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Re-imagining the Froebelian influence on early childhood education as a dynamic and ever-changing web of encounter

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ABSTRACT

Friedrich Froebel is often positioned in contemporary landscapes of early childhood education as a ‘pioneer’, strongly associated with an emphasis on self-directed activity and learning through nature. While Froebel’s philosophy has clearly had an impact on how we think about young children today, in this article we argue that we need to re-imagine what counts as Froebel’s influence so that it goes well beyond the sayings and doings of one individual. In line with this special issue, we seek to bewilder the concept of the pioneer by instead re-imagining Froebel’s influence as a dynamic and ever-changing web of encounter. In conceptualising this web of encounter, we think with Karen Barad’s ‘entangled genealogies’ and introduce into working with these genealogies, the historical methods of prosopography and material histories of the book. Using digitised extracts from late 19th century texts by or about Froebel as a starting point, we attempt to present small parts of a web of encounter drawing in complex national, cultural, economic and material contexts, along with the contributions of multiple individuals, many of whom have been forgotten or side-lined. We argue that exploring and documenting Froebel’s influence in this way can support critical and lively reflection on the past, present and future of early childhood education.

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Introduction

Friedrich Froebel is often cited as a ‘pioneer’ of early childhood education. Froebel’s life and writing has had an undeniable impact on how we think about young children today and the institutions of early childhood education. In this article however, aligned with the special issue’s call to trouble and bewilder the concept of ‘the pioneer’ (Snaza 2013), we argue that Froebel’s influence can be reconceptualised to enable novel insights into early childhood education. Rather than thinking in terms of a legacy of just Froebel, we want to play with new ways of approaching the Froebelian legacy as a dynamic, ever-changing web of experiences, encounters and voices from around the world and over time. In reconceptualising Froebelian approaches to early childhood in this way, we aim to open up new ways of looking back in order to look forward (New 2013). That is, we seek new

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and playful ways of engaging with histories of early childhood in order to inspire openings in early childhood research and practice today.

We begin by briefly considering Froebel in the contemporary landscape of early childhood education before exploring how Froebel might be re-imagined through thinking with Barad's (2007) concept of entanglement, in which experiences are endlessly intertwined and mutually dependent. We follow diffractive lines of enquiry (Osgood 2019) through three webs of encounter around the Froebelian influence on early childhood education. Osgood and Mohandas (2020, 68) explain following diffractive lines of enquiry when considering a Montessori approach as 'pulling different strings from historical accounts, information from websites, visual images, [Montessori] literature, news articles, affective memories, personal journals and more'; Diffractively reading the various elements through each other' enables us to 'create new and generative stories'. In this paper, we diffractively read texts by or about Froebel through each other, to shift attention towards what is lost and silenced in how we think about Froebel and his influence.

In following diffractive lines of enquiry, we introduce and pay particular attention to two historical approaches: prosopography and material histories of the book. Prosopography as a method involves looking for connections between individuals' lives. It highlights the patterns of influence that exist between individuals, including those whose contribution has been marginalised. In placing an emphasis on material histories of the book, we hope to trouble the idea that to understand Froebel is to understand texts that showcase 'what he said'. In turning our attention to all of the text (e.g., prefaces, footnotes, marginalia etc.) that surrounds what has been deemed to be the most important part, we launch critical and creative reflections regarding Froebel's influence on early childhood education.

In the first web of encounter, we turn attention to a translator's preface, generating questions about gendered power relations in the publishing industry. In the second web of encounter, we consider publishers' advertisements appearing in the preliminary pages of a text and generate questions about the commercial benefits of thinking about early childhood education as a 'canon' of influence. In the final web of encounter, we explore sales catalogues of kindergarten objects, generating questions about how early childhood pedagogies are embroiled with the rarefication of particular material objects and their marketisation. Taken together, these adventures are intended to trouble how we think about Froebel and what counts as 'Froebelian'. Going further, we seek to unsettle the dominant paradigm of developmentalism, which is often propped up by what is thought to be the influence of the so-called 'pioneers'. Unpicking what we mean when we talk about 'Froebel' helps us to challenge the assumptions that underpin how we think about children, childhood and early childhood education.

Reflecting on our webs of encounter in the final discussion, we suggest that they are a useful tool as part of the critical reflective work of the early childhood 'pedagogista' (Vintimilla 2018) as they can open up how we understand and think about the influence of so-called pioneers in early childhood education. We aim to welcome back some of the complexity and trouble that has been written out of how we imagine Froebel's influence primarily through commercial and ideological forces shaping the sector.

Contemporary imaginings of Froebel

In contemporary perspectives on early childhood education, Froebel and Froebelian education tend to be coupled with particular principles, values, beliefs and practices. It is rare to find that Froebel's own writings are part of early childhood education qualifications and training, while at the same time, introductory courses will often emphasise Froebel's influence on how we approach the education of young children today. Most typically, Froebel's legacy is equated with the valuing of children's creative self-activity and relationships to the natural world (Strauch-Nelson 2012) and a vision of the child as in a state of 'harmonious and holistic development' (Blackburn 2020, 287) whereby they should be allowed to develop 'naturally' without too much interference from adults around them. This has led to a positioning of Froebel as useful in pushing back against overly academic discourses surrounding early childhood and school-readiness (Hoskins and Smedley 2019). In addition to this way of conceptualising the child, Froebel is often positively associated with the empowerment of women via advocating for the conceptualisation of mother as the first educator (New 2013) and the call for women to take up a fundamental role in early education systems and thereby in wider public life (Bakker 2013). There also tends to be an association of Froebel with particular activities for children, including singing and singing games (Blackburn 2020; Bruce 2021) or the guides produced by bodies such as The Froebel Trust which relate to activities such as woodwork or clay modelling (e.g., Moorhouse 2021; Parker, n.d.).

There are interesting tensions in how we think about Froebel's influence today. Froebel is often associated with placing a value on children's free-flow play. There is great trust for the child's 'natural' activity, as expressed through such statements in 'Pedagogics of the Kindergarten' as:

By life, the child appears predominantly connected with Nature, with the all; by love, he appears pre-eminently united with humanity; and by light, he appears to be one with wisdom, with God (1896, 11)

At the same time, a lot of what follows in this text is highly prescriptive instruction for mothers and (women) educators to follow in relation to particular material objects and activities (known as 'The Gifts and Occupations'). Without such instructions, mothers and educators would fall short in enabling children's full capacities to unfold:

True, the natural and unspoiled feeling of the mother often hits upon the right thing to do; but this right thing is done by her too unconsciously and too unconnectedly, it is not repeated consciously enough; still less is it constantly and progressively developed, and so it is not logically enough built up.

So while Froebel's emphasis on creative self-activity has been equated to adults taking a step back and interfering less, Froebel's original writings propose that adults have a fundamental role to play in supporting children's creative self-activity and are negligent if they do not do this with the necessary thoughtfulness (Froebel and Jarvis 1896). These twists and turns of Froebelian and neo-Froebelian practice have been carefully documented in the work of Nawrotzki (2006) in an English context. Nawrotzki highlights how 'Froebel' has been used as a discourse in early childhood education that constantly changes depending on the needs of the sector invoking The Froebelian legacy.

Against this backdrop, we position our research and this article as a reconceptualist exploration of Froebel and Froebel's legacy. We do not self-identify as Froebelian educators, and we are keen to engage in a critical reflection on what is taken to be 'Froebelian'. Our explorations are framed by a commitment to reconceptualism in early childhood education as modelled through the work of 'pedagogistas' such as Vintimilla (2018) and Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo et al. (2015).

Re-imagining Froebel as a web of encounters

Theoretically underpinning the article is our commitment to conceptualising Froebelian influence as a sprawling, endless and dynamic web of encounters over time and space. In thinking about Froebel in this way, we are drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of entanglement and more specifically, entangled genealogies. Barad uses the term 'entanglement' to explain how all phenomena comprise endless elements in the world, which whether visibly connected or not, mutually constitute one another through their 'intra-action'. These elements are not actually separate but can be identified separately only through the ways that they interact with each other; thus, they are in a state of 'intra-action' rather than 'interaction'. The conceptualisation of entanglement is inspired by developments in quantum physics which reveal 'quantum entanglement' whereby miniscule particles which appear to be separate seem to be simultaneously influencing the behaviour of one another.

Through discussions of quantum entanglement and its implications for how we think about the world, including in the social sciences, Barad draws our attention to how everything is connected and specific identities can only be parsed from one another as a result of how they are connected to each other. In the case of re-imagining the Froebelian influence on early childhood education, this would mean that the idea of 'Froebel' is an illusion that we allow ourselves only as a result of the underlying reality, which is in fact an endless and ever-changing web of connections. Froebel is not a single man's life and/or writing. Instead, our identification of something we wish to call 'Froebel' comes about only through dynamic, spiralling and ever-changing intra-actions.

One of the ways to think about entanglement is as a commitment to the logic of AND rather than OR (MacLure 2013), which Lecercle (2002) describes as the logic of dreams. In the logic of AND, we cannot define Froebel and Froebel's influence on early childhood through what it is and what it is not, but rather we see how an infinite myriad of associations, possibilities and connections ripple through what we mean when we talk about Froebel. The influence of Froebel on early childhood education is the influence of everything, which we can only begin to embrace and grapple with through a spirit of welcoming in the trouble and mess by following 'diffractive lines of enquiry' (Osgood 2019, 111). When we say 'the influence of everything', we are thinking of the cultural, historical, material, social and corporeal elements that rattle through the 'Froebel discourse' as it is termed by Nawrotzki (2006): the human and more-than-human connections that swirl not only around 'Froebel' but through 'Froebel'. The influence of Froebel on early childhood education might be the influence of a particular leader of the kindergarten movement and their interpretations of Froebel's writing, which are in turn shaped by their social context and personal agenda; it might be the blueprints of a particular architect associated with the Froebelian movement as well as the buildings

themselves; it might be the objects advertised in a pamphlet of 'Froebelian' supplies; it might be the dynamics of global trade that enable or prevent material objects to make their way to different parts of the world; it might be the entrepreneurs that take an opportunity to manufacture objects in a particular country at a particular time; it might be the investment capital that supports this manufacturing enterprise to start; and so on. The examples mentioned here are just that – examples. There is no comprehensive list of 'the influence of everything' but, in the spirit of the diffractive method, seeing some of these elements not only in relation to each other but through each other, can help us to reconceptualise early childhood education and particularly the influence of the so-called 'pioneers'. Diffractive lines of enquiry take us on journeys of endless connection, which in turn generate a dynamic web of encounter: what Barad (2007) refers to as an 'entangled genealogy'. Thinking with these concepts can prompt greater engagement with the silences and voices which are too often left out of the mix (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor 2015), and in this respect, working with entangled genealogies is underpinned by a commitment to social justice. We can encounter much more vibrantly the voices of women and the global majority, for example, when we jump into entangled genealogies that push beyond the canonisation of particular revered individuals. Through engaging in webs of encounter, we engage in 'productive evocations, provocations and general material articulations or reconfigurings of what is and what is possible' (Barad 2007, 389). We can question the dominant narratives surrounding early childhood, such as developmentalism, and the dominant construction of Froebel as a 'pioneer' offering a particular set of definable foundations. Engaging with Froebel becomes a way of opening up new possibilities for early childhood rather than limiting ourselves to a particular set of ways of thinking about early childhood pedagogies. We recognise that we are contributing to ongoing dialogues that aim to reconceptualise early childhood education and the influence of particular thinkers, including Froebel. For example, MacLure and MacRae (2022) have recently explored how both Froebelian and Deleuzian approaches to subjectivity conceive of it as a 'relation of dynamic folding and unfolding of inner life and external world' (54). Thus, while Froebelian philosophy is often presented as a foundation of the dominant paradigm of developmentalism and its constituent binaries (e.g., child/adult, capable/incapable, normal/deviant), alternative interpretations yield different impressions and new possibilities for early childhood education.

As a means to work with entangled genealogies, Barad introduces the approach of 'web-mapping' which essentially involves a visual representation of entanglement. Barad recognises that these visual maps will only ever be an imperfect representation of entanglement since they cannot show infinite and dynamic connections. Web-mapping would ideally have elements moving and shifting constantly, falling away and spiralling back in, and they would go on forever. While visual mapping is always insufficient in its representation of entanglement, it can begin to open up connectedness and thus act as a useful methodological starting point for engaging with entanglement. Mapping connectedness can also be achieved through writing, as Osgood (2019) demonstrates in her writing on glitter in early childhood art pedagogies. Folding together repeated and divergent fragments of text, Osgood explores glitter as a happening and a doing that has no beginning or end. She explores what is possible through diffractive lines of enquiry, which involve the 'telling of entangled, interwoven stories that present endless possibilities' (131).

In this article, we aim to do something similar in relation to Froebel's influence on early childhood education. Rather than creating boundaries around how we conceptualise Froebel's influence, we explore through what might be possible through starting somewhere that we assume to be in the *muddle~middle* (Sellers 2013) and exploring what encounters might emerge from there. These encounters are material, discursive and cultural. They involve other individuals, including many that have been largely written out of what we understand to be Froebel's influence, but they also go beyond particular individuals to connect with myriad aspects of complex and problematic political, social, economic and cultural contexts. In developing a Baradian entangled genealogy, we have taken inspiration from two historical approaches: prosopography and material histories of the book.

Prosopography

A fundamental part of re-imagining Froebel's influence through a web of encounters is to highlight the interconnectedness of various individuals, including those who have been silenced and lost in history. To support this task, we have drawn from the historical method of prosopography which involves simultaneously tracing multiple biographical trajectories and intergenerational influences with an emphasis on connections rather than individual lives and texts. In the history of education, prosopographical work has been especially important in surfacing the lives and contributions of women educators over time (Goodman and Martin 2013; Martin 2003, 2012, 2014). When adopting a prosopographical approach, we are always asking the question: 'Who else?'. So, when tracing Froebel through, for example, his autobiography or the texts he produced, we are looking for the mention of other individuals who we can then find out more about. Sometimes who these other individuals are will be clear, as when a named person is presented in histories of Froebel as a benefactor or follower. More often though, connected individuals are more like ghosts: lost, silenced, abandoned and/or written out. In the webs of encounter in this article, we pay particular attention to translators of Froebel's writing, as well as illustrators around the world who have created drawings to accompany ideas that are presented as Froebelian. Such translators and illustrators are typically unrecognised aspects of Froebel's influence on early childhood education. Attempting to find out and to trace what these individuals have left behind is a way of reclaiming the expansiveness of what Nawrotzki (2006) refers to as the 'Froebel discourse'. Even when it is impossible to state exactly what an individual's influence has been, staying with the awareness of a silence and silencing, and allowing ourselves to engage in risky speculation, is a way of challenging dominant paradigms in early childhood (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor 2015). To give an example: in this article, we attempt to recognise and stay with the simultaneous presence and absence of a Japanese illustrator who contributed fundamentally to a Japanese edition of a Froebel translation by Annie L. Howe that was used by American missionaries in the late 19th century. The style of the illustrations and the explicit intention of Howe to present ideas in a way appropriate for a Japanese audience lead us to suggest that the illustrator of this text is Japanese. This opens up new possibilities for thinking about the Japanese contribution to what we think of as Froebel's influence, and the input of this particular unknown individual, but it also provokes us to consider who has been written out of the Froebel story and as a result of which agendas. While Annie

L. Howe's contribution is named and has been written about, the contribution of an unknown illustrator constitutes a silence, a gap and even a dead-end in exploring what we mean when we talk about Froebelian early childhood education.

Material histories of the book

Engaging with material histories of the book and the publishing industry can help to bewilder the concept of the pioneer and 'their' texts. Prefaces, translators' notes, footnotes, marginalia and library indexing are all potentially disruptive parts of canonical readings that we often look beyond in order to get straight to the parts that we have been told are most important – that is, the part of the book purported to be 'by' the pioneer. The careful consideration of such often forgotten details offers a jumping off point towards a critical and creative re-reading, which complicates rather than complements what we would typically consider to count as 'the text'. In addition to this supplementary material, readers' active material engagements become in themselves a voice in the tangle of influence. In engaging with these parts of the book, we take a step closer to the entanglement of the Froebelian legacy with political economies of publishing work by the 'pioneers' and the histories of readers in relation to these texts. If we look for the financial currents that surround publication, re-publication, translation, university library ownership, course reading lists, bookselling (and so on), we can see more clearly how and where profit emerges, whose voices are remunerated and whose are not, how the construct of intellectual property is entangled with our understandings of the foundations of early childhood research and practice, how and where estates are maintained and ultimately, who benefits and who loses in the pioneer accounts that we develop and sustain. To help surface some of these strands of questioning, we have used digitised images of extracts from books published at the 19th century as the starting point for each of the webs of encounter presented below. Interrogating these images of texts can act as a tool for uncovering prosopographical threads – identifying named and un-named individuals whose lives and work are intertwined with Froebel's – but they also offer possibilities for thinking beyond individuals and tuning into wider currents, whether they are cultural, social, political or economic.

Webs of encounter

The three Froebelian webs of encounter presented below are in fact parts of a single web of encounter, though we present them as separate from one another. Each is an adventure in diffractive lines of enquiry, which starts with a digital image of an extract from a text originally published in the US towards the end of the 19th century, but now digitised by Google and available on the internet. The first two extracts are from parts of a digitised version of the first American translation of 'Pedagogics of the Kindergarten' (1896) by Friedrich Froebel and the final extract is taken from a digitised version of 'The Kindergarten – A Manual' (1871) by Albert Douai, which was presented at the time of publication as a practical guide to implementing Froebel's ideas for the kindergarten in American public education. We take the digital images of these extracts as starting points for further exploration, encounter and connection.

First web of encounter: lost voices

In the 'American Preface' to 'Pedagogics of the Kindergarten' (Figure 1), written by Josephine Jarvis in 1893 and later published in New York in 1896 by D. Appleton and Company, we encounter the entanglement of Froebel in book publishing histories and the commercial relationships that have existed between publishers, writers and translators. In this case, our attention is drawn to the work of the translator Josephine Jarvis and the contradictions surrounding her voice as it appears in a text apparently by Froebel.

Through engaging with this edition of the text, we see Jarvis' unignorable influence on how Froebel's writing is understood and received by an American audience at the end of the 19th century. We hear her voice in the preface above, and even more consistently in the 22 pages of the book dedicated to 'Analysis of Contents by the Translator'. Jarvis' analytical notes are presented in much denser and smaller print than any other part of the text, which has the effect of highlighting her technical expertise as a translator and the linguistic choices she makes for the reader's understanding of Froebel's ideas. On the other hand, we experience the muting of her voice through this small, dense print. The dense text of her technical notes on translation are likely to be skipped over by a reader keen to get to what they see as the important 'bit' – the text accredited to Froebel. In addition, her preface is far shorter than either of the prefaces that bookend it: one by the series editor and US educational reformer W. T. Harris, and the original preface, written in German, by Dr. Wichard Lange.

Jarvis' brief preface focuses on an apology regarding the difficulties of translating Froebel's writing with use throughout of the male pronoun. She considers whether she might have used 'she' and 'her' instead throughout the text and then asks a question, which feels awkward for us as a contemporary audience: 'where, then, would have been the masculine supremacy?'. While this question suggests that Jarvis may be resigned to a masculine supremacy, it can be experienced alternatively by the reader (in any time period) as a provocation. While the preface is short, the question is a powerful one that makes us pause and wonder about masculine supremacy in Froebel's influence.

AMERICAN PREFACE.

X
 I HAVE been sorry to give so masculine a preponderance to the child in this book, but the necessity for this mode of expression must be attributed to the peculiarities of our language. Many sentences would be unintelligible if "it" were always used to designate a child as well as an object. I might have used "her" instead of "him," but where, then, would have been the masculine supremacy?
 The music for most of the rhymes contained in this book are to be found in Kohler's *Bewegung Spiele*, which I have translated, and hope to see in print.

JOSEPHINE JARVIS.

COBDEN, ILLINOIS, *July 7, 1893.*

Figure 1. American preface to 'pedagogics of the kindergarten', published 1896.

The final sentence of the preface highlights another work of translation completed by Jarvis, which she hopes to see in print. This draws attention to Jarvis' precarious position as a translator of Froebel and related German texts. She appears to be dependent on publishers' interests in the texts that she translates, which may or may not come to fruition and may be subject to a delay. There was certainly a delay in the publication of this translation: Jarvis' preface is dated 1893 but it is (1896) by the time the text is actually published. This highlights the power differentials between individuals in the book publishing industry. An individual such as Jarvis – a woman translator at the end of the 19th century – had to carefully and persistently navigate the desires of those with the power to bring texts to publication through capital investment.

In re-imagining Froebel as an entanglement, can we invite Jarvis and other quieter (perhaps silenced) voices back into our understanding of Froebel's influence? Can we attend more to what her translation, notes and preface all offer to our understanding of Froebel, but can we also go beyond this to recognise how the muting of her voice through history is itself part of what we mean when we say 'Froebel'? In the entanglement of Froebel, we find both Josephine Jarvis and the loss of Josephine Jarvis.

Josephine Jarvis is of course just one example of a lost voice when we look at the entanglement of Froebel with the book publishing industry; there would be so many other individuals to whom this tension applies. Another interesting example would be the unidentified illustrator of Annie L. Howe's translation of Froebel's work for a Japanese audience. Howe was an American missionary in late 19th century Japan who produced her own translations of Froebel's 'The Education of Man' and 'Mother-Play and Nursery Songs'. According to Nishida (2022) it is these translations which remain Howe's most notable contribution to early childhood education in Japan. Howe's translation of 'Mother-Play and Nursery Songs' included new illustrations that related more strongly to Japanese life, culture and illustrative style. In the introduction to these translated texts, Howe explained that she felt it necessary to embed Froebel's philosophy in a Japanese cultural context and that the illustrations were supportive of this. What is not clear or mentioned however, is anything about the creator of these images. Did Howe herself produce the illustrations for the Japanese translation or – as seems more likely based on the technical skills required for the culturally-specific illustrations – were these created by a Japanese illustrator?

Staying with and troubling the contributions of translators and illustrators can be an effective way to imagine and re-imagine the voices that are part of Froebel's influence. Material histories of the book help us to physically find the presence of other individuals, even when they are unnamed. When we can know or speculate about whose input we are seeing, prosopography helps us to turn more fully towards these 'others', who are typically ignored and glossed over. At the same time, we can see that it is not just these individuals' voices and lives that matter as part of Froebel's influence, but also the lack of attention that we have paid to these lives and voices. It is what we don't hear, as much as what we do hear, that is part of the Froebelian influence on early childhood education. This would mean that engaging with Froebel today is partly about recognising or respecting loss, rather than attempting to undo this loss or compensate for it (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor 2015). To offer a concrete example, this would mean understanding and embracing that part of what we mean when we talk about 'Froebel' are gender inequalities as they play out in relation to the economic system of capitalism. It makes no sense to try and write sexism or capitalism out of Froebel – to search for something purely

Froebel – but instead we can look to the future by ensuring that when we ask questions about how to ‘do’ early childhood education, we are always also asking questions about power, gender, economic systems and so on.

Second web of encounter: publisher-created canons

As an industry, book publishing has commercial aims, which have influenced our perceptions of Froebel and what Froebel means for early childhood education. The (1896) edition of ‘Pedagogics of the Kindergarten’ considered above was published as part of a series of books known as ‘The International Education Series’. In considering what this series aims to achieve, we can attend more carefully to how Froebel’s influence is entangled with the commercial agendas that underpin the publishing industry whether in the 19th century or today.

Figure 2 highlights the materiality of ‘The International Education Series’ – its size, texture and uniformity point to markers of material ‘quality’ in the book publishing world and reasons for ownership. The reference to uniformity highlights how this is a series that can be collected and displayed with pride. This in turn contributes to the impression of a canon of texts, whereby those 33 volumes that are part of this series are (literally) bound together ideologically. The emphasis on uniformity also creates a sense that the volumes which make up the series are comprehensive – that no other texts beyond these ones are needed.

As the explanation in Figure 3 suggests, The International Education Series is intended to represent ‘a complete course of reading and training for teachers generally’. Froebel’s presence in the series signals his inclusion in the attempt of the publisher to create a canon of educational writers, which also includes Pestalozzi and Rousseau, alongside highly pragmatic guides specifically for a US audience (e.g., ‘Practical Hints for the Teachers of Public Schools’). The inclusion of Froebel in this publisher-created canon feeds into an enduring perception of Froebel as an international ‘pioneer’ whose voice and writing changes the educational world in a traceable way.

The entanglement of Froebel with the commercial dynamics of the book publishing industry continues to this day. Academic publishers in the contemporary landscape respond to a commercial imperative which guides the books that are commissioned by editors. Those books with the greatest commercial potential are inevitably those with the largest potential readership. In an academic context, this depends on whether a book is likely to be taken up as a compulsory (ideally) or supplementary text on university undergraduate reading lists. In reviewing book proposals for publishers, reviewers are asked whether they would recommend a book for inclusion on a particular reading list. This question of what will sell the most is fundamental for what contemporary texts end up circulating that relate to Froebel. What we see is Froebel’s appearance in handbooks and guides to early childhood education rather than more nuanced examinations of Froebel’s relevance and

T H E
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION SERIES.
12mo, cloth, uniform binding.

Figure 2. Title page announcing ‘the international education series’.

THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION SERIES was projected for the purpose of bringing together in orderly arrangement the best writings, new and old, upon educational subjects, and presenting a complete course of reading and training for teachers generally. It is edited by W. T. HARRIS, LL. D., United States Commissioner of Education, who has contributed for the different volumes in the way of introductions, analysis, and commentary. The volumes are tastefully and substantially bound in uniform style.

Figure 3. Blurb about *the international education series* contained in the text.

influence in relation to childhood today. Froebel is presented in expensive handbooks such as the 'Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel' as 'one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century' (Bloomsbury Website), positioning him through implication alongside other thinkers whom we deem to be important. Froebel also appears alongside such thinkers in books such as the 'Routledge Handbook of Philosophies and Theories of Early Childhood Education and Care', which dedicates Chapter 3 to Friedrich Froebel, before moving on to consider Montessori, the Macmillan sisters and Dewey. Following in the 19th century footsteps of 'The International Series of Education', the publisher's aim remains the creation of books that can be taken up within an apprenticeship model of early childhood education, where a set of ideas and individuals must be known about, understood and applied. While these texts may involve some critical reflection, their packaging by publishers as 'handbooks' reinforce the view that a particular set of individuals have a particular legacy that is a worth knowing about.

Reconceptualising Froebel's influence as an entanglement involves recognising how book publishing has played and continues to play a part in how we see and think about Froebel. Book publishing's commercial aims work to create Froebel as one of a series of pioneers that early childhood educators, trainers and researchers must be aware of. By engaging with these commercial aims we become more acutely aware of the 'packaging' that surrounds Froebel's influence whether this is uniform cloth-binding in order to create a sense of importance and untouchability, or whether it is the order of appearance of pioneers in a contemporary handbook. These connections can be explicitly drawn into supporting early childhood educators and students as 'pedagogistas' (Vintimilla 2018) to critically reflect on the influence of particular pioneers. If we ask the questions 'why was this book published?' and 'why was this book published in this way?' with students, we can disrupt and open up early childhood education so that it goes well beyond learning about a particular set of ideas, influences and individuals.

Third web of encounter: Froebel's entanglement with 'good toys, playthings and games'

Our final encounter begins with a small excerpt taken from Albert Douai's book on Froebelian education, popular among American audiences in the 1870s: 'The Kindergarten – A Manual'. Albert Douai was recognised as a leading proponent and interpreter of Froebelian education and a writer important for converting philosophical ideas into pragmatic solutions for aspiring Froebelian educators. In the case of the chosen extract (Figure 4), Douai is summarising the main conditions needed for a Froebelian

The fourth and last condition to successful Kindergarten are good toys, playthings and games—presented in a serial order. They can be had from E. Steiger, or may be imported from Germany in any selection which is preferable, according to means and the number of children in the class.

Figure 4. Excerpt from *the kindergarten – a manual* (1871) by A. Douai.

kindergarten and focuses attention on the need for ‘good toys, playthings and games’. The extract highlights the entanglement of the dissemination of Froebel’s ideas with a specific material culture embedded within commercial dynamics. In this extract, the specific objects necessary for a successful Kindergarten are reported to be available from two sources: from the publisher of this particular text, E. Steiger, a company also making pedagogical objects, or through imports from Germany.

E. Steiger and Co. was a company based at 25 Park Place, New York, specialising in the publication of texts about the kindergarten but more notably the sales of pedagogical objects designed specifically for the kindergarten. We find, for example, at the end of another text about Froebel, ‘The Kindergarten Guide’ (1877) by Maria Kraus-Boelte and John Kraus, a lengthy list of material components that can be brought from E. Steiger. These are numbered, described and the price given. Where relevant, the descriptions relate back to the discussion of the Gifts and Occupations which exists in the main text, and select materials are shown in use through illustration (see Figure 5).

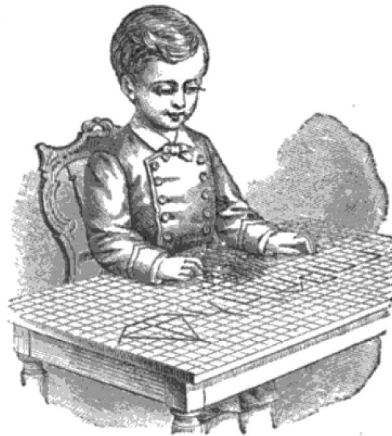
No. 161. A package containing 500 round sticks, 3 inches long, \$0.15.

No. 166. A package containing 500 round sticks, 4 inches long, \$0.15.

No. 171. A package containing 500 round sticks, 5 inches long, \$0.15.

No. 176. A package containing 500 assorted round sticks (150 one inch, 200 two inches, 50 three inches, 50 four inches, 50 five inches long), \$0.25.

No. 181. A package containing 250 round sticks, 13 inches long, \$0.30.



E. Steiger & Co., 25 Park Place, New York

Figure 5. Excerpt from the E. Steiger catalogue of kindergarten materials presented at the end of ‘the kindergarten guide’ (1877) by Maria Kraus-Boelte and John Kraus.

The adoption in the US, including in public schools, of the Kindergarten was related to the advancement of business for those dedicated to making specialist pedagogical materials. Prochner (2011) highlights this dynamic through analysis of Froebel's Gifts as they appear in the sales catalogues of the Milton Bradley Company from 1869 to 1939. The highly prescriptive nature of the Gifts and Occupations represents an opportunity for businesses that depend on the sales of educational materials. The more detail given in the specification of the design of playthings and other educational materials (including the wider architectural and interior design of the learning environment), the greater the catalogue of things to sell. Thus, Froebel is entangled with the commercialisation of the Kindergarten and the marketisation of early childhood education pedagogies. There is irony in the use of the term 'Gifts' to describe material objects used in a Froebelian approach, when in fact they must be purchased.

The association of early childhood education with a 'material package' continues to this day. Popular philosophies, whether it is Froebel, Steiner, Reggio Emilia or Montessori, all appear to place an emphasis on material culture and the learning environment and ensuring that educators get this 'right'. In Reggio Emilia, the environment is the 'third teacher' (Fraser 2006; Strong-Wilson and Ellis 2007) and the educator must carefully attend to principles of the environment, which include the aesthetic layout of materials and the creation and positioning of material provocations. In even more obviously commercial enterprises, such as *The Curiosity Approach* (www.thecuriosityapproach.com) – a private venture popular in UK nurseries currently – settings are instructed to align their physical environments to cultural values including the popularised Danish notion of 'hygge'.

Raising questions about the material cultures of the early learning environment can act as a starting point for unsettling colonial, heteronormative and developmentalist paradigms that frame our understandings of childhood. Osgood and Mohandas (2021) consider the animal figurine in early childhood settings and how such figurines work to 'ensure that only particular worldviews, ones that unwittingly but powerfully reinscribe heteronormativity, colonialism, and white supremacy, find expression' (205). To unsettle such dominant paradigms, we can follow diffractive trajectories from a particular object or aspect of material culture, following its entanglements and intra-actions to places of trouble and uncertainty.

The entanglement of Froebel with special material cultures, embedded in commercial dynamics, continues to this day. A search on Etsy, a website for individuals and businesses to sell hand-crafted materials, using the search term 'Froebel gifts' leads us to a selection of items currently on sale. Many of these items are given the name 'Froebel Box' and then given a number e.g., 'Froebel Box #1' as in the figure below (Figure 6). Just as with the numbers in the E. Steiger catalogue, the numbering of 'Froebel boxes' is designed to suggest that there is something purely Froebel about these material items. The seller is implying that these material objects are so closely linked to what we mean by 'Froebel' that they do not require a descriptive title, but just a number.

The product 'Froebel Box #1', on sale for £45.41, is described as 'twelve malleable balls' made through crochet and 'stuffed with polyfill'. The seller suggests that 'children can thus firmly enclose the balls and let their imagination run wild'. The seller goes on to write in the description:

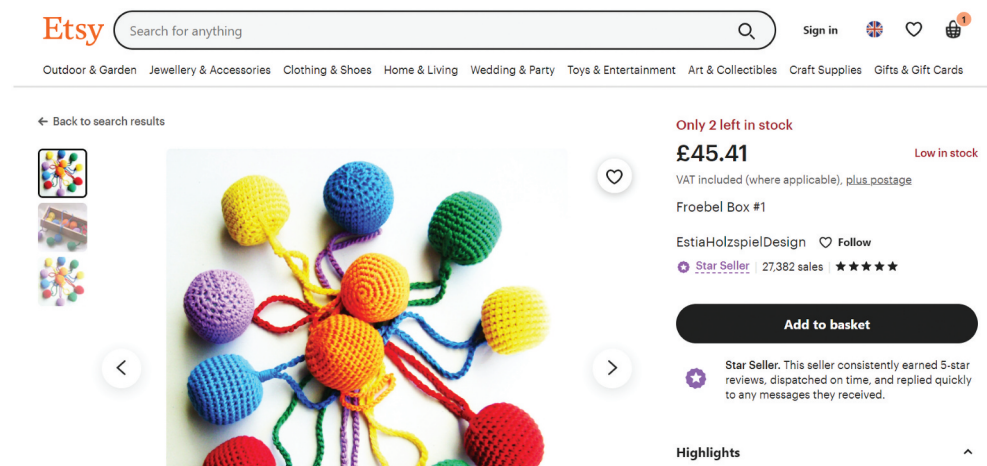


Figure 6. 'Froebel box #1' on sale for £45.41 on Etsy.

Froebel attached great importance to the children's imagination and play, it is a typical way of learning and living for the children! The construction sets are suitable to promote the existing abilities and talents of the child. They cannot be used to force learning success.

Through this explanation around the material object, Froebel's legacy is further entangled with concepts of free play, imagination and the emergence or revelation of children's natural abilities. Furthermore, the description positions children as special and ultimately different to adults in that they have a 'typical way of learning and living', which is presumably different to that of adults. They must also be protected from adults' desire to 'force learning success', highlighting the ways in which early childhood 'pioneers' such as Froebel are used to push back against academic discourses of childhood and ideas such as 'school-readiness'. The parent or educator that buys this kit for children in their care is buying not only the material object but an identity set against a backdrop of contemporary discourses surrounding the child, childhood and early childhood education and care.

Critically reflecting on material culture associated with Froebel in early childhood education is a way to open up the discussions around what counts as a Froebelian influence. We can begin to ask more interesting questions about the ways in which Froebel's influence inscribes and re-inscribes dominant paradigms in early childhood education and works within existing debates. There are multiple agendas at play when we look at how Froebel is thought and talked about in today's landscape of early childhood; these agendas are commercial, but also political and pedagogical. Taking material culture and the rarefication of specific objects as the basis for diffractive lines of enquiry (in the spirit of Osgood and Mohandas 2021) can offer a practical way to critically reflect and re-imagine Froebel's influence along with the influence of other so-called pioneers.

Discussion

We have presented three webs of encounter that problematise and extend what we mean when we talk about Froebel and Froebel's influence on early childhood

education. Through encountering lost voices, the commercial aims of publishers and the material culture surrounding Froebelian pedagogy, we have challenged the idea of Froebel as a 'pioneer' and suggested productive routes for prompting a more critical reflection on the influence of Froebel on early childhood education. While our writing about each web of encounter cannot ever capture the endlessness of entanglement as expressed by Barad (2007), we hope that the article offers an invitation to open up dialogues around Froebel in early childhood education. What we have offered is just a starting point and far from comprehensive. We fully recognise that were others to adventure into webs of encounter around Froebel they would end up with different connections and associations to those we have made, even were they to begin with the same digitised image of the same extract taken from the same text.

Our three webs of encounter blur the edges that tend to exist around our understanding of Froebel's influence on early childhood education. They move us on from thinking about Froebel as something pre-packaged and pre-defined to instead a richer entanglement with contexts, individuals, materials, discourses and so on. In the first web of encounter, we have explored the somewhat lost voices of translators and illustrators of Froebel's texts and suggested that we need to reclaim not only these individuals as part of understanding Froebel's influence, but also the loss and silencing itself. As Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor (2015) suggest, it may be through staying with silences (rather than trying to fill them) that we can begin to dismantle dominant colonial paradigms that surround early childhood education. Practically, we can ask such questions as: What has been lost in our focus on Froebel? What has been lost and continues to be lost in the way that we imagine Froebel's influence today? Who has been silenced or muted in making Froebel's voice louder?

In the second web of encounter, we have looked at the business of book publishing and how vital this has been and continues to be in conceptualisations of Froebel. Whether as part of 'The International Education Series' of the late 19th century or in today's expensive handbooks of early childhood education, positioning Froebel as a 'pioneer' is a lucrative proposition for publishers. Asking provocative questions about the books through which we come into contact with Froebel is a way to challenge how commercial dynamics are shaping the intellectual landscape of early childhood education, not just through a representation of some individuals as 'pioneers' but also through the apprenticeship model on which most publisher-created canons are based. Handbooks and textbooks feed into perceptions of the early childhood educator as an apprentice rather than a critically reflective professional. With students, we can ask such questions as: Why has this book been published (in this way)? What underlying messages about early childhood education and the work of the early childhood educator does this book give us?

In our final web of encounter, we considered the entanglement of Froebel with specialist materials sold to support the creation of a Froebelian kindergarten. The perception that Froebel's influence can be pinpointed and reduced to a finite set of ideas and practices is entangled with the desire to package Froebel as a commodity to be sold. In reconceptualising early childhood education, we can push back against the neat packaging and ask questions that invite in mess and trouble and challenge the dominant paradigms in early childhood education. We

can ask questions such as: What does this object tell us about what Froebel stands for today? What does the marketing around the object communicate? Whose agendas and discourses are at work in the object? What paradigms of early childhood are reinforced through the sale and use of this object? Can we unsettle the apparent 'purity' of this object? What more complex forces and questions exist around the object?

In this article, we have shared an approach of endlessly unpicking the connections and threads that run through even the smallest of excerpts from a text by or relating to Froebel. The process challenges us to consider not just what we mean by 'Froebel' and all that might be contained in this name, but also to ask the more radical question of whether there is anything more fixed beyond the endless and dynamic connections. When we infuse diffractive lines of enquiry about Froebel with prosopography and material histories of the book, are we left with a vision of a different Froebel, or does Froebel as 'a thing' collapse altogether? We offer up this question as a useful discussion to have within the project of 'bewildering' so-called pioneers. Do we need only to re-imagine the influence of particular individuals, or do we need to sidestep the emphasis on individuals' influence altogether through a deeper philosophical rejection of the idea that individuals can have any kind of definable influence on early childhood education?

Conclusion

In this article, we have problematised Froebel's influence on early childhood education. We have done this by re-imagining Froebel's influence as a dynamic and ever-changing web of encounter, thinking with entanglement and entangled genealogies (Barad 2007) and diffractive lines of enquiry (Osgood 2019), and introducing the historical approaches of prosopography and material histories of the book. We have suggested that Froebel's influence is messy and troubled. It involves political, social, economic and material contexts and is intertwined with the lives and work of innumerable 'others', many of whom have been silenced or muted. Engaging in diffractive lines of enquiry around digitised images of extracts taken from texts that relate to Froebel and were originally published in the US towards the end of the 19th century, now available through Google Books has raised questions about the marginalised contributions of translators and illustrators, the commercial agendas of publishers and the ways in which the rarefication of material objects in the Kindergarten all ripple through the influence of so-called pioneers. We hope that our way of exploring Froebel offers possibilities to other early childhood 'pedagogistas' (Vintimilla 2018) seeking to disrupt and open up early childhood education as a realm of practice and an academic field.

In practical terms, using images of small excerpts of texts can provoke more critical dialogue than attempting to engage with a whole text and this is particularly the case if the excerpt comes from a part of the text that might otherwise be overlooked. Students could, for example, be introduced to the E. Steiger catalogue before encountering a more generic overview of Froebel's ideas. Looking together at the catalogue, we can ask provocative questions: *What might we guess about Froebelian education based on this catalogue? How does that connect with what you already know? Who was this catalogue for? Who made this catalogue and why? Are there contemporary equivalents to this catalogue and what do they suggest about*

Froebel's influence today? In engaging with these questions and using them as a starting point for open-ended enquiry, students of early childhood education can be supported to sidestep an apprenticeship model that positions them as subservient to an agreed set of 'pioneers' and instead launch themselves directly into the critical and creative reflection required for early childhood education research and practice.

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