

The History of Kindergarten: From Germany to the United States

Christina More Muelle
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the history of kindergarten from Froebel (1967a) to the current issues that pertain to kindergarten. The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the reason why kindergarten was first established and to demonstrate why it is important to revert to kindergarten as an aid for socialization.

Almost every person can think back to the first day of school, and the first thought that comes to mind is walking into a kindergarten classroom, holding on to mom crying or being excited of finally were able to go to school like older siblings. Each experience is unique, just as is the concept of kindergarten.

This paper reviews scholarly research and history books to examine the history of kindergarten, from its origins in Germany and to its establishment in the United States. This paper also tracks the changes that have taken place in the kindergarten curriculum since its arrival in the United States to call for teachers and policy makers to bring back the original concept of kindergarten as a tool for socialization to help children achieve school success.

Where did Kindergarten Come From?

Friedrich Froebel was born in Germany in 1782 to a minister father and his mother died before he was a year old (Froebel, 1967b). His father tried to teach him but Froebel constantly moved from school to school and served as an apprentice for various occupations. It was not until adolescence that he found satisfaction in his academic life (Headley, 1965; Moore, 2002). He went to university in Germany, studying under Pestalozzi and later served in the German army in 1813. After the war was over, Froebel returned to Berlin to care for his brothers' children after his death. This began Froebel's career in educating young children (Braun & Edwards, 1972; Froebel, 1967b; Weber, 1969)

In 1817, Froebel established a school in Keilhau, Germany, where he incorporated some of Pestalozzi's ideas (Braun & Edwards, 1972; Moore, 2002). He found that Pestalozzi's school lacked unity and felt that unity stems from God (Weber, 1969). Being raised in a religious environment with many family members as pastors, he believed that God's reason should be the center of the educational system (Shapiro, 1983). "Education consists in leading man, as a thinking intelligent being, growing into self consciousness, to a pure and unsullied, conscious and free representation of the inner law of Divine Unity and in teaching him ways and means thereto" (Froebel, 1974, p. 2).

Froebel moved to Blankenburg, Germany, in 1837 where he set up his school, that later became known as kindergarten (Headley, 1965). Froebel called for German women to come together and support the kindergarten. Because he described children as plants and teachers as gardeners, the term kindergarten emerged, kinder meaning child and garten meaning garden (Headley, 1965). The teachers, called kindergarteners, were called to educate the children from the earliest years through their own experiences to become integrated and whole people (Froebel, 1967a).

In his school, Froebel (1974) emphasized play, which started with simple activities and later progressed to more complex games. He felt that children should learn through play. He described ten gifts (playthings) that were given to the children by God to help them grow and

develop. He spent ten years refining his concept of kindergarten and in the end created 20 gifts or educational toys, songs and finger plays (Moore, 2002). The gifts given to the children allowed them to see diversity of appearance and structure through handling the gifts freely and without structure. Froebel (1967b) also wrote about the three principles of social imitation, learning through expression and systematized play that were incorporated into his kindergarten.

The Move from Germany to the United States

The kindergarten move to the United States began in 1848, when Germans were fleeing the country due to the revolution (Headley, 1965). Carl Schurz and his wife Margaretha Meyer Schurz immigrated to Watertown, Wisconsin. Mrs. Schurz had studied in Germany under Froebel and opened the first German kindergarten in 1855 in her home (Braun & Edwards, 1972; Headley, 1965; Shapiro, 1983). She put into practice the methods learned in Germany teaching her children and their cousins in German (Weber, 1969).

In a chance meeting with Margaretha Schurz, in 1859, Elizabeth Peabody became interested in this kindergarten education. In 1860, she opened the first English speaking kindergarten in Boston, Massachusetts. Mrs. Schurz gave her a pamphlet that contained a part of Froebel's *Education of Man* (Peabody, 1882). Peabody based the curriculum on the principles she read. After years of trying to accomplish this special type of education, she realized that the program and curriculum that she implemented was not based on Froebel's original idea. She went to Germany to study the Froebelian kindergarten in order to truly incorporate his ideas in the American kindergarten (Peabody, 1882).

In Germany, Elizabeth Peabody studied at the Kindergarten Seminary, which was run by Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow who had worked with Froebel in his kindergarten and was one of Germany's top kindergarten trainers. She was President of the German Froebel Society and one of the leaders in the Hamburg Froebel Union (Peabody, 1882; Shapiro, 1983). When she met Peabody, she felt it was her duty to establish the Froebelian kindergarten in the United States. In 1868, Peabody brought Matilda Kriege, a protégé of Baroness Marenholtz to Boston (Peabody, 1882). This began the growth and movement of the kindergarten in the United States.

The Kindergarten Movement in the United States

Late 1800s

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, industrialization caused many mothers to join the workforce. There has been a shift away from maternal care at home to mothers choosing organizations to care for their children. Day nursery was focused on child rearing practices and took the place of mothers who could not care for their children and were deemed deficient in their motherly duties by the society. Professionals who advocated for the establishment of public school kindergartens felt that supervision should consist of not only childrearing but also citizenship and work habits (O'Connor, 1995).

As Elizabeth Peabody was trying to promote the kindergarten movement by corresponding with William T. Harris, Superintendent of the St. Louis public schools, Susan Blow approached Harris about teaching kindergarten (Ross, 1976; Weber, 1969). Blow studied in Europe under Maria Boelte who had learned kindergartening from Froebel's widow (Ross, 1976; Shapiro, 1983). Boelte came to the United States when Peabody asked her to come and help train new kindergarteners. Susan Blow became her first student in the United States (Peabody, 1882; Ross, 1976).

In 1873, the expansion of kindergarten began as the first kindergarten opened in St. Louis under the direction of Susan Blow and William T. Harris and based on Froebel's observations of mother child interactions (O'Connor, 1995). Blow insisted on following the rigid program

Froebel had created (O'Connor, 1995; Weber, 1969). The kindergarten was child-centered and kindergarteners were in charge of the spiritual, physical and moral development of the child (O'Connor, 1995; Ross, 1976; Shapiro, 1983).

Early 1900s

By the 1900s, the kindergarten movement had become very progressive. Free kindergartens were popular and kindergarten was looked at as a community center for the neighborhood (Ross, 1976; Shapiro, 1983). In 1903, the Committee of Fifteen was established to solve the debate existing over keeping the Froebelian principles of kindergarten or changing to scientific principles. The Committee was soon changed to the Committee of Nineteen because the Fifteen could not come up with a solution. Susan Blow continued to fight for Froebel's principles while a newcomer, Patty Smith Hill, felt that Froebelian rules were too rigid and new ideas and principles had to be implemented (Ross, 1976; Shapiro, 1983; Weber, 1969). Hill drew on Dewey's concepts and felt that a child's interests should correspond with significant educational experiences (Ross, 1976; Weber, 1969). She began to develop new songs, gifts and occupations for the new American kindergarten. Teachers lost their opportunity to show their concern for social development that was characteristic of the first kindergartens (Ross, 1976).

Teachers had to teach double sessions and could no longer interact with parents and families in the same way as before. By 1914 every major city in the United States had established public kindergartens (Ross, 1976). As the curriculum began to change, subject areas were introduced. Nature study, home and community life, literature, music and art were at the core, yet "each subject was determined by its ability to assist children in confirming and extending their daily life" (Weber, 1969, p. 96).

The 1920s gave way to new psychological theories as two groups of American educators began taking an interest in early childhood education. Patty Smith Hill tried to find a common ground between the two groups. The behaviorists, led by Thorndike and Watson, warned teachers against motherly love in the classroom (Shapiro, 1983; Weber, 1969). The emphasis should be based on learning objectives or habit formation. The opposing theory was that of Dewey and social education (Shapiro, 1983). While the debate between the two theories continued, education as social reform diminished and the behavioral emphasis on education began to dominate.

The child study movement gave rise to research in childhood education at universities, which led to the emergence of new child study centers (Shapiro, 1983). Measurement brought promise of efficiency for kindergarten. Since there were no immediate effects on the kindergarten, studies began to focus on teachers' efforts. Even though the first assessments were used for measuring the children's individual growth, the teachers began to have a greater concern for standardization and efficiency (Weber, 1969). The move to standardize the kindergarten curriculum focused on holiday and seasonal activities (Weber, 1969). At this time, the main objective of kindergarten was to help the child adjust to the new social environment of the school.

As kindergarten became integrated into the public schools, changes became evident (Ross, 1976). The unification between the kindergarten and first grade programs was seen in many schools as the first grade curriculum moved down and the kindergarten curriculum moved up. The age range of the kindergarten was also limited from 3-7 year olds to 4-5 year olds (Weber, 1969).

Mid 1900s

The launching of the Sputnik by the Russians in 1957 brought about complaints in the United States education system, including the preschool and kindergarten level. This began the acceleration of academic skills included in the kindergarten curriculum to prepare children for later academic success (Shapiro, 1983). People began to see devastating failure of the children of the uneducated and poor in school (Rudolph & Cohen, 1984). To close the gap between the students of high and low socioeconomic backgrounds, kindergartens were built in low socioeconomic areas (Weber, 1969). Educators also felt that a new rationale and methodology were needed in the kindergarten curriculum to close this gap. They felt that early education was the remedy for American poverty (Shapiro, 1983).

The 1960s also brought about the theories of Jean Piaget and Montessori. Maria Montessori had established method long before, but parents were turning back to her method of education which was very structured and much like the kindergarten Froebel first established (Shapiro, 1983). Piaget's theory of how children learn was considered in the kindergarten curriculum. Piaget saw activity on the part of the learner as essential. The learner needs to transform his or her own experiences in order to acquire meaningful concepts. Piaget also stressed the importance of intrinsic motivation and a competence drive that leads children to learn as well as the child's ability learn through trial and error (Mindess & Mindess, 1972).

At this time organizations which supported actions that would provide better educational opportunities for children under the age of six began to emerge (Headley, 1968). Parents, as well as organizations, began putting pressure for more academically rigorous kindergartens to emerge (Headley, 1968; Weber, 1969). Reading, arithmetic and writing became the focus that parents were pushing for. On the other hand some parents felt that curriculum should be concentrated on the nature of the children and less on the process of learning (Weber, 1969). These two views were called the "Hurry-Hurry-Hurry and Don't Push Me" theories of education (Headley, 1968).

Research conducted in the sixties led to results that confirmed kindergarten experiences correlate to academic success in later years (Mindess & Keliher, 1967; Mindess & Mindess, 1972). The kindergarten school day included reading, writing, speaking, listening, arithmetic, science, social studies, art, music and physical education (Headley, 1968; Mindess & Mindess, 1972). The subjects were not formal but integrated throughout the day in various activities. Continued push by the parents caused reading instruction to become more formal (Headley, 1968). The age requirement of kindergarten became an issue as reports pointed out that older students had more success in kindergarten than the younger students (Mindess & Keliher, 1967; Mindess & Mindess, 1972). Many districts required that students begin kindergarten at the age of five while others reported students starting as early as four years and three months (Mindess & Mindess, 1972). Class size became limited too as it was found to affect the quality of education (Headley, 1968). The average kindergarten class contained anywhere from 18 to 30 students and each kindergarten session lasted two and a half hours. (Mindess & Mindess, 1972).

Late 1900s

Education came back into the political sphere with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). The report stated the nation was at risk of losing its intellectual capacity to the Japanese and urged to take education more seriously. The goal was to develop the talents of all students starting from early childhood through adulthood. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* caused society to put education first on the agenda of the federal government. Public support began to increase for compulsory and tax supported kindergarten in the public schools (Morrison, 1998). By the 1980s, enrollment of all five year olds had risen to

96%, and every state had public kindergartens, although only mandatory in twelve states and the District of Columbia (Morrison, 1998; Rudolph & Cohen, 1984). A movement to transform kindergarten into a traditional first grade class or push down the first grade curriculum into kindergarten began (Rudolph & Cohen, 1984). The kindergarten curriculum was being pulled in two directions: (a) total learning and growing and (b) a watered down version of first grade (Rudolph & Cohen, 1984). The latter became prevalent after *A Nation at Risk*.

School readiness became an issue with the publication of *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994). The first goal stated all children would start school ready to learn, causing many states to raise the age of entrance into kindergarten (Morrison, 1998). Retention was seen in kindergarten as well as high-stakes testing. Parents began holding back their children, especially boys, for a year ensuring that their children would be the oldest in the class and therefore perform better academically (Morrison, 1998).

Conclusion

The future of the kindergarten curriculum is a full-day cognitive based program that includes more reading and writing (Marzollo, 1987). Technology will be present in the classroom and in the curriculum. Kindergarten will no longer be seen as a place to get ready for school but rather a place to learn and develop (Morrison, 1998). “The purpose of the new kindergarten is to teach children a rich, meaningful, and balanced curriculum of skills and information through age-appropriate activities that encourage children to want to learn more” (Marzollo, 1987, p. 1). It is important to note that children who may be academically ready to start school may not have the social skills needed to be successful. Froebel began the first kindergarten to allow children to socialize while at the same time learn concepts needed for school. Parents and politicians must revert back to this initial concept of the school primarily as a social institution.

References

- Braun, S. J., & Edwards, E. P. (1972). *History and theory of early childhood education*. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Froebel, F. (1967a). Outline of a plan for founding and developing a kindergarten. In I. M. Lilley (Ed.), *Friedrich Froebel: A selection from his writing*. (pp. 117-119). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Froebel, F. (1967b). Pedagogics of the kindergarten. In I. M. Lilley (Ed.), *Friedrich Froebel: A selection from his writings* (pp. 92-117). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Froebel, F. (1974). *The education of man* (Rev. ed.). Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley (Original work published 1887).
- Headley, N. (1965). *The kindergarten: Its place in the program of education*. (3rd ed.). New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education.
- Marzollo, J. (1987). *The new kindergarten*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Mindess, M., & Keliher, A. V. (1967). Review of research related to the advantages of kindergarten. *Childhood Education*, 43, 505-512.
- Mindess, D., & Mindess, M. (1972). *Guide to an effective kindergarten program*. New York: Parker.
- Moore, M. R. (2002). An American’s journey to kindergarten’s birthplace. *Childhood Education*, 79(1), 15-20.
- Morrison, G. S. (1998). *Early childhood education today* (7th ed.). Englewoods Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- O'Connor, S. M. (1995). Mothering in public: The division of organized child care in the kindergarten and day nursery, St. Louis, 1886-1920. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 10*, 63-80.
- Peabody, E. P. (1882). The origin and growth of the kindergarten. *Education, 2*, 507-527.
- Ross, E. D. (1976). *The kindergarten crusade: The establishment of preschool education in the United States*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Rudolph, M., & Cohen, D. (1984). *Kindergarten and early schooling* (2nd ed.). Englewoods Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Shapiro, M. S. (1983). *Child's garden: The kindergarten movement from Froebel to Dewey*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Retrieved October 13, 2002, from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk>
- U.S. Department of Education. (1994). *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. Retrieved April 4, 2003, from <http://www.edgov/legislation/GOAL2000/TheAct>
- Weber, E. (1969). *The kindergarten: Its encounter with educational thought in America*. New York: Teachers College Press.