

The Continuing Influence of Froebel's Kindergarten System in Current Early Childhood Education in the USA and South Korea

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Abstract

We (1) describe the origin of the kindergarten system invented by Froebel, (2) explain how Froebel's kindergarten system has influenced the kindergarten system in the USA and South Korea, and (3) offer conclusive statements and implications about the application of Froebel's original thoughts on the kindergarten system in both countries. Four objectives of this paper are: (1) to understand the original ideas of the kindergarten system invented by Froebel, (2) to review how Froebel's kindergarten system has been changed and modified after applying it both in South Korea and the USA, (3) to find the similarities of the application of the kindergarten system in the different countries, and (4) to re-think the kindergarten system for the future.

Keywords: Froebel, kindergarten, Gifts, developmentally appropriate practice, play-based curriculum

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The purpose of education is to encourage and guide man as a conscious, thinking and perceiving being in such a way that he becomes a pure and perfect representation of that divine inner law through his own personal choice; education must show him the ways and meanings of attaining that goal. (Friedrich Froebel, 1826, p. 2)

The purpose of this paper is to present the original ideas of the kindergarten system (i.e., Froebel's innovative pedagogical foundation and practice) invented by Froebel and review how this system has been changed and modified after applying it in both South Korea and the USA. This paper describes Froebel's core ideas about the kindergarten system based on the authors' study of publications by Froebel, his friends and students, and German, American and South Korean educators. The authors used concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) to interpret and analyze Froebel's kindergarten system (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) in order to see how it has been transmitted and changed to reflect the current early childhood education system. Areas of (1) learning environment, (2) materials, (3) instruction, and (4) assessment were included to illustrate the influence of Froebel's legacy of kindergarten system through the contemporary lens of DAP. How the USA and South Korea have adapted Froebel's kindergarten system to their own cultures is also described.

The Origin of Froebel's Kindergarten System

Froebel's Core Ideas of Kindergarten Education

The combination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's educational theory, and Fichte's nationalism influenced Froebel's later pedagogical theory along with his Christian faith (Allen, 1988). According to his manuscripts such as *Letters on the Kindergarten* (2001a), *The Education of Men* (2001b), and *Pedagogies of the Kindergarten* (2001c), the core of Froebel's pedagogical theory is based on his experience and faith. He believed that the purpose of education is to understand the relationship between a Creator (i.e., God) and creatures (non-living and living things including human beings) which is harmoniously interwoven on earth. For instance, if a flower represents

wholeness, the wholeness consists of many small parts such as petals, stem, leaves, and roots. Thus Froebel believed that understanding the relationship of wholeness to parts and parts to wholeness is fundamental to seeking true knowledge under God. In the USA and South Korea, many kindergarten teachers have applied or developed his core ideas into practice (e.g., lessons for kindergarteners using various picture books, hands-on activities and/or computer games relevant to the concepts of wholeness to parts and parts to wholeness) except for his Christian faith.

Learning Environment

Many people state that Friedrich Froebel is the father of kindergarten system because he coined the word, *Kindergarten* (i.e., a garden for children). He considered educators as gardeners who knew how to raise plants appropriately. Thus, Froebel's vision of a safe learning environment could be similar to his flower garden. He was influenced by Rousseau's philosophy about educating children in nature. Before establishing his first kindergarten, Froebel worked as a tutor, traveling and doing nature walks to raise a German duchess' children away from home when the duchess asked Froebel to correct her children's ill-mannered attitudes and misbehavior. But he stated that he failed his experiment of moral education; living in unstructured nature and correcting their misbehaviors, and brought the children to Pestalozzi's school located in Yverdon-les-Bains Castle, Switzerland. Froebel thought that structured formal schooling would be important to develop children's social skills, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Later on, Froebel still loved Rousseau's philosophy in spite of his failure of the experiment and featured outdoor activities, field trips, and town festivals as an important part of his kindergarten education. Thus Froebel created the kindergarten system using both indoor and outdoor environment for educating his students (Weston, 2000). We can see the similarity between Froebel's learning environment and today's kindergarten education in the USA and South Korea although both countries have much more emphasis on indoor activities or lessons than outdoor play or field trips.

Appropriate Materials

Froebel believed that young children still need concrete manipulatives to understand the world and obtain advanced knowledge. Teachers need to prepare well to use their concrete teaching materials. For the purpose of creating his teaching materials, Froebel initially used chopped vegetables such as German radish, but it rotted and was not re-usable. Thus he used wood pieces to make his stable learning materials. He called these non-transformative wooden materials “Gifts” (“Gabe” in German) because they were hand-made and he considered them gifts to give his students. He also used Occupations (e.g., activities using transformable papers, clay, drawing or painting) to support his main activities using Gifts, which initially consisted of three dimensional wooden materials or balls made of yarn (Tovey, 2013; Wolfe, 2002). For instance, for his first Gift, Froebel used colorful yarns to create a soft ball and a string to teach the concept, “whole.” For his second Gift, Froebel used strings, sticks, and three wooden blocks in the shapes of sphere, cube, and cylinder to teach the concept, “harmony” and “diversity” including the concept of wholeness. For other Gifts, Froebel made a wooden box which held smaller blocks: eight cubes for the third Gift, eight rectangular prisms for the fourth Gift, and a combination of cubes, rectangular prisms, and triangular prisms for the fifth Gift. When training his students to become teachers, Froebel encouraged them to create their own teaching materials. Thus his students’ materials were added to the Gifts and Occupations, including sophisticated, colorful, and diverse materials made of wood and yarn. In today’s kindergarten, we can see a variety of stable teaching materials made of such as wood, yarn, magnetic and plastic materials. We can also see similar Occupations such as play dough, clay, yarn, and paper, although it is hard to see Gifts as teaching materials in the public kindergarten system in the USA and South Korea.

Appropriate Instruction

Froebel developed various appropriate activities or lessons based on mathematical concepts to teach three concepts: Form of Life, Beauty, and Knowledge (Liebschner, 2001; Milton & Wiebe, 1869). For the Form of Life, he thought that connecting to the real world

is very important for his teaching method. For instance, using small Gift blocks, he asked his students to build something three dimensional that they had seen before such as a house, items in the house, or a church, then allowed them to create something new using their own imagination. For the Form of Beauty, he wanted to teach a variety of harmonious patterns. For instance, he asked his students to make something familiar such as floor or ceiling patterns and then he allowed them to create something new. For the Form of Knowledge, he emphasized teaching language and mathematics using Gifts because he believed that language and mathematics could be a communicative tool to understand God's creatures and the world.

Froebel systematically and concretely developed teaching materials, songs and games, daily routines, and curriculum to teach the three concepts. He also provided the children with supplemental materials such as Occupations to reinforce their knowledge through playing with the Gifts. Thus we strongly assume that Froebel provided two separate group lessons such as a large group lesson with Gifts and then small group lessons with diverse occupations. Like Froebel, today's kindergartens in the USA and South Korea provide various activities and lessons for a large group (i.e., center time) and small group sessions (i.e., stations) for the daily routine.

Appropriate Assessment

Today's Early Childhood Educators recommend that teachers use authentic/informal assessment for young children such as daily checklists/rating scales, portfolios, running record, anecdotal observation, and interview (Eliason & Jenkins, 2011; Morrison, 2015). Although Froebel did not state much about his assessment strategies in his books, we can easily assume that Froebel was a very careful observer of his students' growth and learning habits. For instance, when the Duke of Meiningen asked Froebel to educate his son, Froebel observed his son and told the Duke that "it was impossible to give a sound intellectual education to a child who had not a true moral development, and that it was impossible for a child to receive that who was separated from equals and led to imagine himself as having a superior nature" (Bulow, 1889, p. 338). Froebel thought that teachers should have keen eyes for observing their own students for the purpose of understanding the individual

child's developmental domains. Froebel effectively communicated with young children when he taught and demonstrated his instruction to his potential donors who might financially support his kindergarten (Liebschner, 2001). For instance, he used rhythmic patterns of language like opera to get his students' attention and communicated with his students very well. Thus we assume that Froebel often used appropriate observation and communication skills for authentic assessment in his instruction.

The Influence of Froebel's Kindergarten System in the USA

In the late nineteenth century, Froebel's ideas about the kindergarten system initially landed on USA shores in cities such as Boston and New York City, brought by German immigrants who created private kindergartens in the USA. These ideas became popular among USA educators like Susan Blow, who established the first public kindergarten education system in St. Louis, Missouri in 1873. Blow was highly influenced by Froebel's thought, stating that "Kindergarten education is for young children to be able to understand himself/herself as a whole and also as a single member of the great living whole: God, nature, and humanity" (Allen, 1988, p. 40).

In the early twentieth century, Froebel's philosophy was overshadowed when Italian immigrants brought Maria Montessori's educational philosophy to the USA. One possible reason that Froebel's ideas fell out of favor is that this major idea of "Wholeness" and "Parts to Whole/Whole to Parts" connected to Christianity, and discussion about God was not always welcomed in the public school system or by educators such as John Dewey and Stanley Hall (Corbett, 1989; Wolfe, 2002). However, Froebel's materials were still used in schools but his philosophy based on his faith was left out. Many in-service kindergarten teachers used Froebel's teaching materials such as songs, Gifts and Occupations. Many pre-service kindergarten teachers used to be trained in how to use Gifts and Occupations as part of a course in a teacher's college at that time (The Teachers College of Indianapolis, 1917). Some educators criticized Froebel's Gifts because they were too small to help young children develop their large motor skills (Wolfe, 2002). Thus since the middle of twentieth century, hollow blocks, paper box blocks, and unit blocks have been developed and utilized

as a part of small group activity or station in a public kindergarten classroom setting. Froebel's Gifts, educational theory and practice gradually faded from use in the public school system.

In the early twenty-first century, Froebel USA (www.froebelUSA.com) was established in Grand Rapids, MI, in the USA to provide information about Froebel's original philosophy, materials, and methods, and the organization holds an annual conference and offers its own publication.

History of the Early Childhood Education System in Korea

Before the concept of kindergarten was introduced by Japanese and foreign missionaries, early childhood education in South Korea was family-oriented, and its teachings originated from Confucianism (Lee, 1995). The core concept of Confucianism is filial piety, which is deeply rooted in the lives and thought of people in many Asian countries. Filial piety emphasizes family harmony, virtue, righteousness, respect and care for the elderly, and good manners (Chi, 1988; Chow, 1991, Deutchler, 1980; Lee, 1995; Lew, 1983; Lieber, Nihira, & Mink, 2004; Sung, 1995, 1997).

Home-based private schools existed in some towns. These became most popular at the end of the Joseon Dynasty, the last and longest-lived imperial dynasty of Korea (1392 to 1910). These schools were called "Seodang" and the teacher was called "Hunjang." The characteristics of Seodang varied depending on the condition of each town and reflected the population, economic condition, and parents' wishes (Choi, 2006). Seodang education was teacher-centered and could be considered a form of an early childhood/elementary education system in Korea before the modern school system including kindergarten was established.

In Seodang education, children learned to read and write as well as to exercise elements of filial piety. The main curriculum of Seodang education consisted of three subjects: "Gangdok" (reading), "Jeasool" (composition) and "Supja" (penmanship). The Hunjang also taught students about filial piety. Sometimes, for the instruction, a few Hunjangs used a play-based approach such as traditional board games called "Seungkyukdo," which

develops an understanding of the government system and king's servants' ranks, and "Goeulmodeumnoli," which has children memorize the names and locations of towns. During break time, students enjoyed physical activities such as "Toocho," which involves throwing arrows by one hand into a narrow jar. When students finished a textbook, Hunjang tested them. On that day, there was a school event called "Checkguli" to celebrate the students' hard work and appreciate the teacher. Parents prepared special treats for the school (Chang, 2009).

However, because it was based on elitist principles, Seodang was normally founded for educating middle or upper class male students by male teachers. Hunjang usually were men who had passed a basic government exam in Chinese characters. They did not receive teacher training and usually used books written in traditional Chinese characters with Korean pronunciation and meaning as their teaching materials. For Jeasool and Supja, Hunjang used a written language called Hanmun, which was classical Chinese instead of the Korean used by common people. During the period of Japanese Occupation of Korea (1905-1945), one-third of the 16,540 registered Seodang disappeared or were forced to close. By the time the occupation ended, most Seodang education had disappeared in Korea. Today there exist a few Seodangs (e.g., "Chunghakdong") that serve as summer camps for youth group who are interested in learning traditional moral education and reading traditional literature or documents (Jung, Lee, & Chae, 2000; Jung, 2013). Some elements of Seodang education are still present in the current education system. Chang (2009) wrote that Seodang education differentiated instruction depending on individual learning conditions, so we can assume that some teachers of Seodang considered concepts that would be similar to DAP in current education terms. Some Hunjangs also used play-based hands-on activities to promote student learning, so to some extent DAP also can be found in different era and location although these were not influenced by Froebel.

Influence of Froebel's Kindergarten System in Korea

Before the Japanese occupation of Korea, the first kindergarten was established in South Korea in 1897, but it was only for Japanese children. Japanese kindergarten was based on

the theory of Froebel and incorporated Japanese social and cultural traits (Beck & Lee, 1992; Lee, 1995). To find Froebel's influence on Korean kindergartens, it is necessary to explain how kindergarten and teacher training programs were founded in Korea.

In 1914, the first kindergarten for Korean children was established by "EwhaHaktang" (presently Ewha Womans University), which was influenced by American Protestant Christianity. A female American Methodist missionary named Charlotte Brownlee, a graduate of the kindergarten training school in Cincinnati, Ohio, opened Ewha Kindergarten within EwhaHakdang for 16 children (Lee, 1995). The first kindergarten teacher training school in Korea was opened in 1915 at EwhaHaktang and Brownlee served as a teacher (Lee, 1998). Brownlee translated Froebel's *Education of Man* and *Mother Play and Songs* into Korean and used them as textbooks in teacher training schools in Korea (Lee, 1998; Rhee, Rhee, & Lee, 2005). She also used Froebel's materials such as Gifts and Occupations and emphasized free play (Lee, 1998). Brownlee was influenced by Froebel's educational beliefs and pedagogy, Korean students in kindergarten teacher training programs learned Froebel's kindergarten system based on Brownlee's perspectives (Lee, 1987).

Most early Korean kindergartens provided Froebel's Gifts and Occupations as developmentally appropriate learning materials. The children learned through play based on educational activities such as songs, hands-on activities, and stories. The education was child-centered and allowed children their choice of play. In 1923, there was Froebel shop in Korea, the *Chosun Froebel shop* that sold Froebel's educational material Gifts for 200 won (Lee, 1987).

The Republic of Korea (i.e., South Korea) was founded after the Korean War (1950-1953), the first national kindergarten curriculum was formed in 1969, influenced by principles of progressive education. In the 1980s, cognitive development theories and practice such as Piaget's, Vygotsky's, and Montessori's also considerably influenced early childhood education curriculum. As South Korea became modernized, early childhood education curriculum was heavily influenced by foreign theories that promote children's creativity and independence. However, South Korean kindergarten curriculum also emphasizes traditional Korean values based on filial piety such as keeping group harmony, respecting elders, and moral education (Lee, 1995).

Froebel's early childhood education philosophy emphasized children's creativity, hands-on learning, art, and living in harmony with nature (Strauch-Nelson, 2012). Froebel said, "Play is the first means of development of the human mind, its first effort to make acquaintance with the outward world, to collect original experiences from things and facts, and to exercise the powers of body and mind" (Von Marenholtz-Bulow, 1877, p.67). In South Korea, play is still an important part of the curriculum or daily routine. Brownlee's teacher training school curriculum that was embedded Froebel's educational belief is still influential.

In the early twenty-first century, Froebel's Gifts (가베 in Korean), once again became popular and some private kindergartens or daycares named after Froebel. However, these kindergartens did not teach children only based on Froebel's beliefs and pedagogy but they adapted parts of Froebel's educational theory such as using Gifts and Occupations as teaching materials, play based, and child-centered activities. One of the possible reasons that Froebel became more popular in South Korea in the 21st century is that in 1970, the Froebel Company was established for producing educational materials and children's books (www.froebel.co.kr), re-introducing the benefits of using Froebel's philosophy and materials. The company also established nationwide education centers to train instructors how to use Gifts appropriately. The trained instructors then taught children and parents how to use Gifts as educational manipulatives in after-school programs or local centers.

Korean's traditional beliefs about how children should grow and learn, and the role of parents fit well in Froebel's educational belief: "Let us live for our children." Froebel's beliefs about education go well with the core concept of Confucianism that emphasized moral and character education in early childhood education. Froebel's many activities using Gifts or Occupations are also aligned very well with concepts of mathematical connection and communication emphasized in South Korean mathematics education and necessary in a technology-oriented society. We think that these factors can explain why Froebel is still popular in South Korea.

Conclusions

We think that it is the right time to revisit Froebel's ideas about kindergarten systems. Some of his ideas have been adapted or are similar to current practice such as developmentally appropriate practice for kindergartners, play-based curriculum, using various Gifts or Occupations and emphasizing nature as a "true" learning environment. We also think that his teaching methods of whole to parts/parts to whole and form of life, beauty, and knowledge using Gifts are best practices and should continue to be investigated.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is one of the most popular terms among early childhood educators in both USA and South Korea. DAP is an insightful tool to define whether or not the early learning environment, materials, instruction and assessment are appropriate for young children based on their age, ability, and culture (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gestwicki, 2011). Although the definition of DAP can be different depending on culture and even time period, there are similarities between Froebel's original ideas of the kindergarten system and the current kindergarten system in the USA and South Korea.

The Importance of the Nature as a Learning Environment

Froebel (1902) especially stressed the importance of interaction between children and nature in child development. The eco-friendly movement in early education has become popular.

In the USA, Early Development of Global Education (EDGE) is an American organization which was founded in 2007 to raise environmental awareness, teach conservation, and combat global pollution through a green preschool (EDGE, 2013). The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) recommends outdoor play for children such as exploring woodlands, getting wet feet, climbing rocks, building with sticks, running on grass, turning over rocks, following insects, stomping in puddles,

gardening, and so forth in North America (2010).

In South Korea, the Korean Society of Eco Early Childhood Education (KSEECE) was established by early childhood educators, parents, and administrators in 2002. This non-profit organization has provided teacher training programs, publications, and conferences (KSEECE, 2007). The eco-early childhood education movement emphasizes nature-friendly early childhood education (Dyment, et al., 2014; Kim & Lim, 2007). Eco-early childhood education was first introduced in the early 1990s and its curriculum accentuates the harmony between humans and nature (Lim et al., 2006). The program includes nature walks, meditation, gardening, hand-crafts, recycling, and traditional South Korean physical exercise (Kim & Lim, 2007).

As society is rapidly changing and technology evolves, children are less likely to interact with nature but are more engaged in organized after-school activities and technology use. Eco-early childhood education is an effort to go back to nature in education to promote children's sensory and physical development, self-expression, and creativity and also inspire social cooperation and community engagement. In this sense, Froebel's educational belief can be found in the current educational trend in both countries that emphasizes harmony and unity in nature.

The Importance of Play

In both the USA and South Korea, major aspects of Froebel's pedagogy are still part of the current kindergarten system and early education policy in "learn through play" or "play-based curriculum," which includes hands-on learning experiences, games, music, songs, movement, field trips in nature, and so forth. But it has been hard to find some aspects such as Froebel's play-based curriculum using the Gifts and teaching methods such as three concepts of Form of Life, Beauty, and Knowledge in the public kindergarten system since the middle of the twentieth century in both countries. In the early twenty-first century, we can see the renewal of interest in Froebel's play-based curriculum and teaching methods (Provenzo, 2009; Strauch-Nelson, 2012; Tovey, 2013), using his Gifts for educational purposes in both countries through the non-profit organization Froebel USA in the USA and the for-profit Froebel Company in South Korea.

In addition, for early childhood educators and policy makers in both countries, we believe that it would be meaningful to understand how previously well-known educators like Froebel developed their ideas with specific purposes and how different facets of the kindergarten system have been implemented in different countries or cultures. This understanding will offer insight into developmentally appropriate practice in the present and for the future.

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