

The Second Biennial Conference of the International Froebel Society was held in Dublin, Thursday June 29th - Saturday July 1st, at the Froebel College of Education. This well-organized conference on the subject "Froebel: From play to work - taking Froebel forward", featured four keynote speakers. Dr. Francis Douglas addressed the relationship between Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori. Despite the obvious differences, Douglas observed some interesting basic similarities between them. Both, he contended, based their views on observation, and they both appreciated play and discipline in a similar way. Dr. Kevin Brehony, whose keynote opened the second day of the conference, paid attention to Froebel's views on manual training. He placed Froebel's thoughts in the wider context of his time, relating them to the thoughts of Uno Cygnaeus, John Dewey, Georg Kerschensteiner and Celestine Freinet.

[Note: The other two keynote speakers were: Dr. Karl Neumann and Dr. Barbara Beatty]

As a Ph.D. student in the history of early education, what remained in my memory from these keynotes was especially the historical content. I was for example fascinated by Douglas's description of the formalisation of Froebel's pedagogy in the late nineteenth century - I have seen similar tendencies in my own source materials from Stockholm, Sweden - and his comparison between Froebel and Montessori. I also enjoyed Brehony's description of the relationship between Froebel and other pedagogues that were sceptical towards bookishness.

The way the keynotes connected Froebel as a historical phenomenon with early years education today also interested me. Historians tend to view Froebel, and the likes of him, as separated from the present. One of the great advantages of the IFS-conference was that it highlighted the fact that history does not exist in isolation, and that the thoughts of the nineteenth-century can have relevance today. The keynote speakers contributed to this, for example by discussing what Froebel could be for us today, and how his efforts to formulate a pedagogy based on movement and creativity is something we can still learn from.

The conference offered a smorgasbord of sessions with topics ranging from primary music education in Estonia to how Froebel can be used in teaching college students creativity and abstract thinking. Some of these sessions were especially meaningful to me. These were the sessions that featured presentations which, if I may borrow an expression from Brehony's keynote speech, were less interested in what Froebel really said and more interested in what people in different times and contexts thought he said. Maura O'Connor's discourse on "An interpretation of Froebelian theory and practice in Ireland in the late nineteenth century", and Ludwig Liegle's talk on "Froebelian kindergartens in the Jewish community in Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century" were two presentations I really enjoyed. Both O'Connor and Liegle described how Froebel's ideas were adjusted to different contexts. O'Connor showed how Froebel tended to be interpreted in a formalistic fashion at the turn of the nineteenth century in Ireland, and how kindergarten was regarded as the foundation of manual instruction. Liegle demonstrated how the interpretation of Froebel in the Jewish community of Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century was quite orthodox even as the language of instruction was Hebrew and the religion was Jewish. There was also a greater emphasis on agricultural work, at least in the collective settlements.

These oral presentations clearly showed how different settings give rise to different interpretations of Froebel. In this respect these presentations were immensely stimulating for me and my work on the establishment of early years education in Sweden. Among other things, these presentations gave rise to a number of questions. What I, for instance, would like to know more about is the context that causes these different interpretations. What conditions can account for these different interpretations of Froebel?

Margaret Kernan's talk on "Outdoors in early childhood education: reinventing Froebel's garden across space and time in Dublin" is especially interesting in this respect. She addressed different interpretations of the concept of Froebel's "garden", and showed how these interpretations are shaped by practical circumstances, economic resources and the physical conditions of the kindergarten. These are the kind of circumstances I would like to know more about! I would like to learn more about what it was that caused the formal interpretation of Froebel at the turn of the century in Ireland, and what the structures were that caused the orthodox interpretation of Froebel in Jewish communities in Palestine.

On the second day of the conference I participated in a symposium on Froebelian theory and practice with Blythe Hinitz and Kristen Nawrotzki. Apart from getting the opportunity to present a paper on the introduction of Froebelian practices into Swedish pre-schools, this symposium also gave me the opportunity to listen to two stimulating presentations. Both discussed questions that I think are fundamental in the history of early childhood education. Hinitz discussed the importance of the pioneers of early years education.

Regarding early education on American soil, Hinitz contended that the historical foundation of today's early education programs, despite distortions during dissemination, is based on pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel. Listening to Hinitz I could not help but ask myself if this is the case in Sweden as well. Nawrotzki discussed in her presentation, "In Praise of Dauntless women?", the position and function of teachers in early education as well as the history of early education. She addressed, among other things, the hagiographic tendencies in the historical research on early years education, and showed how there are other ways to interpret the history of the teachers of the early years. Even saints have bad days! A lasting impression from her presentation was the choice and use of historical sources. Listening to Nawrotzki, I found myself trying to figure out how I could get a hold of similar diaries and letters that Nawrotzki based her presentation on, and how they could be of use to me.

In conclusion I must say that I learned a lot from the IFS conference. It was immensely stimulating to meet and discuss matters of early childhood education with researchers whose articles and books I have read. There are only a few conferences that can offer this opportunity. I also benefited from the international perspective that permeated the conference. It was a truly international conference, with participants not only from Europe but also from South Africa and the US. Finally I really enjoyed the practical point of view that the participating kindergarten teachers brought to the conference. To get the chance to speak with teachers from, for example, Norwich, gave me a lot of insights into the concreteness and material existence of early education.

To conclude I cannot but recommend the IFS conference warmly. Not only for kindergarten teachers, but also for historians interested in early years education or the history of childhood. This is the

conference where you get to meet the researchers that you want to meet. It is also the conference with the international perspective that is so badly needed no matter if you are a practicing kindergarten teacher or a historian.