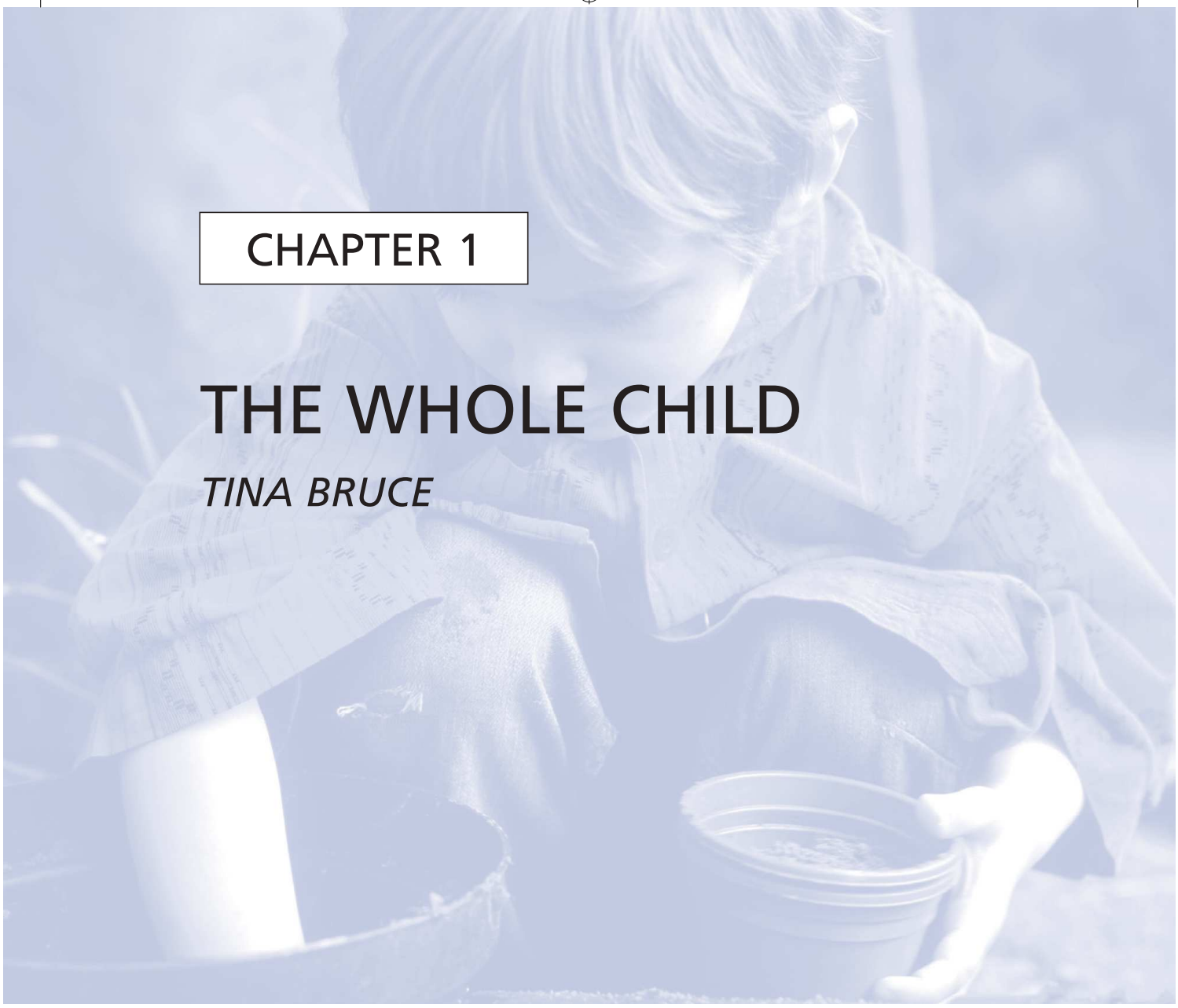

CHAPTER 1

THE WHOLE CHILD

TINA BRUCE

The whole child – the child's relationship with self, others and the universe

At regular intervals in the history of the world, there are clashes between people who hold different views of the world. Sometimes a way of thinking will creep quietly and gently into people's minds, difficult to put into words, almost a group feeling that this is how things are or ought to be. At other times there is a clarion call for change, and old moth-eaten ideas are ruthlessly attacked and put on the rubbish dump. This is as true for theoretical frameworks as it is for political systems and governments.

The Froebelian framework that is put forward in this book is not a new one. It started life in the middle of the nineteenth century – the period of the Enlightenment. But it still has a time-honoured place in early childhood

education and care. This is because a good framework transforms itself and is as relevant today as it was when it was first formed. The principles and philosophy of Friedrich Froebel have lasting value and have become a navigational tool, leading reflective practitioners in different parts of the world into a new era. In this way, something which started as a small idea has rippled out into something larger and of lasting value.This is well expressed in a saying on the notice board outside a Quaker Meeting House in Hammersmith recently:

> I set my hope on the small inner circles which ripple outwards and in doing so transform and grow, changing self and others.

The Enlightenment, which certainly influenced the original thinking of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), has at its heart several key features. These are that:

- people need to be educated to think for themselves and not to rely on the thinking of others in authority to tell them what they should think
- there should be tolerance such that we can put our ideas into the public domain without fear of retribution from political, religious or other such authorities that have power to punish those whose ideas they disapprove of
- the past is seen as a resource to inform and transform the present and the future.

These ideas are strongly represented in this book which is about how Froebelian practice is being developed today in the UK. Froebel was influenced by the German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). But it is also important to remember that the Scottish Enlightenment was responsible for a surge forward in thinking which had particular features. These are also central in this book. Broadie (2007) is of the view that the Scottish Enlightenment uniquely involved a close-knit community of thinkers who shared, debated and reflected on ideas together, such as the two friends, David Hume and Adam Smith.

The group who initiated this book are in that mould. The Froebel network in Edinburgh comes from a long and respected tradition, which has allowed depth of discussions, some of which have been, and will continue to be, robust and challenging. Feeling safe enough to explore and critically reflect (through being linked into a Froebel network of this kind) has led to the practitioners feeling able to discuss regularly the educational principles of Friedrich Froebel, and to study them with rigour through short one-day courses and an accredited Froebel course at the University of Edinburgh. This kind of close-knit community is important, but contact with the wider world of education is also important. Just as the literati groups which were such a feature of the Scottish Enlightenment linked with commerce, science, and ecclesiastical life, so the Edinburgh Froebel network is strongly linked with educational ideas beyond. This provides opportunities to put in the public domain (such as this book and conferences)

the reflections on Froebelian principles that have developed, leading to consideration of what Froebelian practice might look like, and how it transforms (without losing its essence) to take in the rich cultural diversity across the world.

Central to Froebel's thinking is the idea that education is about the relationship between self, others and the universe. These elements make up a whole and lead to an understanding and respect for the unity that is in all things. Nowadays we no longer describe this as 'unity'. Instead, we usually talk about the whole child.

The whole child – what does it mean?

This term has become a cliché. It means different things to different people, but in this book it is developed to have meaning for Froebelians today. It involves an updating of terminology which ensures that the concept of unity remains, but as a navigational tool that has use, application and meaning today.

In developing this concept of the 'whole' (unity), Froebel brought together many existing ideas. In doing so, across the years, slowly and gradually, by the time he died in 1852, he had developed an understanding of the need to see children as whole people with thoughts, feelings, physical selves, and relationships to others. He placed the child in context, not in isolation from others or the universe. He did this in a larger way than those before him, but he used the past and others more contemporary to inform his approach. This thinking about the whole child continues to inform practitioners today, but it needs to be transformed into the context of today and the cultural setting in which it is to be used. Just as there are no two children who are the same (although they all have physical selves, intellectual lives, feelings and relationships) in the same way there are no two settings or classrooms the same (although they might have Froebelians practising in them). Froebelian practice embraces diversity, held together by elements which make it whole (giving it unity).

Like Kant, Froebel believed that we experience life through the senses and movements, through which we have sensory and kinaesthetic feedback. Also like Kant, he believed that we have the possibility to transform these experiences and to develop, in doing this, the symbolic. The symbolic life developed by the child is, in Froebel's view, a crucial part of being human. Experience which is real and direct with materials, nature and people is the bedrock of this, and childhood play is another central part of its development.

Learning by active participation and making connections

Most educators today would agree that children learn by doing and active participation and initiation in their lives, but Froebel's insistence on the wholeness

of that experience is still not understood or embedded. Children might study trees, or grow plants in the garden, but for Froebel this needs to connect with the whole. There must be wholeness and unity of experience, which makes the meaning great for the learning child or adult. Trees take soil and air and they also give to the air and the soil. They contribute to the way the climate functions in different parts of the world. Children might watch fish in an aquarium, but they need to see a river and learn which fish live there and how. They need to understand about freshwater fish and sea fish. They need to see the sea to fully understand this. They need to know about running water environments and still water ponds. It is surprising how much children can learn and understand about nature study in the first seven years of their lives. This wholeness of learning is the kind that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Each aspect of the experience links to another, opening up deeper understanding of the whole. Froebel stresses the importance of interconnected experiences. The result is a whole (unified) experience.

In the same way, if learning about fruit and vegetables is to have meaning, logic, coherence and to be a whole understanding, it will need to be about more than presenting children with plastic fruit. An apple, for example, grows on a tree. Children need to experience this. Some schools now plant orchards, but this is not yet widespread, or considered to be part of basic learning. Apple trees rely on bees to cross-pollinate. They need the right climate (temperature, sun, rain). Learning about different apples and what they are for (cooking, eating) and then learning to apply this with recipes, or sharing fruit to eat makes the study of apples fascinating, deep and meaningful for children.

Sharing fruit together brings a different wholeness to the child's development and learning. The relationship with self will bring the child to understand which fruits are favourite, how to eat them, cut them up, enjoy the experience. But it will also connect the child with others. If several children want the one banana what happens then? There can be discussion of whether it could be cut or broken into pieces. The child who has visited botanical gardens and seen bunches of bananas grow, or visited countries where they grow naturally, will quickly become aware of the temperature and climate bananas need in order to grow. This connects the child with the wider universe. So does making compost with the skin, and turning it to soil. Would this help the apple tree to grow?

Through these examples, which show just a few of the possibilities through which children learn to be whole people, the importance of unity of experience which is inter-connected is clear. So often the learning experiences offered to children lack these important elements, and so the learning is far less than it could be. This is a waste of childhood, which is when most learning, (and certainly the foundations of the dispositions which encourage it), takes place. In the chapters which follow, the practical impact of the need for wholeness of first-hand, direct experience will be ever present and central.

The child as a symbol user and maker

A symbol is something which stands for and represents something else. Once a child is free from being rooted in the present, and can go back and forward in time, the symbolic life takes off. Walking, talking and pretending all seem to come together. Pretending and talking is part of having a symbolic life.

In the last section several of the examples given feature Froebel's emphasis on the importance of the study of and relationship with nature as part of the basic education of a child. Song, rhyme, stories are also interconnecting and whole experiences with literature, music which involve children in symbolic ways. These also connect children with self, others, and the universe. We see this in the Movement Games and the Mother Songs. Because cultures develop or vary, through different historic times, or in different parts of the world, these are no longer used in the way they were originally. But the essential messages remain.

Children learn best when they can use what they know and understand to learn about what is new to them. They use what they know as a jumping-off point, equipped with dealing with what is not familiar to them. For example, once you know that apples grow on trees, it is possible to understand that oranges do too. You do not have to grow an orange tree to be able to understand quite a bit about how that happens. The important thing, as Froebel realised, is that children are not required to learn what is beyond biological maturity.

Developing the symbolic life of the child through music, song and rhyme

The same approach is used in the choice of songs, music, rhymes and stories selected by Froebelian practitioners today. The subjects for songs, movement games (finger and action songs) and stories that Froebel chose were based on everyday experiences, and the physical self-knowledge of children. These were about the baker, the dovecot, the charcoal burner, the carpenter, for example. Now children sing about buses, cars, aeroplanes, doctors, buying buns. But they do not focus on these in respecting the work being done, or understanding the processes of baking the buns. Froebel's respect for craft and work essential for everyday life and communities perhaps needs reactivation.

Typically the songs sung to and with children are rather superficial in their content, and in the melodies and rhythms. Perhaps this is because few practitioners in the UK today can sight-read any more, or play by ear. Before the days of records, CDs and DVDs, computers and other technologies bringing tunes and music into the home or early childhood setting ready-made, adults learned to sing from memory complex songs, or to play musical instruments by

ear, and, in some circles, to sight-read music. The words of songs, the complexity of illustrations in songbooks with layers of symbolic meaning, all need attention in the musical and movement aspects of early childhood education. Children are being underestimated in this respect because the adults they spend time with are not equipped to help them develop as much as they could, if given the opportunities. They are also functioning at lower levels in relation to the sophistication of the melody and rhythms, or the movements that are part of the music and movement experience.

Children need to spend time with adults whose minds have been expanded through music and dance, three-and two-dimensional visual arts, literature and drama, as central to this. Children depend on adults to teach them about these through participation in their culture. Depending on the adults they spend time with, they will either have less-than-whole or whole experiences. They will either live whole, fulfilled artistic lives, or not. This is the difference between a broad, rich and deep education, and narrow schooling.

The cultural aspect of educating children is a crucial strand, but so is the biological. Songs and dances and action songs and finger rhymes, used and developed in the Froebelian tradition build on what the child naturally does. Examples are walking, jumping, hopping, skipping, sliding and running.

Developing the symbolic life of the child through movement and dance

The symbolic life burgeons as children begin to walk, talk and pretend. You can walk round a chair, but you can only walk parallel to a wall. Toddlers love these kinds of movement games, and adults, family or practitioners can spend happy times together making up songs to accompany this, all about straight lines and round and round.

Froebel developed 'wandering games' and 'visiting games'. These involved meeting people in a particular order, greetings of characters, invitations and events (imagined and real). The dances were designed for children who had developed enough experience and biological maturity (typically 5–8 years of age) to form figures of eight, and other shapes. There were representations of, for example, a snail. This made a spiral shape, echoing nature. Other movements showed a woodland, swimming, birds flying, tying a bow, planting seeds, working in the garden, feeding chickens and a cat playing with a mouse.

The mill wheel involved children in dancing formed of two concentric circles, with the outer circle moving faster than the inner circle. This gave tangible form to a scientific concept in the working of machinery and technology. Games suitable for the culture and everyday lives of children growing up today in different parts of the world need to be developed in the Froebelian traditions.

Knowledge, everyday life and beauty and how they connect with each other

All of these artistic experiences developed the whole child through the ideas and imagination, physical body and the emotional mind. Froebel believed that these were all interconnected as a coherent and integrated whole. He called them the forms of knowledge, life and beauty, respectively. Everything, in his view, is interconnected. He talked about the need to link, and link as central to being educated.

According to Froebel, symbols hold meanings which grow out of active life, and which translate actions back to the inner meaning of life. It is not enough to observe and describe or represent a garden with plants growing in it. It is essential to act on what is seen and described, through digging, sowing seeds, planting bulbs, and looking after the plants and insect life.

The same applies in the social life of the home or early childhood setting. Both adults and children learn through each other as they play and work together. Often educators say that children learn with other children, but Froebel emphasised the way that children and adults learn through each other.

Through their own actions, children manipulate objects, learn through people, represent experiences symbolically. All of this is important, but Froebel's important contribution is to show the importance of the child's autonomy and intrinsic motivation in this. He calls it the self-activity of the child. The child is learning to think for him or herself, to know how to get the help needed when needed, to willingly accept being taught directly when it makes sense.

The Gifts and Occupations

Froebel was the first educationalist to place wooden blocks at the heart of a child's education. He saw play with these had the potential to teach children mathematics, language, about beauty and artistic endeavours, scientific construction, stories, the representation of everyday life and to be physically competent and skilled. In the 1830s he stressed the importance of children using these blocks in their free play, with adults supporting and joining in appropriately (Liebschner, 1992). He became more prescriptive in 1844, but Liebschner suggests that as he saw practitioners invade and take over the children's learning, he moved again to a less adult-dominated approach.

The degree to which adults lead children in their play remains an area of contention for the practitioners and parents of today. It seems that it is fine for adults to join children in their play providing they are sensitive to children's ideas. After all, the aim is to develop the child's learning, and not so much the learning of the adult! Adults need to build their own constructions alongside

the child, rather than take over that of the child. In order to educate rather than school and instruct children in narrow ways, practitioners need to be good and informed observers. They need to know about child development which they use as a navigational tool. They also need to have played with blocks themselves, so that they know the potential of the material. (The same applies to clay, sand, water or any other material offered to children.) They need to have studied the mathematical, scientific and dramatic opportunities too. The Tickell Review (2011) of the English Early Years Framework strongly states the importance, when working with other people's children, of educated, mature, well-trained and qualified practitioners.

The Gifts – wooden blockplay

The first Gift is the soft sphere. The second is the wooden sphere, cube and cylinder, suspended on string. This demonstrates the law of opposites. What is known is challenged by experience, and new connections with what is known before need to be made. Nowadays the first and second Gifts are virtually never seen, and only the Froebelian principle behind them remains, although babies are still often and typically given the soft sphere as a first Gift. Most people do not realise that this is a link to Froebel's educational approach.

These first and second Gifts can be rotated and spun such that they transform into different shapes. It is significant that the wooden blocks (Gifts 3 to 5) were presented to children in a whole box with a sliding lid, which was slid from underneath leaving a cube made up of smaller cubes. The parts make the whole – a central Froebelian message. Each box of the Gifts contained small blocks of different shapes, carefully thought through. These are not used in their original form today. Froebel was a mathematician by training, and a forester, and it is these aspects which make wooden blockplay particularly important in a child's education. The modern form of Froebel's Gifts can be found in those known as Unit blocks, Hollow blocks, mini-unit and mini-hollow blocks. There is a direct link through Community Playthings with Froebel's first school in Keihau (Huleatt, 2011). Each block, in the Froebelian tradition, links with others. The natural wood links the child to nature, and this connection to trees needs to be made explicit. The child needs to see the maple tree (or, if it is an old set of blocks, the beech tree) from which the blocks are made in order to have a whole experience.

The Occupations – workshop experiences

The Occupations are the sorts of things that would be found in workshop areas of early childhood settings. In today's context they include drawing, painting, clay, paper-folding and junk-modelling, cutting, pattern-making with shape

boards and tessellations, printing and paper-pricking, weaving, sewing and construction kits. But they are offered separately and in a fragmented way. The unity and interconnectedness between them has become lost, and needs to be re-established in ways which are right for diverse communities in different parts of the world today. Each Occupation offers children different challenges, and children learn to generate their own problems and to solve them, to be imaginative and creative, physically and mindfully skilled. The Occupations need to be made a whole experience again, if they are to make their full contribution to the learning of children.

Play

Froebel (anticipating Vygotsky, 1978) saw play as the highest form of learning. This was because it orchestrates learning into a whole. Nowadays it is seen as an integrating mechanism. Drawing on the wealth of research and theories of play, 12 features emerge (Bruce, 1991, updated 2011b) which resonate with the Froebelian traditions in updated form. When these co-ordinate the play develops a free-flowing character, and so the 12 features identified as central to play are named 'free flow play' (Bruce, 1991, updated 2011b).

1 Children draw upon the first-hand experiences they have had. They bring these into their play. The richer their experiences of ideas, thoughts, feelings, relationships and their physical bodies, the richer the play can be.
2 Play shows us what children understand about rules of different kinds. These will be social greetings and partings, organisational, fairness, singing games, stories, mathematics and many others kinds of rules. When they play children are in control, and they make their own rules.
3 Children find props, or make them when they play. They get the idea that this is possible from seeing other people play. Making dens, pretending leaves are plates and twigs are cutlery or chopsticks are open-ended props, which lend themselves to the development of imagination and creativity through play.
4 Play cannot be forced upon children. A child has to be in the right frame of mind and mood to play. Children choose to play or not. Play will not fit into tight timetables. Children need time and space and people who encourage play in order for it to flourish and develop with depth. Play needs the right circumstances, conditions and atmosphere. Then it burgeons.
5 In their play, children escape from the here and now. They can transform the past, and shape the future to their liking, experiment with situations, rearrange, reflect, create alternatives, feel stronger and equipped to make things better in future, dealing with things differently. They can recapture past pleasures, reassure, enjoy. Children manage pain and come to terms with life in their play. They find what they value most. They hold on to what they treasure in their play. They become more resilient (Brown, 2004).

6 Children pretend when they play, moving from the literal to the more abstract, from being like other people, to being in the character or the story they make up.
7 Froebel stressed that education involves children in better knowing themselves, others and the universe. Playing alone is part of this. There is a difference between being lonely and feeling alone and getting to know self through having the personal space that encourages this. Many children and adults today do not have enough personal space, and this makes reflection and thoughtful action difficult.
8 Children often mirror and imitate each other as they play. They may enjoy each other's companionship without wishing to directly interact and engage with each other.
9 Children who develop their play with great depth will vary the nature of their play, sometimes playing alone, sometimes in parallel companionship and sometimes co-operatively. When children play co-operatively they need to be clear about the theme and who is being who. Each child will develop their own play agenda and follow it, while needing to be sensitive to the needs, thoughts and feelings of fellow players. The recognition that they are part of a whole play episode develops. Some adults have not yet developed this ability, as seen when they invade and take over the play, rather than joining in with the understanding that their play agenda is no more important than that of anyone else participating in the play.
10 Children who play well are deeply involved in their play. They are not distracted in their concentration and focused learning by events or others. Being engaged in learning is one of the hallmarks and predictors of successful future learning in the school system. Childhood play is an appropriate form through which concentration develops.
11 Children who are involved in their play are able to apply their learning. The application of knowledge is key to sound education. Development and learning come together, resulting in technical competence and skills. It is not so much that children learn new things in their play. It is more that they try out what they have been learning and thinking, feeling and physically doing when they play. Play is a powerful tool through which to observe the learning children have been developing, and to see its impact in a child-safe environment.
12 Play takes children to their highest forms of learning, revealing the future inner life. It is a resource which remains deep inside the maturing child, encouraging adult creativity, problem-solving and imagination, and dispositions conducive to the development of future learning. It is an integrating mechanism which makes learning whole and not compartmentalised and fragmented.

It is important that those who spend time with other people's children throughout their professional lives continue to study and observe play.

Froebel's thinking about play was born out of practice. The more he played with children, the more he learned from them. Then he had to modify, change and update his ideas about play, which he continued to do throughout his life. The situation is no different for practitioners today.

Froebel (1782–1852) took the natural play of children and gave it educational status. His pioneering work spread across Europe and into the USA. Later, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) also gave status to play, again using open-ended, natural materials (Taplin, 2010). The central place given to childhood play by Froebel, and subsequently Steiner, contrasts with the approach of Maria Montessori (1869–1952). She felt that children need to engage in real rather play experience, such as pretend cooking. Montessorians today (Montessori Schools Association, 2008) continue to emphasise as defining factors in the child's education having freedom of choice, and the exercise of will and deep engagement, leading to concentration. Freedom of choice is, however, limited to the exercises and experiences of the 'prepared environment' to which the child has been introduced by the trained Montessorian. This is a great contrast to the practice of Froebelians and Steinerians who place play as well as rich first hand experiences at the centre of education. Steinerians are doubtful of the early introduction of technology, such as camera, books, and computers or word processors, mobile phones etc. Froebelians see children as part of their community from the beginning of life, and technology is a part of the lives of children today, to which children take easily and with joy. Through play, children transform, vary, abstract, develop, imagine, create and innovate as they move into the future. Play lifts children to higher levels of functioning than everyday experiences which are literal and in the here and now. Play helps children to transform their learning and take it from the immediate here and now, to the past and future, and to use their experience as a resource, going beyond the real world as increasingly skilled symbol users and symbol makers.

The whole child – including the family and the community

From the Gifts and Occupations, Nature, Movement Games, Mother Songs (with finger rhymes and action songs) and emphasis on play, Froebel developed a whole, unified approach to the education of young children. This had inner logic and cohesion which did not prescribe or constrain the self-activity of the child. Autonomous learning was encouraged, and the child's intrinsic motivation supported by adults, sensitive to what is needed through observation and understanding of child development integrated with thorough knowledge and understanding of the core curriculum areas of experience. For Froebel these were helping children to understand time, space, reasons for things, nature, mathematics, literature and the arts, movement and the

physical self-such that they were educated in relating to self, others and the universe through the forms of knowledge (intellectual life) everyday life (physically participating) and beauty (emotional life of feelings and relationships). Then the child would be a whole person.

There is another aspect of the notion of the whole child which has permeated this chapter, but needs more articulation, and that is the way that family and community are at the heart of education. The child is not separate from other people, in the home or in the community and wider world. This is the focus of the next chapter.

Reflective questions and practical actions

Observe a child or children at play. Using the features outlined, reflect on whether the play is of deep quality.

- In your setting, do you consider that you offer first-hand experiences to children, which are interconnected and whole? Can you make changes which would do so with more impact on the learning taking place?

Introductory reading

Bruce, T. (2011b) *Learning through Play*. 2nd edn. London: Hodder Education.

Community Playthings (2008) *I Made a Unicorn! Open-ended Play with Blocks and Simple Materials*. Robertsbridge, E. Sussex: Community Playthings.

Further reading

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