's thought, and one which underpins his design of teaching materials, the organization of his kindergarten, and the importance of *play* in learning.

It is through the provision of appropriate experiential opportunities that the innate potential of a human being to develop according to the template that, as in all Nature, dwells within, is realised. By these means is achieved the synthesis of the essence of humanity and the uniqueness of the individual, a process which has been labelled *unfoldment* (Brehony, 1997, pp.10-11).

From Philosophy to Practice

These 'laws' or principles - the 'spherical' law of the unity of all things; the laws of opposites or contrasts and the connection of opposites (the dialectic); the principle of self-activity; and the process of 'unfoldment' - comprised a single, coherent system of thought about life, the world, and specifically education, which required translation into practice^{xiv}. Froebel's attempts to do this are to be found in every niche of his pedagogy and the resources he developed. Special mention may be made of both the 'Gifts and Occupations' and *The Mother Song Book (Mutter -und Koselieder Buch)* first published in 1844 (Froebel, 1895), but it is proper to note first that the principle of the (Divine)

Unity permeated all the activities of Froebel's school and kindergarten. This is particularly so in regard to the part played by the child's experience of Nature.

For Froebel, long and regular walks through the forests, fields and farmlands surrounding the school, recreating those of his own childhood in Thuringia which were of such importance to him, became a natural (and essential) feature of the educational regime (Liebschner, 1992, p.39)^{xv}. Here the children would find revealed the true nature of all things, and the basis for an understanding of themselves and their unfolding place in the world. Here, their sensory experiences would lead to a wonderment and an aesthetic response to the beauty and design (for all embodied mathematical order), and through reflection and meditation, a synthesis of the contrasts and opposites (the Seasons, life and death, night and day), and a sense of the enormity of Creation (the starry skies and so on). Equally important were the opportunities for the child for self-activity in working *upon* nature, through craft works, and work in the gardens^{xvi}. Of the latter, Liebschner (1992, p.39) observes, 'the garden of the Kindergarten was not only a symbol [the *visible* spirit], it was an essential means for the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of the child'. In other words: *the education of the whole child*.

The laws or principles of Froebel's system were explicitly and systematically 'built in' to the sets of progressively more complex learning experiences provided by the Gifts and Occupations. The Gifts (not in the sense of presents but objects which would facilitate the development of the child's gifts or talents), comprised 'an ordered sequence of educational toys' which 'sensitively but systematically directed the child's thought and imagination into interaction with the physical world'(Weston, 1998, p.18)^{xvii}. More or less lengthy descriptions of the Gifts (and the Games and Occupations) are to be found in numerous places (e.g. Weston, 1998, pp. 18-19; Liebschner, 1992, chapter 5; Provenzo, 2005), and no attempt is made here to describe them in detail. However, we may note that the first gift of a soft ball (or balls) on a string, being spherical, personified unity or wholeness (cf the 'spherical law') and could be used to demonstrate opposites (as in swinging to and fro). The second gift of a *hard* wooden ball and a wooden cube (no curvature, all angles and corners) provided opposite qualities, while between the sphere and the cube was a cylinder which, containing both flat and curved surfaces, comprised a synthesis of opposites (the dialectic). Subsequent gifts were sets of square and oblong blocks, each set bearing a specific mathematical relationship to its predecessors which, through division and combination may re-assert diversity, opposites, synthesis and unity or wholeness. The 'occupations' included creative or handicraft work using 'scissors and paper, sticks and thread of wool, clay and wax, peas and shells, sand and stones' (Liebschner, 1992, p.99).^{xviii}

The uses to be made of the various sets of blocks were to be such as to assert and represent the holistic relationships which exists between all facets of our experience. Thus, the child was to be encouraged to construct patterns and shapes from which s/he would acquire knowledge of mathematics or logic (such as in the exercises of conservation and reversibility of operations associated with Piaget a century later - cf Provenzo, 2009, p.93), represent the shape, substance and function of things encountered in daily life, and be artistic with aesthetic quality. Froebel termed these respectively, the Forms of Knowledge, Life and Beauty (Liebschner, 1992, p.80).

In *The Mother-Song Book*, Froebel (1895) sought to provide mothers with guidance, both moral (as regards the great responsibility given to women in the raising of children), and practical (in the form of songs and games to be shared with the child). These are in the tradition of (and sometimes equate with) the nursery-rhymes and games which were common at the time and of which some, such as

'Bo-peep' (p. 100), endure. Each game typically includes an intricate picture or set of pictures which tell a story, a poem or song which explains what is in the picture, and hand movements to accompany the shapes or actions illustrated. The mother and child together look at the illustration, sing the song or recite the poem, and contemplate the moral of the story^{xix}. Some illustrate the work of villagers (e.g. the charcoal-burner, the carpenter), some everyday objects (the flower basket, the pigeon-house), some present myths and fairy stories, some relate directly to the child's routine and experience of the mother and the nursery, while yet others focus on the senses.

In combining song/music, learning, movement and morality, in the context of the depiction of the (real-world) experiences of the characters in the picture, we see an extension of the Forms of Knowledge, Life and Beauty present in block-play, but also unification of various aspects of the child's being - intellectual, moral, physical, creative. In the very lengthy (86 pages) explanation of the 46 pictures, Froebel points out in great detail the many symbolic features which assert or embody the laws of Unity and Opposites/Contrasts, the principles of unfolding and synthesis. For example, of the illustration of the title page he says:

...The Girl, who is just blooming into Womanhood, rests safely on her own harmoniously-developed disposition, just as she stands safely on the Ball, which is at rest in itself on all sides. The Boy, who has just grown into a young Man, rests firmly in his thoughtful mind that is striving to be clear about everything, just as he rests upon the Cube which reveals simple laws so clearly. (Froebel, 1985, p.118)

The opposites are clear - male and female; the sphere and the cube - as is the unfolding of the child into youth and the complementary union of man and woman that the future offers.

While we may today find Froebel's explanations unacceptably sexist and patronising, he *was* advocating and celebrating what he saw to be the calling of women to what for Froebel was a duty of unparalleled importance - the care and nurture of children - which was to give them a unique place in his educational system. Thus in von Marenholtz-Bülow's (1891, p.179) account, he says: 'As educators of mankind, the women of the present time have the highest duty to perform, while hitherto they have been scarcely more than the *beloved* mothers of human beings'^{xxx} (italics in original). That duty was to *teach*.

Spiritual Education in the Spirit of Froebel

We have seen how Froebel's quest for an all-embracing and coherent account of the world, and of the nature of humankind, led him to the concept of the (Divine) Unity of all things - God - and to the enunciation of some fundamental laws or principles (of opposites/contrasts, the connection of opposites, the principle of self-action and the idea of unfoldment), by which that unity may be grasped and realised in the life of the individual. Implicit in this philosophical system, and made explicit by Froebel and his disciples, is the Romantic model of the child as having the potential for perfection, given the right circumstances and a supportive environment. There is no place for original sin - and not much for sin of any kind - in Froebel's concept of childhood, only for the effects of the failure of adults to provide the right sort of environment.

Throughout his life, Froebel strived to create just such environments in schools and kindergartens. He did this by establishing his own institutions, and lobbying influential members of the community

(such as the Duke Of Meiningen) and municipal authorities from whom resources might be forthcoming or who were in a position to finance their own schools along Froebelian lines. He designed a curriculum, developed learning resources, wrote books and papers and spoke at gatherings of teachers and educators. In all that he did, we see his belief in *the integrity of Childhood*, not as a preparation for adulthood, but in and of itself, unfolding according to its inner spirit, just as we can see the unfolding of the Divine Unity in Nature.

According to Froebel, the child has an innate inclination to seek the truth, and knows what it is that it needs in order for its potential to unfold. The imposition of strict and formal styles of instruction in subjects artificially separated from each other, and taught in isolation from the real world, is counterproductive^{xxi}. Unless the child is free to experience through its own sensory and motor engagement with the physical world, in the order and the way appropriate for his stage of development, the child may 'learn' much but understand little. And for the young child, *play* is medium of this engagement:

'Play is the highest phase of child-development [it] is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole - of the inner natural life in man and all things' (Froebel, 1887, p.55).

In play we see the imagination, the creative impulse, the capacity to create and work with the symbolic, to roam beyond that which is here and now, but to do so through engagement *with* the here and now. And the 'here and now' is, if we can but see it, the Divine Unity that is ever before us. This is what I think Froebel is getting at here.

I asked at the beginning of this paper, where concepts of the spirit and spirituality figure in Froebel's thought, and what, if anything, would the 'spirit of the child' mean to him. From all that has been said above, these questions now look naive; they look to be based on a false premise: that the 'spiritual' is something that is discrete and separate from the physical, mental, social and moral dimensions of the person. It is clear, I think, that the spirit is, for Froebel, *not* some unsubstantial 'part' of us, but is more like the essence or *whole* of us, of that which is 'inner', and, at the same time, this is a manifestation of the spirit of all creation, the Divine Unity which in Froebel's scheme, is all that God can be. Just as I find a rejection of the doctrine of original sin (Froebel, 1887, p.122), and nothing (explicit or implicit) about the redemption of the individual sinner through faith in Christ, I find nothing that suggests a Holy Spirit in the sense of the Holy Trinity^{xxii}. Despite all that is said about Froebel, and all that Froebel says himself about the Christian religion, his concept of the spirit is a very *human* one. To ask what is the spirit of man is to ask: what is *Man*? To ask what is the spirit of childhood, is to ask: what is a *Child*? Froebel's answers to these questions are to be found in everything he wrote.

As the pure potential for the unfolding of the Divine Unity in Man, the Child is the most precious thing in all Creation. For this reason, is the dictum: 'Come, let us live for our children' (Froebel, 1895, p. 117) perhaps the most quoted of his words. But *The Education of Man* has it: 'Let us learn from our children.... Let us live *with* our children...' (Froebel, 1887, p.89, italics added), and this is telling us how we should approach the business of teaching.

How do we *learn* from our children? We observe; we listen; we empathise; we allow them to shape and order their learning experiences and gear our teaching accordingly. How do we *live* with our children? I don't suppose Froebel to mean this literally, although in his earliest school, the

communal life of the residents - children and adults - meant just that; rather, what is being said here is that we must enter into the life of the child in relationships of mutual value and respect. We reduce the social distance between the adult and the child; we work *alongside* the child rather than oversee her/him. We 'start where the learner is', and not where the teacher thinks the learner ought to be. In other words, what follows from my reading of Froebel is, indeed, the kind of child-centred, progressive education which has often claimed Froebel as its guiding light, an education which aims to promote the development - the unfolding - of the *whole* child.

Spiritual education on this account, is not an aspect of the curriculum; it is not religious education, nor is it limited to the first 'S' in SMSC (the spiritual, moral, social & cultural dimension of cross-curricular approaches). Rather, to educate the whole child, to facilitate the development of its body, mind, feelings, aesthetic awareness, morality and potential for imaginative and creative activity, to encourage the ('inner') engagement with the ('outer') world through 'self-action', to experience what it is to know joy and sadness, to love and to be loved - to become a person as fully and as meaningfully as is possible - *that* is spiritual education.

The school which fosters such an education will have a *spirit* of its own (cf Stern, 2009) - it will be inclusive, person-centred, nurturing and non-judgemental; it will be a school in which boundaries (between people as much as subjects) are soft, where unity in diversity is the watchword. It will be a school where caring and teaching are integrated in the mission of each teacher, where each child will feel valued in and of itself.

Of such schools I would say: here, the spirit of Froebel is still at work.

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- i The work of the Committee was reported in *Children and their Primary Schools* (The 'Plowden Report'), London: HMSO, 1967.
- ii Especially: Mme Maria von Marenholtz-Bülow's *Reminiscences of Friedrich Froebel* (1891, translated by Mrs Horace Mann); the 'sketch' by Barop appended to *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel*, e-book No. 16434 produced by Project Gutenberg: <https://archive.org/download/autobiographyoff16434gut>, accessed 14.06.2016; and *Reminiscences of Madame Luise Froebel* (Froebel's second wife), <http://studentzone.roehampton.ac.uk/library/digital-collection/froebel-archive/autobiography-froebel/Madame%20Froebel.pdf>, accessed 14.06.2016
- iii For shorter versions of Froebel's life derived from these and other sources, see Emily Shirreff's *Short Sketch of the Life of Friedrich Froebel*, a paper read to the London Froebel Society in 1876, and reproduced as an appendix to von Marenholtz-Bülow (1891, pp. 335-359), and Liebschner (1992), chapter 1.
- iv Including: J. Erricker, C. Ota and C. Erriker [Eds] (2001): *Spiritual Education. Cultural, Religious and Social Differences*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press; S. Bigger and E. Brown (1999): *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education*, London: David Fulton; D. Carr and J. Haldane [Eds] (2003): *Spirituality, Philosophy and Education*, London: RoutledgeFalmer; R. Nye (2009): *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*, London: Church House Publishing; A. Thatcher [Ed] (1999): *Spirituality and the Curriculum*, London: Cassell; H. Worsley (2009): *A Child Sees God*, London: Jessica Kingsley; J. Stern (2009): *The Spirit of the School*, London: Cassell; J. Watson, M. de Souza and A. Trousdale [Eds] (2014): *Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education*, London: Routledge. In the last of these, there is no mention of Froebel in either Jane Bone's chapter: 'Spirituality and Early Childhood in New Zealand and Australia' or Brendan Hyde's chapter: 'Nurturing Spirituality through a Dispositional Framework in Early Years' Contexts' where one might most have expected the Froebelian perspective to feature. In fairness, others whom we might label 'Great Educators' - Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Dewey etc - may not get much of a mention either, although I found all of the above referred to at least once in one or more of these books where, suffice it to say, one is more likely to find Freud and Freire than Froebel under 'F'!
- v Provenzo (2009).
- vi For example, in a passage reminiscent of references to 'awe and wonder' in documents on curricula, assessment and school inspection criteria in England in the 1990s, the very first issue contains an extract from an unnamed source in which Froebel describes the child and its mother 'lost in delight for an hour together watching the moon or gazing at the starry sky' (*Child Life*, 1(1) 1891, pp. 11-12). In a paper presented to a meeting of Froebelians in 1892, a Miss Franks quotes Froebel thus:
My desire shall be to educate men whose feet stand rooted in the world of Nature, while with erect head and steady gaze they read the secrets of heaven, and in whose hearts are united the peace of heaven and the joy of earth; whose affections embrace Nature, with her wealth of beauty, and heaven, with its serenity - God's earth and God's heaven'. (2(8), 122).
 In Volume 2(4) [1891], Mme Michaelis writes of 'religious and moral feelings' and of bringing 'into harmony, man's spiritual and physical nature' (p. 56, my emphasis). In Volume 2(5), one A. M. Buckton advocates teaching Milton's *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (p.18), while a further article (by E. R. Murray, pp. 45-47) on 'What to Teach for the Next Three Months' offers games, songs and stories to do with Christmas.
- vii Indeed some might be seen as having a decidedly *pagan* ring to them. For example, in Volume 2(7) [1900], pp. 155-157, the following song and activity are offered under the heading: 'The Tree's Year (A Fairy Cycle)' by H. Keatley Moore: *A few children, as trees, stand in a semi-circle as if asleep, with shut eyes and closed hands. The arms are arranged appropriate to the tree represented - a poplar has her arms erect, an oak crooks his elbows and bends his wrists as ruggedly as may be, etc. The Spirits lie in a group before the trees; each bears some indication of her nature. The Spirit of the Spring awakes, arises, beckons her attendants, and follows the actions of the song. At the close of the verse the trees open their eyes and smile on the Spring.....* and so on through the four seasons.
- viii I neither speak nor read German, and have been dependent upon the English translations of his work. I am indebted to Kornelia Cepok, archivist of the Froebel Archive of Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton, for advising me on the accuracy of the translations I read. If I have rendered any of these inaccurately, the fault is mine alone.
- ix The others are: Natural Science and Mathematics; Language; Art and Objects of Art.
- x It is true that von Marenholtz-Bülow (1891, p. 18) quotes Froebel as saying that 'the first Mary brought up the Saviour of the World', but her verbatim recollections of conversations with Froebel are so specific and detailed as to invite doubt as to how much of what is attributed to Froebel is in fact a projection of her own beliefs. My reading of Froebel is that if anything is to redeem mankind, it is *education*.
- xi Interestingly, writing in 2009, Provenzo asserts: 'Froebel's philosophy embraced a *Christian pantheism*, one that assumed that all things in nature (animal, vegetable and mineral) are connected' (Provenzo, 2009, p.87, my italics).
- xii This passage is followed immediately by a three-page commentary by the translator which includes 'branch' diagrams to demonstrate the development of all Nature, and of the Mind, in terms of the connections made between contrasts or opposites. The translator also provides an explanation of the order and substance of Froebel's Gifts in terms of these Laws.

- xiii 'When asked if his system was based on Hegel's dialectical theory, Froebel responded that he had not studied Hegel's work, but that the whole meaning of his own system rested upon this law alone. It is almost certain that he picked up on Hegel's ideas, which were widely circulating in German universities during Froebel's era, without his realizing their source. There is, however, the possibility that Froebel invented his theory independently of Hegel's ideas'. Provenzo, 2009, p.90.
- xiv This search for a system is best summarised in Froebel's letter to philosopher Krause, as follows: *My plan of culture was very simple: it was to seek out the innermost unity connecting the most diverse and widely separated phenomena, whether subjective or objective, and whether theoretical or practical, to learn to see the spiritual side of their activity, to apprehend their mutual relations as facts and forms of nature, or to express them mathematically; and, on the other hand, to contemplate the natural and mathematical laws as founded in the innermost depths of my own life as well as in the highest unity of the great whole, that is indeed to regard them in their unconditioned, uncaused necessity, as 'absolute things-in-themselves'. Thus did I continue without ceasing to systematise, symbolise, idealise, realise and recognise identities and analogies amongst all facts and phenomena, all problems, expressions, and formulas (sic) which deeply interested me; and in this way life, with all its varied phenomena and activities, became to me more and more free from contradictions, more harmonious, simple, and clear, and more recognisable as a part of the life universal.* (Froebel, 2005, p.53).
- xv Walks or 'walking parties' were an important aspect of the education offered by Pestalozzi at Yverdon where Froebel spent time on two occasions. For how he used these walks educationally, see Froebel, 2005, p.43. For the way in which such 'rambles' can exploit the boy's (sic) natural curiosity, see Froebel, 1887, pp. 104-105. His position is nicely summed up in Froebel, 1887 (p.163): *Teachers should, at least once a week, take a walk with each class - not driving them out like a flock of sheep, nor leading them out like a company of soldiers, but going with them as a father with his sons or brother with his brothers, and acquainting them more fully with whatever the season of nature offers them.*
- xvi The playground of Froebel's first kindergarten at Bad Blankenburg included garden beds, some of which were planted and harvested collectively by the whole class, while each child had responsibility for an individual bed (Liebschner, 1992, pp.38-39). We may note here the law of opposites being honoured: individual v. collective.
- xvii See von Marenholtz-Bülów's recollection of Froebel's own account, in which he says: *[See how] they proceed from the ball as a symbol of unity, and then pass over from this to the cube; how the cube is then divided according to the law of connection of opposites, how each succeeding form (in the play) goes forth from the preceding, and how not only the connection according to a law of all the parts of the play-material exhibits clearly the union into one whole, but the child perceives through his own action that he only obtains his building (or other figures) when he unites into a whole, in a regular and lawful manner, the parts which he is handling. In such a way he is to perceive that all connection implies opposites which can be joined together, and again that no opposites are to be seen in the properties of things which cannot be connected.* (von Marenholtz-Bülów, 1891, p. 152).
- xviii According to Liebschner (1992, p.99): 'Except for a short article on 'Paper Folding', published in 1850, and on 'Stick-Laying', published after his death, Froebel left us no record in detail of how these activities were to be carried out'. Froebel engaged in recreational/creative crafts himself, and an example attributed to him, of 'prick-work', in which a pattern of pin-holes is made in black material and illuminated by sunlight through a window, is in the Froebel Archive of Childhood Studies at Roehampton.
- xix For example, in 'The Charcoal-burner's Hut', the child will learn (a) that you should not judge the character of a person from his outward appearance, and (b) that however humble a person's work may seem, we are dependent upon his labour for the essentials of life. See Froebel, 1895, pp. 74-75 and 176-177.
- xx In reading Froebel's account of mothers - and, indeed, the kindergarten teachers he sought to inspire - it is difficult not to feel that the little boy who lost his own mother within a year of his birth is crying out here for the maternal love and care of which he was robbed.
- xxi For example, of his own schooling in his Uncle's village, Froebel says: *The subjects best taught in the school of Stadt-Ilm were reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. Latin was miserably taught, and still worse learnt. Here, as in so many similar schools, the teaching utterly lacked the elucidation of first principles.... In physical geography we repeated our tasks, parrot-wise, speaking much and knowing nothing; for the teaching on this subject had not the very least connection with real life, nor had it any actuality for us, although at the same time, we could rightly name the little specks and patches of colour on the map* (Froebel, 2005, p.15).
- xxii There is more than one 'trinity' in Froebel's work. One comprises the 'outer world (the world of form and matter)' the 'inner world (the world of mind and spirit)' and 'language which unites the two' (Froebel, 1887, p. 138). Others are variants of the dialectic: *.....each thing can manifest itself completely only by representing its being in unity, individuality and diversity, or in the indispensable triune way, the essential nature of force, too, is shown completely and perfectly only in such a triune representation of its being by and in form* (Froebel, 1887, p.170). Yet another (Froebel, 1887, p. 209) is as follows: **Religion strives to manifest and does manifest being; nature strives to manifest energy; language strives to manifest and does manifest life as such and as a whole.** By contrast, von Marenholtz-Bülów's (1891, pp. 185-186) recollection is of the Trinity of God, Man and Nature.