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## Universal Values of Friedrich Froebel's Pedagogy in the Views of Polish *Froebelians*

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*Uniwersalne wartości pedagogiki Friedricha  
Froebela w poglądach polskich Froebelistów*

### SUMMARY

The article describes the values of Friedrich Froebel's pedagogical thought and practice in Polish pre-school education. It outlines the historical background, focusing especially on the views of great Polish Froebelians: Justyna Strzemeska, Maria Weryho, Zofia Żukiewiczowa, Natalia Cicimirska. The paper's considerations regard the following aspects: the vision of the child, the views on education and play, the role of the teacher and the use of teaching materials, so-called *gifts*. A number of profound educational concepts of Froebel stayed still actual and re-valued in contemporary preschool education, especially Froebel's philosophy and uniqueness of each child, respect for children as human beings, their development and right to free play, the pre-school education model based on gifts.

**Keywords:** child; pre-school education; Friedrich Froebel's approach; Polish Froebelians' followers

### INTRODUCTION

When in 1837 Friedrich Froebel set up the Educational Institution aimed at small children, which was later renamed *kindergarten*, in Poland children aged 5 to 12, living in extreme poverty and being forced into denationalisation, were taken care of by local charity associations, also acting as secret schools. On the initiative of private donors, land owners, monastic societies, religious communes and secular social organisations, the first nurseries were set up, their principal function being to provide care to children whose mothers were employed in industrial units. While the idea of

establishing nurseries enjoyed general approval, there was an apparent lack of interest in their finances, staff resources and the quality of care and educational services they provided. The first schools for teachers and care-takers in Galicia, which also offered practical training, were not established until the 1870s. The awareness of the need to educate children in the spirit of freedom and play began to slowly develop with the establishing of elitist school facilities for wealthy children, resembling Froebel's children's gardens. Renewed pedagogical thought began to find its way into pre-school teaching practice. As reported by Wanda Bobrowska-Nowak (1978, p. 167), in 1870 the first children's garden was created on the initiative of Teresa Pruszek-Mleczkowska, soon followed by other facilities of this kind. Unfortunately, given the exorbitant maintenance costs, as well as expensive teaching aids and materials, Froebelian gardens were very scarce and available only to a limited group of the wealthiest society members. In the entire Polish lands under the Austrian partition, there were as few as 9 facilities of this kind in 1882 (Kasáčová 2007, p. 54).

Froebel's philosophy and educational activities, which enjoyed much respect Europe-wide, though they also had a few opponents, became increasingly recognised in Poland, mainly through diverse social and publicity activities conducted by a group of well-educated and wealthy social activists, led by Maria Weryho (who was commonly known as Maria Weryho-Radziwiłłowiczowa, having married psychiatrist Rafał Radziwiłłowicz). The vision of a child, consistent with Froebel's approach, was popularised and further developed in secret seminars, educational meetings and courses. The active followers of Froebel's pedagogical thought soon came to be called *Froebelians*, and the pre-school facilities they established – *Froebelian schools*.

After the end of World War Two, a different socio-ideological reality began to emerge. The pedagogical thought developed by Froebel and his Polish followers was superseded by Communist ideas. Games were removed from teaching guidebooks and pre-school curricula, whereas education using teaching materials was commonly referred to as playing with gifts. This study outlines the history and values of Froebel's pedagogical thought and its reflection in pre-school teaching practice, focusing especially on the following aspects: the vision of the child, the role of teachers, the Froebelian views on play, using didactic materials (*gifts*).

### FROEBELIANS' PUBLICATIONS

Post-1918 pre-school theory and practice were mainly influenced by the system developed by Froebel, and later popularised by Justyna Strzemeska and Maria Weryho in the teaching guidebook describing the Froebelian pre-school education model, entitled *Wychowanie przedszkolne. Podręcznik dla wychowawców (Pre-school education. Teaching guidebook)* (1895). The views presented in this publication, the value of which could hardly be overestimated by future teachers, were also shared and disseminated

by other social activists and publicists, including Stefania Marciszewska-Posadzkowa, Natalia Cicimirska, Zofia Bogdanowiczowa and Zofia Żukiewiczowa.

In 1920, another major book was published in Lviv, entitled *Podręcznik dla ochro-niarczyk (A guidebook for caretakers)* (1920), jointly written by Natalia Cicimirska, Maria Germanówna, Aniela Gustakiewiczówna, Stanisław Progulski, Maria Sariusz-Jawor-ska, Ida M. Schätzel, Jadwiga Warchałowska and Barbara Żulińska. This guidebook described the working principles to be followed by nursery teachers (morning chats and their logical continuation in the form of other activities, alternating exercises, etc.). The recommended pre-school activities related to Froebel's proposals both di-rectly, including through construction activities based on blocks-*gifts*, and indirectly (through chats and manual work). Montessori's pedagogical traces were also clearly visible (e.g., sensual training using specially designed aids and calculation exercises). Nonetheless, the guidebook made no attempt at an in-depth understanding or analysis of Froebel's pedagogical and philosophical views.

A brochure entitled *Wskazówki dla osób zakładających i prowadzących ochrony (Guidelines for people establishing and running nursery facilities)*, published by Maria Weryho (1921), was another insightful publication bearing certain curriculum-like features.

In 1924, one more Polish social activist, Zofia Żukiewiczowa (1924), Chair of the Pre-School Education Section at the Warsaw Magistrate, published a paper entitled *Wychowanie przedszkolne. Wskazówki metodyczne uwzględniające zainteresowanie dziecka (Pre-school education. Methodical guidelines taking into account the child's interests)*.

The last but not least study, important for this article, was the guidebook entitled *Moja ochronka (My nursery facility)*, written by Natalia Cicimirska (1928). These studies are the basis for this article.

## VIEW OF THE CHILD

In the teaching guidebook, *Pre-school education*, Strzemeska and Weryho (1895, p. 36) referred to the major literary work by Froebel, *Die Menschenerziehung (The Education of Man, 1826)*, and its underlying message "we should live for our children". The child was perceived as an extremely receptive human being, in the cognitive, motor and spiritual senses. In line with Froebel's vision, the authors viewed the child as an individual striving for knowledge and willing to create. They believed that "the more the child develops in the cognitive sense, the stronger his/her craving for knowledge, which can be satisfied by chats, narratives and fairy tales" (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 14). Viewing motor activity as one of the major needs of the child, the authors recommended that adults should let children move freely, in line with the principle that "a restrained body leads to a restrained mind and heart" (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895,

p. 40). The authors jointly agreed that the mother and the child make up a unity. They nonetheless claimed that children could derive more benefits, in both intellectual and moral terms, when they grow up in a close relationship with both parents. The family was perceived as the most important educational environment, and the educational process was expected to begin from the very first days of a child's life, by guiding him/her towards the unity of thoughts, feelings and moral values. Harmonious development should therefore become the major objective to be pursued by an educator, mindful that the early period of human life involves shaping attitudes towards understanding oneself and the world, and hence it should not be underestimated.

Żukiewiczowa's paper made clear reference to Froebel's pedagogical thought. The writer referred to the Froebelian vision of the child, stating:

The child brings to the world a miraculous gift which takes the form of striving for physical and intellectual self-development. This is reflected in the child's motor needs, spontaneous muscle training, and interest in the surrounding reality, which manifests itself in the child's frequently touching and destroying things, repeating a given action which brings certain outcomes, being continually involved in activities, and asking numerous questions. There is no other stage of human life which brings such intense and multi-faceted development (Żukiewiczowa 1924, p. 9).

Children develop their interest in the world through play, which lets them bring their fantasies to life, express themselves in a creative way, and develop their physical and mental strengths. According to the author,

A talented, lively, emotional, impulsive (willing to act) and, at the same time, impatient, unchastised and playful Polish child can easily be tamed in the atmosphere which matches his/her interests. Such an atmosphere should be created, on the one hand, by the keen interest of a teacher and, on the other, by the child's interest in the surrounding reality shaped by the teacher (Żukiewiczowa 1924, p. 9).

As regards teachers' duties, Żukiewiczowa stressed their role in guiding the child's interests, claiming that "without skilful guidance, the child's interests and inclination to act are likely to proceed in the wrong direction" (Żukiewiczowa 1924, p. 10). The author perceived education as contributing to the development of the physical, mental and spiritual capacities of the child, and "instilling" in him/her various contents arising from the national and social heritage.

These views are still prevailing, might be as well said holistic and universal. Quotations reveal how the advocates of the Froebelian philosophy understood the process of discovering the world through the ideas of self-awareness and learning about world-shaping forces, while also referring to the universal values like family, religion, unity of universe.

## THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND EDUCATION

The promoters of Froebelian ideas also referred to the style and principle of education, advocating to follow “thought- rather than form-driven” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 24). They were clearly against any formal or routine imitation in the educational process, thus becoming the advocates of the in-depth idea and meaning of Froebel's educational doctrine. Referring to child work organisation, they emphasised that the educational reality should make no room for routine or randomness, which implied that following rigid educational patterns, programmes or organisation models was hardly beneficial, and so neither were casualness or randomness. The authors highlighted that any disharmonies in the educational process were detrimental to children, leaving a negative footprint on their development, whereas consistent education fostered their independence. Certain regularities were believed to inspire independence and a more thorough understanding of one's nature and identity, in which the internal motivation is compliant with the external guidance. The autonomous activities of the child were therefore perceived a development vehicle, oriented towards self-education and course-keeping, reflected in the independent acquisition of experience, with the simultaneous suppression of any inappropriate drives. As stressed by the authors, educative work should become a viable teaching method, with verbal instructions being replaced by practical effort.

Referring to Froebel's views, Strzemeska and Weryho (1895, p. 36) believed that teachers should be mindful of a child's being an offspring of humanity, and his/her development's being consistent with natural laws, which all teachers should explore and treat as the basis of their teaching practice. Along with the individualised perception of the child, they also highlighted the child's relationship with other humans, citing Froebel's words “An individual, being merely a member and a part of a bigger whole, is also an autonomous creature whose statements reflect his/her own principles and needs. You should, therefore, investigate your pupil's individuality” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 36). However, the two educationalists put strong emphasis on co-operative learning, claiming that kindergartens should serve as “the first school of social life” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 54). These facilities became places where the foundations of friendship were laid and the first experiences gathered on how to help one another, make concessions, or keep one's pride, vanity and egoism under control.

Strzemeska and Weryho (1895, p. 15) stressed that teachers should search for efficient ways to guide their children. They were advocates of the naturalistic idea that “children, just like plants, need to be looked after”. The idea of being both a guide and a gardener was also consistent with the law of opposites. This implies that the principal task of a teacher entails monitoring, protecting and guiding children, without giving instructions and orders, or restraining them in any other way. The first Polish followers of the Froebelian doctrine believed that teachers were perceived by their pupils as performing a dual function, i.e. acting and awaiting, setting directions and giving

the leeway to act. They stressed that education should make no room for orders, but teachers should rather set an example to follow, act as role models and be authentic. They should also feel at ease with themselves and their function, be sincere in their words and actions, seek to understand the different ways and means of behaving, be attentive to their individuality, and accept themselves and their lives. As claimed by the authors, “life should be courageously taken exactly as it is, taking into consideration both its virtues and its drawbacks” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 20). In their opinions, teachers should also be able to assume the secondary role, aiming primarily at making the child independent, which, according to Strzemeska and Weryho (1895, p. 60), “is not limited to being able to knit, draw, etc. When the child comprehends various things which have been selected by us, the gardener should step back and accept that his/her role becomes diminished, and so are his/her requirements as a teacher”. The active role of a teacher should be mainly manifested in physical activities. Strzemeska and Weryho stressed that, as children’s self-reliance was very low, teachers should have the appropriate competencies and personal qualities to skilfully make it develop. In this context, guiding child’s play and actions appeared easier than letting him/her perform spontaneous activities. According to the authors, “making child’s play meaningful enough is usually much more difficult than guiding the child all the way through” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 60).

Weryho (1921) in her separate guidebook entitled *Wskazówki dla osób zakładających i prowadzących ochronki* (*Guidelines for people establishing and running nursery facilities*), suggested employing a modernised Froebelian method. She also outlined the subsequent stages of the process through which the child learns about his/her surroundings. She believed that the teacher’s task was to lead the child through the process of learning new things, which should include approaching a given object in its natural surroundings, capturing the relationship between the object and human life, understanding why it was useful, comparing the object with other items, and finally the child’s expressing his/her emotions in connection with learning about new objects in aesthetic forms, i.e. through drawings, poems, songs, narratives or manual works.

## VALUE OF PLAY

Play, as presented in *Wychowanie przedszkolne* (*Pre-school education*), was seen as having numerous advantages and constituting the “child’s life” (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 49). The authors of the publication cited Froebel:

Play is like an element of nature, a higher degree of development at this stage of life, and the source of any good which emanates from it. The child, playing composedly, zealously and patiently, is then likely to become a composed, zealous and patient worker. Child’s play is not

a trifle but it has a profound relevance and significance; mothers, you should develop your children's play; fathers, you should protect and safeguard it (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, p. 49).

The authors further stressed that, by touching objects while playing, children make their body stronger, learn to use their senses, distinguish themselves from their surroundings, become aware of their strengths, "drive their personality towards self-discovery", acquire their initial knowledge, train their memory, develop perceptiveness, become prepared for abstractive thinking, shape their will and character, and establish relationships with others (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, pp. 49–50). Strzemeska and Weryho also recommended protecting and guiding children's play. This message eventually led to a number of controversies in discussing the role of both the Froebelian educational materials and the teachers themselves, although Strzemeska and Weryho jointly stressed, in line with Froebel's vision, that independent, uninterrupted and autonomous play was the first right of a child, which should be respected as long as he/she wanted. According to the authors, "play should not be perceived as a drill or an obligation to complete a certain course, construction, wickerwork, etc., as required by the curricula of some kindergartens, or by course books – this should rather imply being part of your child's life, duties and pleasures" (Strzemeska, Weryho 1895, pp. 51–52).

It is apparent that a new and universal approach to play is developing, expressed through the teacher's approach to play expressed in revealing the respect to child's free play. The importance and value of freedom in play is stressed frequently by all Froebel's followers and stays in kindergarten education as a pedagogical, timeless value.

### DIDACTIC MATERIALS – GIFTS

Froebel was also the first educator who had seen the importance of play for educational purposes. In order to do this, he designed tailored educational materials, the set of blocks called *gifts*. He did not entirely reject ready-made toys, including dolls, animals and pushchairs, but he paid special attention to *gifts*.

Weryho in her book entitled *Jak zająć dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym (How to get pre-school children involved)* (1900) viewed all the Froebelian gifts as having a limited impact, serving the purpose of recreating knowledge acquired, and being useful only in the field of spatial geometry and the study of flat figures. The solution she proposed was to treat these materials as toys and to give the child an opportunity to use them for spontaneous creations, and to combine chats and activities involving such materials with other types of activities, including drawing, moulding and modelling.

Similarly, Cicimirska (1928) stressed that the educational process, according to Froebel, should be deeply grounded in exploring the child's soul and appealing to his/her natural inclination towards movement and learning. To foster the child's intellectual development, teachers should use a system of plays, materials referred

to as *gifts*, and creative activities, such as modelling, gluing, drawing, constructing, lacing and folding, as well as singing, games, gymnastics, chats, illustrations, poems and fairy tales. These were perceived as activities inspiring children to construct or destroy, imitate or create.

This is not merely providing toys, but a matter of making available mathematically structured material from which and with which children could learn. Material which allows children to occupy their minds and is the tool to develop abstractive thinking.

## CONCLUSIONS

Froebel's pedagogical thought, as implemented and developed in the Polish lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was mainly reflected in practical measures entailing the organisation of education for small children with a new humanistic approach. Froebel's educational philosophy, his views on children's play, natural regularities and rights intrinsically connected with the child's development, were disseminated in magazines, guidebooks and brochures.

A number of profound educational concepts of Friedrich Froebel stayed still actual and re-valued in contemporary preschool education, especially Froebel's philosophy and vision of the child, respect for children as human beings, their development and play, the pre-school education model based on gifts. The Froebelians re-assessed perception of play and perceived the value of educational materials – gifts.

However, in order to avoid a narrow and one-sided interpretation of Froebel's model, it appears of utmost importance to analyze the original sources and publications released by this great pedagogue. There is also an urgent need for numerous, multi-faceted and large-scale studies which would present the quality and understanding of the education philosophy developed by Froebel and his followers, as well as studies which would verify the hypotheses concerning the uniqueness, or outdatedness, of this educational approach, revealing the truth of its concepts, dimensions and values.

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### STRESZCZENIE

W artykule opisano wartość myśli i praktyki pedagogicznej Friedricha Froebela w polskiej edukacji przedszkolnej. Ukazując tło historyczne, autorka skoncentrowała się przede wszystkim na poglądach znakomitych polskich Froeblierek: Justyny Strzemeskiej, Marii Weryho, Zofii Żukiewiczowej, Natalii Cicimirskiej. Rozważania dotyczą następujących aspektów: wizji dziecka, poglądów na temat edukacji i zabawy, roli nauczyciela i wykorzystania materiałów dydaktycznych (tzw. darów). Jak wykazują analizy, wiele poglądów edukacyjnych Froebela zachowało aktualność i są cenione we współczesnej edukacji przedszkolnej, zwłaszcza: unikalność każdego dziecka, szacunek dla dzieci, ich rozwój i prawo do swobodnej zabawy, edukacja przedszkolna z wykorzystaniem darów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziecko; edukacja przedszkolna; koncepcja Froebela; Froeblianki

