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From Seed to Mighty Tree:
Susan Blow and the Development of the American Kindergarten Movement



Madelyn J. Silber

From Seed to Mighty Tree:
Susan Blow and the Development of the American Kindergarten Movement

By

Madelyn J. Silber

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for Honors in History
In the College of Arts and Sciences
Washington University

Advisor: Margaret Garb

19 March 2012

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Abstract

St. Louis is home to the first continuously running public kindergarten in the United States. In 1873, Susan Blow began teaching a small group of students at the Des Peres School using the methods of German educator Friedrich Froebel, “the father of the kindergarten.” Despite the rejection of Froebel’s ideas in Germany, Blow studied his pedagogy and implemented his curriculum into classrooms in America. Her first class was known as the kindergarten “experiment,” which would later become a standard in schools across the nation. Froebel’s kindergarten curriculum was unique because it was based on learning through play, an understanding of nature, and an appreciation for art. He believed childhood should be separated from adulthood and sought to create a learning environment that would interest and accommodate young people, asserting that children’s earliest experiences would shape their entire lives.

This thesis will explore the lives of both Froebel and Blow to better understand their motivations for creating and spreading the kindergarten movement. It will discuss how this movement brought women into the public sphere as educators, and how Blow worked to improve the reputation and competency of teachers through the rigorous training programs she created. It will look at the changing ideas about early childhood education since the seventeenth century, and argue that Blow’s kindergarten represented the culmination of centuries of theories about children. The curriculum she created allowed children, on a large scale, to benefit from the many theories about education developed by previous educators and scholars. The fate of the kindergarten movement came down to the experiment at the Des Peres School. Blow’s devotion to the project and careful implementation of Froebel’s curriculum made it possible for children through age six to have a place to play, learn, and grow across the country.

*For my family,
that values play as highly as Susan Blow,
and in memory of Wendy Kahn,
with whom I loved to play.*

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Abbreviations

1. BFP – Blow Family Papers
2. CHS – Carondelet Historical Society
3. MHMLRC – Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center
4. WTHP – William Torrey Harris Papers

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Prologue

“To stir up, to animate, to awaken, and to strengthen, the pleasure and power of the human being to labour uninterruptedly at his own education, has become and always remained the fundamental principle and aim of my educational work.”¹ – Friedrich Froebel

The small schoolhouse at 6303 Michigan Avenue in south St. Louis, once bustling with chattering children, busy learning while playing with blocks and balls and patterns of paper strips, now stands as a lonely relic of the past. Inside, a wax teacher sits frozen at her desk with two similarly motionless wax children, a boy and a girl, approaching her from both sides. It was a typical Saturday when I visited the Carondelet Historical Society, in a building formerly belonging to the Des Peres School, home to the first publically funded kindergarten in the United States. Inside the heavy green doors, the curator disappeared into the offices behind the classroom, and I was left alone, the museum’s only guest. The renovated building is set up exactly as it would have been when Susan Blow, the woman who created this kindergarten, began her first class in 1873. Three long tables with benches line the floor, just tall enough for a child not older than six. The blocks and paper projects are strewn about the tabletops as if just having been used. In the still silence, I am reminded that these desks have been empty for a long time.

The fact that almost nobody comes to visit is altogether unsurprising. In America today, children and the people that work with them are often not taken seriously. Driving through the surrounding towns, road signs read “Blow Street” and “Pestalozzi Street” with

¹ Friedrich Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, trans. Emilie Michaels and H. Keatley Moore (Syracuse, NY: C. W. Bardeen, Publisher, 1889), 11.

“Froebel Elementary School” not far away. These places are named for eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars who successfully developed the educational innovation that became America’s kindergartens and the beginning of public education for children.² The nineteenth century kindergarten movement began with Friedrich Froebel’s ideas in Germany and was brought to America by Blow, a St. Louis native who made it her life’s work to see the movement take off in the United States, to give all children a place to develop through play. Though the town has preserved their memories in the names of its streets and schools, America seems to have forgotten. Even kindergartens across the country have forgotten where this movement came from, and what it was all about.

What started as a curriculum based on play, appreciating nature, and learning through experience at every individual child’s natural pace has, in the modern kindergarten, become a rampant race to read and write. In Puritan times, children were regarded as little adults. It took centuries for educators and parents to realize children and childhood were separate from the world of adults and should be treated accordingly. Children, under Blow’s guidance were encouraged to talk with each other while busy with their playful learning. Today, children are expected to be as silent as the wax children in the museum classroom. Much of the environment of the kindergarten Blow worked so tirelessly to create has disappeared. Pressured with testing, teachers have reverted to regarding children as “little adults,” using packets and worksheets in a sterile classroom environment, instead of allowing children to discover lessons through their own

² Glen Holt and Thomas A. Pearson, “St. Louis Street Index,” St. Louis Public Library, Special Collections Dept., 1994, <http://www.slpl.lib.mo.us/libsrc/streets.htm#index> (assessed December 15, 2011). “Blow Street” was originally named after Henry Blow, but the description includes, “[h]is daughter, Susan, started the first kindergarten in the Des Peres schools in 1873.”

experience and spending time outdoors. Kindergarten students today, therefore, do not get the same opportunities to develop emotionally, physically, and intellectually like the students in Blow's classrooms.

The purpose of the following pages is to look back at the foundation of early childhood education in America, specifically, to the first successful public kindergarten classroom. Blow was able to funnel the emerging theories about early childhood education into a curriculum that allowed children to benefit from these new ideas. The story of how changing notions of childhood led to new ideas about children's education, the formation of a new curriculum, the implementation of these ideas into one public school system, and finally, the spread of this movement around the nation is a hugely important part of American history. Regardless of how much the kindergarten has changed since the nineteenth century, this movement conveys a nation's increased understanding of children and attention to their development. It represents a growing recognition of the importance of education during the industrial revolution when labor appeared to be the priority. It showed a concern for the welfare of children during a period of urbanization, and reveals the changing role of women as they studied to become teachers and secure a new place for themselves in society. In this way, the kindergarten movement is not only important for learning about education in the United States, but is also a powerful lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of American history during the late nineteenth century.

This story also applies to educational debates of the present. Kindergartens today are no longer designed for the development of children. They are classes designed to teach students how to take standardized tests, and set up those who do not perform well for failure. Kindergartens today would be unrecognizable to Blow. Yet there is a movement led

by educators, psychologists, pediatricians, and parents who are fighting to bring play back into kindergarten classrooms. Research is continuously showing the benefits of play and the damage standardized testing causes. Understanding the foundation of the kindergarten movement informs this current debate, as the earliest classrooms were places of play, creativity, and imagination. Blow spent her life cultivating the kindergarten in St. Louis, proving its worth, and helping to spread her curriculum across America. Given the current policy struggle over kindergartens today, this story of their origin is especially relevant.

Chapter I

From “*Kleinkinderbewahranstalten*” to “Kindergarten”: The History of the Kindergarten Movement

By the time the kindergarten arrived in America, it had lost its original, cumbersome title, *kleinkinderbewahranstalten*. Kindertgartens were rapidly established in the United States beginning in the early 1870s, although they originated in Germany decades earlier. “The development and formation of the whole future life of each being is contained in the beginning of its existence,” argued Friedrich Froebel, a German known as the “Father of the Kindergarten.”³ He contributed to the budding theories of early childhood education at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During his studies of botany and physics at the University of Jena from 1799 to 1801, Froebel came across the philosophical work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.⁴ These thinkers led him to develop a new theory about children and their education. It was essential, he argued, to cultivate a child’s earliest experiences in a place specifically designed for educating children by trained professionals who understood their development. His theories, which challenged many contemporary ideas, would have a profound effect on the role of women and the education of young children in Germany and abroad. Froebel’s unique, play-based

³ Freidrich Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel’s Pedagogics of the Kindergarten, or, His Ideas Concerning the Play and Playthings of the Child*. Translated by Josephine Jarvis. (New York; D. Appleton, 1899), 6.

⁴ Evelyn Weber, *The Kindergarten: Its Encounter with Educational Thought in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 1-2.

curriculum would become an integral part of early childhood education in school systems around the world, first and foremost, in America.⁵

Froebel's interest in the education of young children was rooted in earlier theories of childhood. Beginning in the seventeenth century, European educators and philosophers expressed a growing interest in young children and how best to teach them. Four scholars in particular, Johann Amos Comenius, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi made the greatest contributions to early childhood educational theories during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Interestingly, the thread that links these four scholars is their emphasis on using play as a learning tool, a thread that links Froebel to these men as well. Comenius began the discussion, stating that mothers should act as educators inside the home, teaching such topics as poetry, colors, textures, and size recognition to their young children through guided play. After age six, he believed children needed to be socialized in schools. Over half a century later, Locke contributed to the conversation. He strongly encouraged free play and emphasized the idea that the desire to learn would come naturally in children. Yet he believed that hired tutors should replace mothers as educators. Rousseau's book written a century after Locke's was much more radical than the previous two scholars. He placed more rigid boundaries around childhood, and although he believed in early childhood education, he did not want lessons to intrude upon this unique period of life. Yet he advocated for children to have tutors, not women, as teachers, and placed a special emphasis on the importance of nature in a child's education. Pestalozzi, on the other hand, regarded women as the best teachers, as they were natural

⁵ Ann Taylor Allen, "Children Between Public and Private Worlds: The Kindergarten and Public Policy in Germany, 1840 – Present," in *Kindergartens and Cultures: The Global Diffusion of an Idea*, ed. Roberta Wollons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 20.

nurturers. He wanted schools to be family-like settings where teachers and students felt comfortable around each other. Like the previous three scholars, he believed learning through experience and play was the best teaching method for young children. Froebel picked up pieces of each these scholars' methods to form his own style of early childhood education. His model was based on an understanding of children and childhood, where learning was not a chore and nature and play were of utmost importance.

"Play is the highest level of child development," Froebel expressed. "It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling—and expression which his inner life requires...It is the purest creation of the child's mind as it is also a pattern and copy of the natural life hidden in man and in all things...[I]t promotes enjoyment, satisfaction, serenity, and constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child."⁶ As Comenius, Rousseau, Locke, and Pestalozzi had asserted before him, teaching through active play was the best way to educate young children. Given their level of development between the ages of four and six, children would learn best if lessons were presented to them as something fun. Froebel strongly believed that if children began their education with playful learning, it would create a positive association with school that would affect their entire lives, encouraging them to continue to take pleasure in learning and school.

Froebel felt that another crucial aspect to a child's education was an understanding and appreciation for nature. The word he created, "kindergarten," means "children's garden." Connecting early childhood education to nature and incorporating time to be outdoors into his curriculum was deeply important him. "In childhood man is like the

⁶ Friedrich Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection From His Writings*, compiled by Irene M. Lilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 93.

plant's flower or the tree's blossom; he is a manifestation of mankind's ceaseless rebirth," he explained. "As a bud is connected with the whole tree—its branch and trunk, root and crown—and so with earth and sky, and as in the course of its growth it is an integral part of the whole universe, so a man lives in communion with Nature, with mankind and with the whole spiritual order of things. He shares the life that is common to all."⁷ He was concerned with forming a sense of unity between children and their peers as well as humans with nature. Especially during a period of industrialization, he felt it was important to not lose touch with the natural world. Gardening was an integral part of Froebel's kindergarten curriculum, to have children actively engage with nature.

As much as play and nature were key components to Froebel's kindergarten classroom, he believed having a co-educational student body was also important. By the mid-nineteenth century, American primary schools were largely already co-educational, yet this was not the case in Germany.⁸ Due, in large part, to his own experiences in school as a child, he felt saddened that boys and girls were so separated. He believed girls could benefit from the physical activity and freedom of boys' schools just as boys could benefit from the serenity and organization of girls' schools.⁹ In Froebel's kindergarten, he advised that both sexes would be present in each classroom.

Froebel's own experiences as a child influenced more than just his desire for co-educational classrooms. The struggles he faced growing up with a stepmother with whom he had no relationship and an uncaring father helped shape his entire kindergarten

⁷ Froebel, *A Selection From His Writings*, 93.

⁸ David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, "Silence and Policy Talk: Historical Puzzles about Gender and Education." *Educational Researcher* 17, no. 3 (Apr., 1988): 35.

⁹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 8, 11-12, 18.

curriculum. Attending both an all girls and an all boys school, working as an apprentice to a forester, attending the University of Jena, and working under Pestalozzi would contribute to his early childhood education theories. However, his development of the kindergarten struggled for acceptance in Germany. The kindergarten ultimately took off in America due in large part to the commitment and dedication of a few strong women who traveled to Germany, studied under Froebel, and brought the curriculum of the kindergarten to the United States.

Johann Amos Comenius, a Protestant minister from the Czech Republic, was the first to write about institutionalized education programs for young children in the *Great Didactic*, most likely completed in 1632.¹⁰ He later wrote *The School of Infancy* between 1628 and 1635, where he advocated for the education of children in the home through the age of six. Children develop at different rates, he argued, and more individualized attention could be given by mothers and personal tutors. Mothers should teach children under age six an extensive list of skills and knowledge including household affairs, the difference between light and dark, the names of common colors, numbers to at least twenty, the difference between small and large and thick versus thin, to name a few. In addition, children should be able to memorize poems and short verses from Psalms or hymns, and coherently express themselves and answer questions. Even though this list of tasks was

¹⁰ Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.; M.W. Keatinge "Introduction Biographical." In *The Great Didactic of John Amos Comenius*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896), 14.

long, he stated that children will learn best through guided play, and advised against excessive early education to give children room to grow on their own.¹¹ After age six, however, he believed children should begin schooling, as older children need to be socialized, otherwise they may become “wild.”¹² Other leading Enlightenment philosophers, such as Locke and later Rousseau, would endorse this idea of children beginning their education in the home, through guided play.

Almost sixty years after *The School of Infancy*, Locke wrote the much more widely read *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. Children should be taught inside the home by parents or preferably tutors, he wrote, as schools were places of “Roughness and ill Breeding.” It was better they not risk acquiring the immoral behaviors of their classmates. Locke believed virtue was “harder to be got, than a knowledge of the world; and if lost in a Young Man is seldom recovered.”¹³ He therefore believed that virtue was to be cultivated in the home, a calmer, safer atmosphere than a school. He further suggested that his ideas be applied only to affluent children, a view he shared with almost every other educator during this century.¹⁴ In his conclusion, he commented, “I think a Prince, a Nobleman, and an ordinary Gentleman’s Son, should have different ways of Breeding.”¹⁵ Breeding, in this case, meant education, revealing that Locke did think the acquisition of knowledge had the capacity to change a person’s status. This was not his goal for educating young children, however. The purpose of education was not to uplift the lower class, but to

¹¹ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 3-4.

¹² Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 4.

¹³ John Locke, “Some Thoughts on Education.” In *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James L. Axtell, 166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

¹⁴ Axtell, James. “The Education in Context,” in *The Educational Writings of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 51.

¹⁵ Locke, “Some Thoughts on Education,” 325.

perpetuate existing social and economic status. Locke believed his methods should only apply to the top four-to-five percent of the population (as the title of “Gentlemen” describes).¹⁶ Even though educators like Locke were trying to better early childhood education, their ideas were only to benefit the small affluent portion of the population.

Like Comenius, Locke proposed specific skills that children should learn while in the home, such as literacy as soon as they began speaking. Also like Comenius, he advocated for learning through play to better engage children in their lessons. “I have always had a Fancy, that *Learning* might be made a Play and Recreation to Children,”¹⁷ he asserted. “Learning any thing [sic], they should be taught, might be made as much a Recreation to their Play, as their Play is to their Learning.” He believed that children should engage in free play as much as possible, and the desire to learn would come naturally. “Get them but to ask their Tutor to teach them, as they do often their Play-fellows, instead of his Calling upon them to learn.”¹⁸ If children did not show this desire, parents or tutors should trick the child into learning. For instance, Locke described a game with lettered dice, which “secretly” taught children the alphabet without a direct lesson. “Thus Children may be cozen’d into a Knowledge of the Letters; be *taught to read*, without perceiving it to be any thing but a Sport, and play themselves into that which others are whipp’d for.”¹⁹ Methods like these spoke to a new understanding of child development. They changed learning from a chore to a game. Froebel would make these play-based methods a key component of his kindergarten curriculum.

¹⁶ Axtell, “The *Education* in Context,” 52.

¹⁷ Locke, “Some Thoughts on Education,” 255.

¹⁸ Locke, “Some Thoughts on Education,” 174.

¹⁹ Locke, “Some Thoughts on Education,” 256.

Rousseau's *Émile* contributed to Froebel's theories of education. This seminal piece was published in 1762, almost a century after Locke's work. The ideas in *Émile*, though heavily influenced by Locke, were even more in tune with child development than *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Rousseau focused on creating a strict boundary between childhood and adulthood stating, "the man must be treated as a man and the child as a child. Give each his place, and keep him there," as children had their "own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling."²⁰ Whereas Locke had a more adult-oriented approach to early childhood education, Rousseau believed children needed to be taught with methods tailored to their age and level of development. For instance, unlike Locke, he believed that children should not be taught to read at such a young age. Instead, he advised that children should begin reading only when they had a natural desire to do so, even if that meant starting this process at age twelve.²¹ Importantly, he also notes that children often did not live to see adulthood. "Of all the children who are born scarcely one half reach adolescence, and it is very likely your pupil will not live to be a man. What is to be thought, therefore, of that cruel education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future?"²² He stressed that childhood should not be rigidly limited to strict schooling, encouraging his fellow man to be respectful of this fragile period and allow for leisure and play. "Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts. Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips, and when the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these

²⁰ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Aldine Press, 1963), 44; Rousseau, *Émile*, 54.

²¹ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 8.

²² Rousseau, *Émile*, 42.

innocents of the joys which pass so quickly?"²³ Rousseau wanted to make sure children were able to enjoy their potentially short lives. Learning through play and allowing a child's natural development to set the agenda for their individual education was Rousseau's way of ensuring children could enjoy their childhood and get an education simultaneously.

Rousseau argued, like Locke, that children should not be taught in schools, but rather by tutors, should the family be able to afford it. Otherwise, he charged the father with the responsibility of teaching his children. Yet contrary to the view of Comenius, he thought women were unfit to educate. "The real nurse is the mother and the real teacher is the father... let the child pass from one to the other." He believed mothers were often resentful of motherhood. "It is not surprising that a [mother who] despises the duty of suckling her child should despise its education," he commented.²⁴ He also felt that mothers "may lavish excessive care on her child instead of neglecting him... she wards off every painful experience in the hope of withdrawing him from the power of nature, and fails to realise [sic] that... it is a cruel kindness to prolong the child's weakness when the grown man must bear fatigue." Despite all these perceived faults, Rousseau still thought mothers could educate their daughters. "What have men to do with the education of girls? What is there to hinder their mothers educating them as they please? There are no colleges for girls; so much the better for them!"²⁵ Although he believed children of different classes should be taught equally, he did not believe the same was true of different sexes.²⁶ Girls, in

²³ Rousseau, *Émile*, 43.

²⁴ Rousseau, *Émile*, 16.

²⁵ Rousseau, *Émile*, 327.

²⁶ John Darling and Maaike Van De Pijpekamp. "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women." *British Journal of Education Studies* 42, no. 3 (1994): 118.

his opinion, were not to be educated like boys. This idea of separate educations for boys and girls was in sync with accepted practices of the time. Froebel would seek to change the norm, calling for co-educational classrooms.

One educator who took a particular interest in Rousseau's work was Pestalozzi. Though, one critic noted, "*Émile* should be read as a speculation on principles, not as a guide to practical methods,"²⁷ Pestalozzi used Rousseau's theories of education to teach his son, leading him to boldly modify the work.²⁸ His records of this process in *A Father's Journal*, which he began in 1774, suggest he was the first European educator to experiment with a real child as the basis for his teaching model.²⁹ In contrast to Locke, his desire to teach stemmed from his wish to improve the lives of the poor.³⁰ Yet instead of trying to lift the lower classes up from their impoverished circumstances, his goal was to make them independent.³¹ He believed strongly in the Rousseauian idea that education should be based on nature. Yet in stark contrast to Rousseau, he believed that the family held the strongest bond within nature and therefore education should happen inside the home. While Rousseau and Locke both stressed the importance of hiring a well-bred, well-educated tutor to instruct the child, Pestalozzi argued the mother was best suited for the job, as women had a natural gift for nurturing.³² He further wanted schools to embody the

²⁷ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Aldine Press, 1963), vii.

²⁸ Pestalozzi went as far as to name his son Jean-Jacques after Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 9.

²⁹ Henry Holman, "Pestalozzi, Johann Heinrich," in *A Cyclopedia of Education*, ed. Paul Monroe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913): 655 and Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 9.

³⁰ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 9.

³¹ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 10.

³² Allen, "Children Between Public and Private Worlds," 18.

female character as much as possible. Practically, this meant that schools were to be places where children could feel loved. He encouraged teachers and students to have intimate relationships in a family-like setting. In his schools, he asked staff and students to refer to him as “Papa Pestalozzi.”³³ He argued that children should attend school only when they were older, sacrificing as little time as possible to be outside the home.³⁴

Pestalozzi’s educational model was based around the idea of learning through experience. “Man is much more truly educated through that which he does than through that which he learns,” he asserted. He wanted children to learn about an object by comparing it to other objects, combining it with something else, using all their senses to discover what its essential properties were, as opposed to merely being told it’s name by an instructor. Essentially, he was encouraging the child to learn through playing to fully understand the object at hand.³⁵ He stated, “[we] get our knowledge by our own investigation, not by endless talk about the results of art and science.” Ultimately, the aim of elementary education, he declared, was to establish “connections between the child and the realities of actual life.”³⁶ He wanted them to learn through their own experiences so that their educations could be applicable to their daily lives, a key theory Froebel would later employ in his education model.

Pestalozzi used this educational model first at the Neuhof, a school he set up on his own farm in Switzerland. This was designed for abandoned and orphaned children and thus is known as the first industrial school for the poor. The school lasted only five years

³³ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 12.

³⁴ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 11.

³⁵ Mary J. Reichling. “Music, Imagination, and Play.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 41.

³⁶ Cited in Henry Holman, “Pestalozzi, Johann Heinrich,” 658.

due to lack of funds. He later opened an institute for teacher training in Yverdon, Switzerland, which attracted educators from all over the world to learn his teaching methods, one of whom was Froebel.³⁷ At Yverdon, Pestalozzi taught teachers the importance of taking students out of the classroom and into nature, by taking field trips to the countryside. Even inside the classroom, he encouraged learning through the use of concrete objects instead of reading about them in a book. He strongly believed that the child should play an active role in their own education, and that schools and teachers should never interfere with a child's natural style of learning. If a child was not developmentally ready to grasp the concepts being taught, it would be "absurd" to expect them to sit through the lesson. If the child should become restless or inattentive during a lesson, Pestalozzi argued that this was not the fault of the child but the teacher. It meant the teacher was imposing knowledge onto a child that was not naturally ready to receive it.³⁸ In his most famous work *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, he criticized this formal method of teaching.

We leave children up to their fifth year in the full enjoyment of nature; we let every impression of nature work upon them; they feel their power; they already know full well the joy of unrestrained liberty and all its charms. The free natural bent which the sensuous happy wild thing takes in his development, has in them already taken its most decided direction. And after they have enjoyed this happiness of sensuous life for five whole years, we make all nature round them vanish from before their eyes; tyrannically stop the delightful course of their unrestrained freedom; pen them up like sheep, whole flocks huddled together, in stinking rooms; pitilessly chain them for hours, days, weeks, months, years, to the contemplation of unattractive and

³⁷ Lucille M. Schultz. "Pestalozzi's Mark on Nineteenth-Century Composition Instruction: Ideas Not in Words, but in Things." *Rhetoric Review* 14, no. 1 (Autumn, 1995), 24.

³⁸ Schultz, "Pestalozzi's Mark on Nineteenth-Century Composition," 28-29.

monotonous letters (and, contrasted with their former condition), to a maddening course of life.³⁹

Likening the formal school setting to a smelly pen cramped with flocks of sheep, Pestalozzi was clear in his deep distaste for rote memorization and lecture-based lessons. His approach based on experience and observation was child-directed and therefore better suited to the educational needs and developmental abilities of a child.

The common thread between Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi, spanning from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, was the pedagogical method of learning through guided play, appreciating the difference between children's developmental levels and adults'. These ideas came from a growing romanticized view of children. Children were no longer believed to be born corrupt, and childhood became something cherished. Children were seen less and less as "little adults," and increasingly as their own separate group, which required its own educational model. Comenius was the first to postulate the theory that early childhood education should be based on the natural learning patterns of the child, and therefore the use of the senses and object-based learning were imperative.⁴⁰ Having read the work of Comenius, Locke incorporated these ideas into his own work, emphasizing that early childhood education should be based on a child's mental development. The first piece of the early childhood curriculum, he put forth, was for children to learn about the physical world through their own experiences and senses.⁴¹ Locke, like Comenius, advocated for example and practice over dictations and textbook

³⁹ Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children: An Attempt to Help Mothers to Teach Their Own Children and An Account of the Method: A Report to the Society of the Friends of Education, Burgdorf: Second Edition*, trans. Lucy E. Holland and Frances C. Turner (Syracuse: C. W. Bardeen, 1898), 60-61.

⁴⁰ Schultz, "Pestalozzi's Mark on Nineteenth-Century Composition," 25.

⁴¹ Schultz, "Pestalozzi's Mark on Nineteenth-Century Composition," 26.

learning. Rousseau took the idea of natural learning even further, suggesting that children should not learn anything until they felt the individual need to learn it. He believed playing games would teach children about the physical world and their own sensory abilities.

Pestalozzi too incorporated playful learning into his family-like classroom. Froebel acknowledged the lessons from these scholars. His kindergarten would honor the natural development of the child and the powerful teaching tool of play as central themes in his curriculum.

Born in 1782, over a century after *Great Didactic*, Froebel came of age during a radical period in European history. After the conclusion of the Thirty Years War in 1648, the German lands experienced a long period of cultural and political transformation. Germans began to focus on the individual experience and personal development. There was a new confidence in reason and the promotion of meritocracy. School systems began expanding to encourage the cultivation of talent.⁴² During the eighteenth century, an unprecedented number of books were published in German to allow Enlightenment ideas to spread to a much wider audience. There was a massive increase in the number of periodicals, newspapers, and magazines distributed throughout the German lands, as well as newly formed organizations and discussion groups to disseminate ideas.⁴³ Literature, poetry, art, music, and philosophy flourished, more so than ever before. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Germany was established as the *Land der Dichter und Denker*, the 'land of poets and philosophers.'⁴⁴ This period of new ideas and new forms of communication

⁴² Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87.

⁴³ Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 90.

⁴⁴ Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 94.

helped to spread the emerging theories of early childhood education, which Froebel would incorporate into his kindergarten curriculum.



Figure 1: Friedrich Froebel.
Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow and the Blow Family, PA 19.2," PH02946.

These early philosophers were not the sole influences on Froebel's kindergarten. His own upbringing had a profound effect on how he envisioned early childhood education. He wrote, "[t]he ability of a human being to grow in felicity to his full power and to achieve his destiny depends solely on a proper understanding of him in childhood. He must be understood not only in his nature but also in his relationships, and treated in ways which

are appropriate.”⁴⁵ In his own childhood, contrarily, he often felt misunderstood and was treated in ways that were not appropriate for a child. His father was a pastor at a Lutheran Protestant church, who was constantly consumed by his work, and his mother, after giving birth to Froebel in 1782, died nine months later. Froebel was then put in the care of servants who neglected him, and it was ultimately his loving brothers who raised him.⁴⁶ His father remarried while Froebel was still a child, and at first, Froebel could not have been happier to have a new mother. However, soon she gave birth to her own child, and, as he put it, “I was treated with worse than indifference... I was made to feel an utter stranger.”⁴⁷ His parents viewed him as wicked and naughty, and he described his childhood as lonely and filled with grief.⁴⁸

Yet he found solace in nature. “The world of plants and flowers, so far as I was able to see and understand... early became an object of observation and reflection to me.”⁴⁹ He loved to help his father in the garden, which was his father’s favorite activity.⁵⁰ Through his close relationship with his brothers and with nature, he was able to find happiness in an otherwise dismal childhood.⁵¹ This emphasis on the importance of nature was a key

⁴⁵ Froebel, *A Selection From His Writings*, 93.

⁴⁶ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 3.

⁴⁷ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 4.

⁴⁸ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 15, 5.

⁴⁹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 6.

⁵⁰ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 6.

⁵¹ Another way Froebel coped with the painfulness of his childhood, interestingly, was by learning about Pestalozzi’s childhood. He wrote in his autobiography, “And now I recalled how in my early boyhood, in my father’s house, I had got a certain piece of news out of some newspaper or another, or at least that is how the matter stood in my memory. I gathered that in Switzerland a man of forty, who lived retired from the world, Pestalozzi by name, had taught himself, alone and unaided, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Just at that time I was feeling the slowness and insufficiency of my own development, and this news quieted me, and filled me with the hope and trust that I, too, might, through my own

component in what would become his kindergarten curriculum. Children were required to work outside in the garden to cultivate an understanding of nature and their own sense of perception.

Outside of his home life, Froebel's introduction to education was rather peculiar; he was sent to an all-girls school.⁵² This experience would influence his decision to make his kindergarten classes coeducational. After attempting to teach Froebel to read, his father found it too troublesome and not worth his time. Once Froebel had struggled through this task and became literate, he was sent to the public village school.⁵³ This school happened to be a girls' school, as that was the district where his father worked.⁵⁴ Froebel surprisingly looks back on his experience there favorably. "This choice had a remarkable influence on the development of my inner nature, on account of the perfect neatness, quiet, intelligence, and order which reigned in the school; nay, I may go further, and say the school was exactly suitable for such a child as I was."⁵⁵ At this school, he was exposed to an entirely different form of education compared to other boys his age. His experience there made him contemplate the differences between the sexes. "I felt a deep pain and sorrow that man alone, among all creatures, should be doomed to these separations of sex, whereby the right path was made so difficult for him to find. I felt it a real necessity for the satisfaction of my heart and mind to reconcile this difficulty."⁵⁶ His brother pointed out to him that plants too had sexual differences, and this once again reinforced his connection with

endeavour, repair the deficiencies of my bringing-up." He turned to self-education as a remedy to his insufficient upbringing. Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 52.

⁵² Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 7-8.

⁵³ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 7.

⁵⁴ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 9.

⁵⁵ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 8.

⁵⁶ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 11-12.

nature. "From that time humanity and nature, the life of the soul and the life of the flower, were closely knit together in my mind."⁵⁷ This understanding led him to believe that it would benefit both boys and girls if they were taught in the same classroom. It also showed the foundation of his respect for women. He would eventually label women as central in the development of the kindergarten.

Froebel was also given a chance to experience an all boys school, where he learned about the importance of physical education and the emotionally healing qualities of play. His time at the girls' school ended in 1792, when he moved in with his uncle on his mother's side.⁵⁸ This move proved to be a wonderful change. Unlike his father and stepmother, his uncle treated him with love and respect. "In my father's house severity reigned supreme; here, on the contrary, mildness and kindness held sway. There I encountered mistrust; here I was trusted."⁵⁹ He was enrolled in the town school where he had boys as classmates. Having not had the chance for much physical activity at his old home, he felt physically inferior to his peers. "Here," he wrote, "I drank the fresh life-energy in long draughts; for now the whole place was my playground, whereas formerly, at home, I had been limited to our own walls. I gained freedom of soul and strength of body."⁶⁰ He especially liked his teacher, yet it was not necessarily because of his teaching ability. "The clergyman who taught us," he asserted, "never interfered with our games, played at certain appointed playgrounds, and always with great fun and spirit."⁶¹ He loved that his playtime was uninterrupted and that his instructor understood the value of this time. He recalled

⁵⁷ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 12.

⁵⁸ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 17-18.

⁵⁹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 18.

⁶⁰ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 18.

⁶¹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 18.

receiving instruction from another two schoolmasters, “one was pedantic and rigid; the other, more especially our class-teacher, was large-hearted and free. The first never had any influence over his class; the second could do whatever he pleased with us.”⁶² These strong recollections of his playtime and his friendly instructors highlight the emphasis he put onto play and playful teaching as an educator later in life. His two contrasting experiences of learning at a girls school and a boys school gave him insight into the worlds of both sexes. In his coeducational kindergarten classroom, he incorporated both the physical activities of the boys school with the order and calm quality he found so comforting in the girls school, so that man would not be “doomed to these separations of sex.”⁶³

The next stage in Froebel’s education illustrated the importance of learning through experience, a theory upon which he based his entire kindergarten. At age fifteen and a half, his parents decided they could not afford to send Froebel to university as they had already sent two sons.⁶⁴ Consequently, in 1797, he began work as an apprentice to a forester where he was able to continue learning about nature. In his description of this job, he notes that his boss “did not understand the art of conveying his knowledge to others, especially because what he knew he had acquired only by dint of actual experience.”⁶⁵ This experience showed Froebel the importance of learning through doing, a key component to Pestalozzi’s pedagogical model. That is how his boss had learned how to do his job, and

⁶² Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 21.

⁶³ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 11.

⁶⁴ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 23-24.

⁶⁵ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 24-25.

Froebel understood firsthand that conveying instructions merely by dictating was not an effective teaching method.

During his time as an apprentice, Froebel began attending plays where he gained an appreciation for theater and performance, which would translate into the songbooks and plays he created for his kindergartners. A traveling theater group performed an hour's walk away from where he worked, and after seeing them once, he was hooked. "These performances made a deep and lively impression upon me," he wrote, "and thus the more that I felt as if my soul at last received nourishment for which it had long hungered."⁶⁶ He attended religiously, stating, much to his father's disapproval, "I placed the benefit I had derived from my attendance at the play side by side with what I had received by my attendance at church."⁶⁷ This source of recreation would become a huge part of how he believed children could learn best – through creating plays and singing songs of their own.

Following his apprenticeship, Froebel was finally able to get the higher education he had been yearning for. His father finally put together enough funds for Froebel to attend university. He began his studies at the University of Jena in 1799, during its heyday of philosophical influence.⁶⁸ Legendary philosophers such as Johann Fichte, Friedrich von Schelling, and Georg Hegel were all professors at Jena at the turn of the century.⁶⁹ Although Froebel was focused on botany and physics, it was impossible to miss the innovative

⁶⁶ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 26.

⁶⁷ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 26.

⁶⁸ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 28.

⁶⁹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/> (assessed 2 December, 2011); David H. Degrood, *Dialectics and Revolution: Volume 2* (Netherlands: B.R. Grüner Publishing Co., 1979): 89; and Timothy C. Luther, *Hegel's Critique of Modernity: Reconciling Individual Freedom and the Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009): 100.

philosophical work going on around him. Froebel's own philosophical work aligned most closely with the work of Fichte. While Schelling was more concerned with the aesthetic unity of mind and matter in art and literature, Fichte believed that the "striving of the human will to realize the good" was far more important "than the creation of the beautiful." This idea deeply influenced Froebel's creation of his "gifts," natural objects that represented symbols of the mind, which would lead children to clear thinking.⁷⁰

By the time Froebel had finished at the University of Jena, he was an aspiring architect. Yet in the back of his mind he was constantly asking himself, "canst thou do work in architecture worthy of a man's life? Canst thou use it to the culture and the ennoblement of mankind?"⁷¹ It was important to Froebel to be able to use his education to help others, which made him question whether he could believe that architecture would be fulfilling enough.⁷² After a friend of his introduced him to Herr Gruner, headmaster of the Frankfurt Model School and pupil of Pestalozzi, whom Froebel confessed his misgivings to, his answer to his own question was decidedly "no." He abandoned the pursuit of his architecture career for the profession of a teacher at the Frankfurt school.⁷³ It was here where he became familiar with the work of Pestalozzi. Froebel said his writing "was to my heart like oil poured on fire."⁷⁴ He had found his calling in teaching.

In August of 1805, Froebel went to Pestalozzi's school at Yverdon to learn his

⁷⁰ James L. Hughes, *Froebel's Educational Laws for All Teachers* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1910), vii.

⁷¹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 51.

⁷² Interestingly, Frank Lloyd Wright cites Froebel's gifts that he used to learn with as a child as having a huge impact on his architectural career. (Frederick M. Logan, "Kindergarten and Bauhaus," *College Art Journal* 10, no. 1, [Autumn 1950] 37.)

⁷³ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 52.

⁷⁴ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 53.

teaching methods.⁷⁵ Here, he was warmly welcomed by Pestalozzi and studied how to teach arithmetic, drawing, physical geography, and German.⁷⁶ He then began teaching these subjects at the Model School in Frankfurt.⁷⁷ During this time, he also became the personal tutor for two young boys. This experience made him contemplate the effectiveness of tutorship. He wrote, "I had a silent inward reluctance towards private tutorship. I felt the constant interruptions and the piece-meal nature of the work inseparable from the conditions of the case, and hence I suspected that it might want vitality."⁷⁸ He preferred the idea of a classroom, something less private and more community-based. He also used this time to test Pestalozzi's model for teaching, which he found, in practice, had some shortcomings. One critique, Froebel recognized, was the "utter absence of any organised connection between the subjects of education. Joyful and unfettered work springs from the conception of all things as one whole, and forms a life and a lifework in harmony with the constitution of the universe and resting firmly upon it."⁷⁹ Froebel envisioned early childhood to not only create well-rounded children but also children with the ability to recognize the unity of multiple subjects.

Because of the flaws Froebel identified in the methods of leading educators such as Pestalozzi, he decided to create his own pedagogy. "All my thoughts and work now directed to the subject of the culture and education of man. This period of my life became full of zeal, of active development, of advancing culture, and in consequence, of happiness."⁸⁰ He was

⁷⁵ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 53.

⁷⁶ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 55-56.

⁷⁷ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 57.

⁷⁸ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 59.

⁷⁹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 70-71.

⁸⁰ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 60.

convinced that “the whole former educational system, even that which had received improvement, ought to be exactly reversed, and regarded from a diametrically opposite point of view--namely, that of a system of development.”⁸¹ It was out of this period that Froebel was motivated to create the curriculum for the kindergarten. Between the years of 1835 and 1850, Froebel developed its key components: the “gifts” (materials) and the “occupations” (activities). He would use these two components to teach kindergartners through symbolic education about the laws of unity, of self-activity, and of connectedness. In 1840, Froebel opened the first official kindergarten in Blankenburg, Germany, where he could finally put his curriculum to use.⁸²

By 1848, liberal reformers in Germany embraced the idea of the kindergarten. However, three years later it was banned by the Prussian government, on the grounds that the Froebel system would convert the nation’s youth into atheists, due to a lack of a substantial religious focus to his curriculum.⁸³ Although Froebel’s methods did not incorporate religion as a main feature in the kindergarten, emphasizing instead the child’s own experience as the basis for learning, he was in no way attempting to encourage

⁸¹ Froebel, *Autobiography of Froebel*, 116.

⁸² Susan Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” in *Education in the United States*, ed. Nicholas Murray Butler (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, 1900), 35.

⁸³ Ann Taylor Allen, “Spiritual Motherhood: German Feminists and the Kindergarten Movement, 1848-1911,” *History of Education Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Autumn, 1982): 325.

atheism.⁸⁴ Frustratingly misunderstood, he recognized that he would need to implement his ideas elsewhere.⁸⁵ Ultimately, “[t]he spirit of the kindergarten [was] far more akin to the free institutions of America... than to autocratic Germany... The kindergarten [was] a democracy and could not flourish in an autocracy.”⁸⁶ Sadly, he would never see his kindergarten come to fruition abroad. He died in 1852, just after the ban was declared. Even though Froebel’s methods were banned, his ideas were already widespread, and his disciples would make it their mission to continue what he started. One place they traveled was to the United States, which turned out to be the most receptive country to Froebel’s ideas.

Americans, during the mid-nineteenth century, were increasingly turning their attention to the lives of children. During a time of mass immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, Americans were worried about the corruption of children by the harsh conditions of the city and living in poverty. These concerns spurred the child-saving movement, with the purpose of creating more control over the environments of children in order to transform their character.⁸⁷ The roots of this movement began in the 1790s, when philanthropists started to develop new strategies to provide care for delinquent children through the establishment of orphan asylums, charity and Sunday schools, and reformatories.⁸⁸ These establishments, built to separate the child from the public world or

⁸⁴ Allen, “Children Between Public and Private Worlds,” 18.; Lucy Wheelock, “What’s In A Name?” *Journal of Education* 88, no. 1 (1918): 539.

⁸⁵ Allen, “Children Between Public and Private Worlds,” 23.

⁸⁶ Wheelock, “What’s In A Name?” 539.

⁸⁷ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 158.

⁸⁸ Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 155.

corrupt families, continued to develop through the 1840s.⁸⁹ The following decade brought about adoption laws and orphan trains. These trains were an “idealistic attempt to remove poor children from corrupting urban influences.”⁹⁰ In a larger sense, these trains expressed a change in the way childhood was being perceived. Children were valued for sentimental reasons instead of being seen merely as a source of labor.⁹¹ They were increasingly becoming “economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless.’”⁹² After the Civil War, the movement entered a new phase, where the state’s police powers took a significant role in protecting children from exploitation, abuse, and neglect. This phase also marked a sharper separation between childhood and adulthood, as laws were created to restrict children’s access to obscene material, remove them from almshouses, fight child prostitution, and persecute statutory rape. From the 1890s until World War I, the Progressive era marked the time when children became an even greater public responsibility, and welfare programs were created to care for children in need.⁹³

The child-saving movement, with its goals of “saving” children from corruption, looked to public institutions to bestow virtue on America’s youth. Public, or “common” schools, along with Sunday schools, libraries, orphan asylums, reformatories, and churches were places where adults could Americanize immigrants and teach proper values to lower-class children.⁹⁴ The overall mission statement of these institutions was largely the same:

⁸⁹ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 156.

⁹⁰ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 165.

⁹¹ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 167.

⁹² Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

⁹³ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 156.

⁹⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1988), 273.

“to nurture the good Christians who would be the good citizens who would enable the Republic to fulfill its destiny as a beacon of liberty to the world.”⁹⁵ Above all, however, the primary place for moral development was the institution of the family. The family was seen as the most natural setting for early instruction and learning good values. The mother was the most important figure in familial education, “who by virtue of God-given instinct had singular responsibility for producing the character and intellect required by citizens of a free society.”⁹⁶ This also meant that Americans believed the early years of a child’s life could determine their character as adults, as mothers would only be educators before their children went off to primary school.

Yet many families had two working parents who were unable to care for their children during the day. The ways poor immigrant families raised their children was often seen as backwards by middle-class American standards. The children of these types of families were regarded as the “outcast poor” and “dangerous classes,” threatening the integrity of the respectable citizens.⁹⁷ Jane Addams and Lillian Wald took on the responsibility for these improperly raised children, establishing settlement houses where they could be reformed, educated, and Americanized. Informal day nurseries, or households that watched over children during work hours developed across the country, also taking some of this responsibility.⁹⁸ Establishments like these allowed parents to work and their children to be cared for. As Americans began to take seriously the rights of children, educational reform followed close behind. The culture of the movement allowed

⁹⁵ Cremin, *The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980*, 273.

⁹⁶ Cremin, *The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980*, 274.

⁹⁷ Cremin, *The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980*, 276.

⁹⁸ Cremin, *The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980*, 278-279.

for the kindergarten to gain acceptance among American citizens. The idea of romanticizing childhood, freeing the child from corruption, and creating a boundary between childhood and adulthood made early childhood education a sensible fit. Kindergartens were also seen as spaces where children could develop strong moral characters and escape the evils of city streets.

The kindergarten movement reached America through German exiles. Following the Revolutions of 1848, mass amounts of Germans immigrated to the United States. One such immigrant and student of Froebel's, Margarethe Schurz, set up the first private kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1855. From 1855 to 1865, the kindergartens that sprouted up in America were typically private, German-speaking, institutions. In these early years, English-speaking parents looked upon these schools with suspicion.⁹⁹ In 1860, prominent Bostonian Elizabeth Peabody set up the English-speaking public kindergarten based on Froebel's methods.¹⁰⁰ This kindergarten, however, closed down seven years after it opened. Susan Blow would establish the first publically funded *and* continuously running kindergarten six years later in 1873 in St. Louis, Missouri.

⁹⁹ Ann Taylor Allen, "'Let Us Live with Our Children': Kindergarten Movements in Germany and the United States, 1840-1914," *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1988): 27.

¹⁰⁰ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 175; Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 58.

Chapter II

Susan Blow: Mother of the Kindergarten



Figure 2: Susan Blow.

Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow and the Blow Family, PA 19.1," PH02988.

In 1833, Friedrich Froebel lamented the refusal of the German government to take seriously his proposals for the expansion of the kindergarten movement. "Everyone wants a way of education such as I have described...but no one is willing to seize the obvious means to achieve it. Each says that the other ought to start first," he declared frustrated. "Many look on...[the kindergarten] as a good milch cow. But they want the cow not only to yield good milk and rich dung in return for poor fodder but to give a good return in stable money as well." He concluded, less than hopefully, "[w]hat the cow should do in such

circumstances or what will happen to her I do not know.”¹⁰¹ Forty years later and across the Atlantic, the fate of this “cow,” and all that it was expected to produce, would lie in the hands of Susan Blow. Her commitment to studying Froebel’s theories and curriculum, her passion for the lives of children and the betterment of society, and her willingness to step outside the role prescribed for nineteenth century women allowed her to make it possible for children to experience the education Froebel had imagined. It took longer than his lifetime for the kindergarten to become embedded into education systems around the world. Blow filled the role of his successor. She carried his ideas and educational practices into the next century, setting a strong foundation for kindergartens in years to come.

“She was small in stature,” one of Blow’s kindergarten trainee’s described, “with a slight, well rounded face and graceful figure, a refined and keenly intellectual face, light brown hair and expressive blue eyes. She was altogether attractive and distinguished in appearance.”¹⁰² Blow had big ambitions. She successfully implemented the kindergarten into the St. Louis public school system and became a leading figure in philosophy of early childhood education. Women in the 1800s had little political influence, and were supposed to take the role of mother and wife, leaving the workplace to men. After the Civil War, however, women began to dominate the profession of teaching and carve out a role for themselves as educators. Mostly taking jobs in primary schools, women felt their mission was to raise children to be noble American citizens, and put children of different economic backgrounds on equal footing with one another. Blow envisioned a greater mission. She believed formal education should promote intellectual and moral development to create

¹⁰¹ Froebel, *A Selection From His Writings*, 172.

¹⁰² Lawrence O. Christensen et al., ed., *Dictionary of Missouri Biography* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 87.

productive individuals.¹⁰³ She wanted children to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and creatively, not just practice good behavior and learn facts. She believed it was necessary to begin this education as early as possible. She committed herself to the Froebelian cause and promoted the kindergarten movement in America. Like Froebel, she wanted young boys and girls of all classes to join together in the classroom to study nature and learn through guided play to aid in their development. Although other women would help pave the way for the movement, it was Blow who proved to American parents and policy makers that kindergartens were imperative for the proper education of children. Blow's class at the Des Peres School in Carondelet, Missouri became a model for kindergartens around the nation. Blow's biography—her family, the way she was raised, the education she received, and her ability to travel—profoundly shaped her ideas about children and education, and were key components to how she began the first continuously running public kindergarten, and why she made it her goal to continue the movement.

¹⁰³ Dorothy Rogers, "Before Pragmatism: The Practical Idealism of Susan E. Blow." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36, no. 4 (Fall, 2000): 537.

Susan Blow came of age in the 1870s, just as middle-class women began to see a bigger role for themselves in society. During the Revolutionary War, women were left on the home front and mastered their husbands' roles in household, estate, and business



Figure 3: Susan Blow. Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow and the Blow Family PA 19.1," PH02984.

affairs. Yet once the war ended, men took these public occupations while women were expected to devote their labor to the family. Even though women had demonstrated their skills at "men's work," the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a separate spheres ideology that separated women's from men's spheres of influence. New gendered norms assumed women were incapable of waged labor, direct political work, and most activities outside the home. However, the theory of Republican Motherhood suggested that women could have influence in society by raising moral and patriotic children. Women would be the

guardians of the nation's virtue and, through their influence on husbands and sons, shape the future of the nation. By the end of the Civil War, a growing number of women were attending college—though still just under two percent of American women—and some began to seek careers outside the home. The Civil War left a shortage of marriageable men and a growing number of women determined to participate in social reform work.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 12-13, 121.

Teaching was the most popular career for women. As children's welfare increasingly became the responsibility of the public, it lessened the duty of the family to provide education for their children. This linked the welfare of children to women's struggle for independence and the right to enter the public sphere to create social reform. The presence of female teachers represented women's concern for the welfare of children and their ability to work outside the home to affect change.¹⁰⁵ Teacher training schools had been sprouting up throughout the country since the first half of the century. These schools eased women's entry into a male-dominated field.¹⁰⁶ This profession allowed middle-class women to establish themselves as "molders of the young," and saw education as a way of reuniting the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War.¹⁰⁷ Especially with the influx of immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women believed it was the task of educators to "Americanize" immigrant children. Thousands of immigrants lived in city tenements plagued with disease and poverty—urban forces that corrupted vulnerable youth. Public schools were seen as places where children could be "disciplined and tutored, homogenized into respectable American citizens."¹⁰⁸ In this way, there was a sense of patriotism associated with the profession of teaching; teaching was political work. Raising proper citizens in the classroom, just as raising virtuous children a generation earlier, was perceived as a noble cause women could pursue.

Many of these middle-class women, like Blow, were brought up by abolitionist parents, who raised them to be socially and politically aware of the plight of others. Parents

¹⁰⁵ Kathryn Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 64-65.

¹⁰⁶ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 122-123.

¹⁰⁸ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 126.

that lived through the Civil War taught their children that people could change society and the government could be a force for good. William Kelley, father of Florence Kelley, a leading female activist for human welfare during the late nineteenth century, taught his daughter to sympathize with working-class and slave children.¹⁰⁹ “[L]ife can never be right for all the children,” he explained, “until the cherished boys and girls are taught to know the facts in the lives of their less fortunate contemporaries.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, Jane Addams, settlement worker and founder of Hull House, grew up recognizing that “poverty could... shrivel a person’s soul,” and was compelled to find ways to save children from this fate.¹¹¹ Guidance like this allowed a generation of women growing up during the Civil War to develop an awareness for social ills, and fueled in them a sense of responsibility to become active in social reform.

Yet the movement of women into the workplace through the profession of teaching did not go without criticism. The role of the teacher had been primarily a male position, yet after the Civil War women not only dominated the field, but had made the education of children a feminine mission.¹¹² Some men were alarmed by women’s growing influence in education. They worried women would not be strong enough role models for their male students, too quick to praise and dote upon their students. Attacks on women teachers did not deter women from education. Even though they were paid, at best, sixty percent the salary of their male counterparts and were given little opportunity for advancement, they

¹⁰⁹ Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work*, 30.

¹¹⁰ Florence Kelley, “My Philadelphia.” *Survey Graphic* 57 (Oct. 1, 1926): 9, 56.

¹¹¹ Louise W. Knight. *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 74.

¹¹² Men still dominated education administration. Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 123, 128.

continued to seek teaching jobs, believing they had a duty to make an contribution to society. Young, single women continued to enroll in higher education and take teaching positions, particularly in primary schools, across the country.¹¹³ Not surprisingly, the “feminization” of the teaching profession, caused the status and salary of all teachers to fall.¹¹⁴

Most women teachers were unmarried. Yet after so many men were lost in the war, this was not uncommon. The number of unmarried women greatly increased toward the end of the seventeenth century, causing the training of women for the role of homemaker, wife, and mother inherently problematic.¹¹⁵ Still, most communities contended that a respectable married woman should not work for wages outside the home, even if she was educating young children. Generally, married women who worked outside the home were in need of additional income to support their families: most were from poor or wage-laboring households.¹¹⁶ Many viewed women’s entrance into the workforce as the deterioration of the family. As Addams had noted, women had to choose between the “family claim” or the “social claim,” between devoting themselves to their husbands and children or to the larger world.¹¹⁷ Many middle-class women felt unhindered by this “family claim,” as they pursued independence to expand intellectually and

¹¹³ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 128.

¹¹⁴ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 123.

¹¹⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

¹¹⁶ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 127.

¹¹⁷ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 3-35; Joyce Antler, “After College, What?: New Graduates and the Family Claim,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Autumn, 1980): 412.

professionally.¹¹⁸ They continued to train as teachers, work in classrooms, and devote their lives to improving society. Blow was among these women, never marrying and devoting her life to developing kindergartens and teacher training institutions. Her mother and father accepted her choice of profession and encouraged her educational pursuits.

Susan was raised by loving parents in a family that was committed to the betterment of St. Louis and the nation at large. Her upbringing not only instilled in her the desire to contribute to society, but it provided her with the opportunities to become well educated and well traveled, which allowed her to pursue her goal of opening the first publically funded kindergarten in America. Henry Taylor Blow and Minerva Grimsley Blow welcomed Susan, their first child, on 7 June 1843 in St. Louis.¹¹⁹ “The baby sweet little creature is quite fat, and I love her Henry so dearly,” Minerva gushed just a few weeks after she was born.¹²⁰ The Blows were a wealthy, prominent, and politically active family in St. Louis. Minerva’s father, Col. Thornton Grimsley was a businessman, a St. Louis alderman, and state legislator, described by historian John Thomas Scharf as “one of the most

¹¹⁸ Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2-3.

¹¹⁹ Trudy Faust. *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow’s Kindergarten*. (Carondelet, MO: Carondelet Historical Society, 1989), 1.

¹²⁰ Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 25 June 1843, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

prominent and influential citizens of St. Louis.”¹²¹ Of Henry, Scharf declared, “[t]he country has produced few men who possessed the variety of virtues and accomplishments embodied in the person of Henry Taylor Blow... throughout his busy and useful life he was one of the most prominent figures in the commercial, political, and social circles of St. Louis, and one of their most conspicuous ornaments.”¹²² Henry was an active abolitionist, leader in the Republican movement, and was involved in the association for the arts in his community and the educational system of St. Louis, resulting in a public school bearing his name.¹²³ In further detail of his character, Scharf continued, “[h]e was possessed of such charming social qualities, such courteous manners, dignified bearing, exuberant spirits, and generosity of heart as endeared him to his friends. In manners he was quiet, but was sometimes impulsive, though never rude. He was cordial and kind to his friends, and often very tender to those dear to him.”¹²⁴ These attributes explain why he served as a role model for his daughter, who grew up with this same sense of generosity and care for others. Both Henry’s character and community involvement influenced Susan’s vision of her life and encouraged her to make a contribution of her own to benefit society.

Henry’s political career was instrumental in Susan’s involvement with the kindergarten movement. He was born to a slave-owning, southern family in Virginia, and moved in 1830 to attend St. Louis University, marrying Minerva in 1840.¹²⁵ After pursuing

¹²¹ John Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County: From the Earliest Periods to the Present Day Including Biographical Sketches of Representative Men* Vol. I (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts & Co., 1883), 609.

¹²² Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, 607.

¹²³ Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, 608.

¹²⁴ Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, 609.

¹²⁵ Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, 609; Nini Harris, *History of Carondelet* (St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1991), 23.

a career in the lead mining industry where he made his fortune, he became a member of the Missouri State senate from 1854 to 1858. In 1860 he was one of eighteen delegates chosen to take part in the Republican National Convention where he was an avid supporter of Abraham Lincoln.¹²⁶ Although he was born in the South and lived in a border state where the majority of residents were proslavery, Henry adamantly opposed slavery.¹²⁷ The following year he was appointed by President Lincoln to serve as Minister Resident at Venezuela, yet once the Civil War began, he felt he was needed back at home and returned to Missouri. He was subsequently elected as Unconditional Unionist to the Thirty-eighth Congress and as a Republican to the Thirty-ninth Congress from 1863-1867.¹²⁸ Henry's politics influenced Susan, as Florence Kelley's father influenced her, to recognize the importance of social welfare.

Henry was firm in his anti-slavery beliefs. While serving in Congress, Henry wrote a letter to President Lincoln in 1862. "I am in the opinion that the masses of our countrymen including our noble Army, and a majority even in the border states, feel that we are unequal to the task of putting down the Rebellion while we protect slavery." The following year he reiterated this message in a letter to his wife stating, "I am settled in my conviction that the entire country must be as Free as the air we breathe & that no taint of a slave

¹²⁶ Faust, *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow's Kindergarten*, 1.

¹²⁷ Silvana R. Siddali, *Missouri's War: The Civil War in Documents* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 3. It has been suggested that his difference in political affiliation from that of his southern family was due to his involvement with the Dred Scott case. Dred Scott was his father's slave, before John Emerson's, and after growing up together, Henry formed a personal affection for Scott, prompting him to become a Republican. Don E. Fehrenbacher. *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 241, 569.

¹²⁸ Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774 - Present, "Blow, Henry Taylor," <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B000572> (assessed 1 February 2012).

influence be left on the settlement.”¹²⁹ Henry had demonstrated his anti-slavery commitment several years before the Civil War began. It was Henry and his brother who purchased the freedom of the famous slave, Dred Scott, and Scott’s family.¹³⁰ Henry, like his daughter after him, was committed to social justice and human rights.

Henry’s political career required him to travel, often leaving his wife and young children behind. He remained closely tied to the family through their constant written correspondence. In her later years, Susan would benefit from his career, having the opportunity to travel through Europe where she was able to study the work of Froebel and observe Froebelian kindergarten classrooms firsthand. As a child, however, she missed him immensely. “Little Sue was talking about you,” Minerva expressed in a letter to Henry in New York, “she heard a carriage on the street and wanted to look out the window to see if “Faver [sic] was coming.”¹³¹ Yet Susan and her mother kept each other company in his absence, and Minerva kept Henry well informed about the family. “[Y]our little Sue is very

¹²⁹ Henry T. Blow to Minerva Blow, 15 July 1863, BFP 1862-1916; 1960, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³⁰ Henry Blow and his brother Taylor were instrumental in the Dred Scott case. Henry’s father, Peter Blow, was Dred Scott’s slave owner. (It is unknown whether he was the original slave owner.) Scott moved to St. Louis with the Blows in 1830, where Henry and Taylor became childhood friends with Scott. The family later sold him after deaths and economic hardships left them needing to pay claims on their estate. Scott was sold to Dr. John Emerson of St. Louis in 1833. While working under Emerson, Scott met with Henry and Taylor, where it has been suggested that they encouraged Scott to pursue the fight for his freedom. When Emerson took Scott to live with him in free states, Scott decided to press charges. When Scott sued John Sanford, Emerson’s brother, for his family’s freedom, Henry and Taylor paid for his legal expenses. Scott lost his case for his freedom, yet after Sanford’s death, Henry and Taylor were the ones who bought the Scott family their freedom in 1857, and later arranged his burial. See Don E. Fehrenbacher. *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Walter Ehrlich. *They Have No Rights: Dred Scott’s Struggle for Freedom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1979).

¹³¹ Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 22 July 1845, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

well, and is such a comfort now that you are away – It seems to me Henry without any partiality that she is an uncommonly interesting sweet child. She talks about you and we talk together too about Faver [sic] very often... she is so affectionate & intelligent that it is a pleasure I have with her and no one else in speaking of you,” Minerva confided. Through their letters, the Blow family remained close and Susan was able to develop a strong relationship to her father, even in her early years.

As a young child, Susan was well mannered but also adventurous. Like any child, she loved to play outside and interact with nature. She was fortunate to be in a family that provided her with the space and time to play. During time they spent living at their friend’s farm in Kentucky, Minerva gushed of her five-year-old daughter, “[l]ittle Sue is as happy as I ever saw in my life & gives me no trouble whatever – She chases the ducks & chickens, and amuses herself outdoors when the weather permits nearly all day.”¹³² A few weeks later she added, “[o]ur dear Susan... continues to take a deep interest in the poultry – I could not say how often she feeds her little white chickens. Every chick and child on the place seems to love her and as to the chicks the moment they see her they run out to be fed from her.”¹³³ Her love of nature and enjoyment of playing would later draw her to Froebel’s pedagogical methods.

Susan developed an incredible work ethic from a very young age. In stark contrast to Froebel’s troubled family life growing up, Susan was fortunate to have dedicated and supportive parents who were committed to her happiness and had the means to give her a

¹³² Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 26 July 1848, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³³ Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 7 August 1848, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

stellar education. Growing up in antebellum Missouri in the mid-nineteenth century, during a time when women were seen as intellectually weak and not given equal educational opportunities to men, Susan's educational experience proved to be outside the norm. As a child, she was a bookworm, pouring over every page in her father's extensive library.



Figure 4: Blow Family Library.

Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow and the Blow Family, PA 19.1," PH00419.

Her fervor for reading translated into an equal enthusiasm for education. Her mother was her first teacher. "I am striving to be as faithful to her, in every respect, as I am

at home, and teach her every day a little – as much as I think necessary for the present,” Minerva wrote to Henry when Susan had just turned five.¹³⁴ From the ages of fourteen to sixteen, she attended a school operated by a teacher her father hired. She then left for New York where she continued her schooling for two years.¹³⁵ Here, in addition to her other academic courses, she took a German language course which would help her to translate the work of Froebel later in life.¹³⁶ Typically at the top of her class, Susan continued to devote all her energy to her education.¹³⁷ Yet her parents were worried she was devoting too much time to schooling. “You are evidently very much absorbed by your studies, which I fear you carry to an extreme,” her mother commented. ¹³⁸ “Do dearest daughter,” she advised, “strive earnestly for a high attainment in virtue as well as knowledge, & while you seek to improve your mind, do not fail to let your warm & generous heart flow out to those you love, & who you love so tenderly.”¹³⁹ Now a young woman, her mother wanted Susan to meet young men and consider marriage. Yet Susan was apparently uninterested in marriage. Her younger sister pointed out, “Susie...seems to be enjoying herself and prefers

¹³⁴ Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 26 July 1848, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³⁵ Faust, *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow's Kindergarten*, 1.

¹³⁶ Minerva Blow to Susan Blow, 15 November 1860, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³⁷ Minerva Blow to Henry T. Blow, 12 December 1853, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³⁸ Minerva Blow to Susan Blow, 20 November (1860?) [sic], in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹³⁹ Minerva Blow to Susan Blow, 15 November 1860, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

(apparently) married ladies & old people's society to unsettled young people."¹⁴⁰ Despite her family's concerns, she maintained her academic intensity.

When she returned to St. Louis in 1861, Susan continued her education, reading books on a wide variety of subjects. She even began to run a little school at her home for her brothers and sisters, taking a liking to teaching at an early age. As her younger sister Nellie described, "I devote more than two hours to the children every day, altho [sic] Susie prefers to teach the children her own way."¹⁴¹ Susan was already experimenting with different educational models on her siblings.

When her father was appointed Minister Resident to Brazil in 1869, Susan and the rest of her family joined him in Rio de Janeiro. Over the course of their fifteen-month stay, Susan picked up Portuguese and became her father's personal secretary and translator.¹⁴² The next year the family traveled through Europe where Susan became interested in a variety of European educational systems. When the Blow family arrived in Germany, Froebel's kindergarten movement was at its peak. Susan was able to visit many schools and observe the children at play in their classrooms. She vigorously took notes about Froebelian pedagogy and bought some of the "gifts" to take home with her. With these tools she felt ready to return to the United States to continue the kindergarten movement for American children.

Susan could have opened a private kindergarten, but this was not her objective. When her father offered her the money to open a school, she declined. Instead, she

¹⁴⁰ Nellie Blow to Minerva Blow, 17 May 1866, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹⁴¹ Nellie Blow to Henry T. Blow, 9 April (1867?) [sic], BFP 1862-1916; 1960 Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC.

¹⁴² Faust, *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow's Kindergarten*, 1.

contacted the St. Louis Superintendent of Schools, Dr. William Torrey Harris, to try to incorporate the kindergarten into the public school system. Dr. Harris, impressed by Susan's knowledge of the Froebel's kindergarten movement and enthusiasm about children, convinced the Board of Education to take up the project. The Board provided one classroom in the Des Peres School and salary for one teacher. Susan gladly volunteered her services as supervisor and teacher instructor and hired Mary Timberlake, a primary school teacher whom she had substituted for in the past, to take the one paid position. Before opening the classroom, Harris advised Blow to travel to New York to study under Maria Kraus-Boelté, a woman who learned about the pedagogy of the kindergarten directly from Froebel in Germany.¹⁴³ Susan left for New York in 1872 and came back to start her kindergarten on the first Monday in September 1873.

Harris had been invested in the kindergarten movement before Blow approached him with her request to incorporate a kindergarten in the St. Louis public school system. In 1870 he joined a committee appointed by the National Education Association, along with Boelté's husband, John Kraus, to decide how to incorporate Froebel's kindergarten into the American school system. He believed kindergartens would serve as a transition between family life and the more disciplined school environment.¹⁴⁴ He believed that the ages from four to six were ideal for starting school. "By this means, we gain the child for one or two years when he is good for nothing else but education," he declared. "The kindergarten utilizes a period of the child's life for preparation for the arts and trades without robbing

¹⁴³ Faust, *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow's Kindergarten*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 66.

the school of a portion of its needed time.”¹⁴⁵ He also recognized that many children discontinued their schooling after age twelve. He therefore saw the kindergarten as a way to include additional years of education into a child’s life before many would drop out.¹⁴⁶ Harris recognized the benefits of the kindergarten and was open to incorporating the movement into the St. Louis public school system.

Yet Harris would not let just anyone lead the St. Louis kindergarten. In 1865 he met Elizabeth Peabody, who was known as one of the leaders in the kindergarten movement. She had already opened a one-classroom public kindergarten in 1860 in Boston but it failed seven years later due to a lack of funding and community support.¹⁴⁷ In addition, she had a limited knowledge of Froebel’s methods, and upon the closing of her kindergarten, she sought instruction from Boelté.¹⁴⁸ From 1870 to 1871, she wrote to Harris constantly to try and explain the importance of incorporating the kindergarten into public schools, appealing to him on professional, philosophical, scientific, and personal levels.¹⁴⁹ Harris’s response was simply that the weather in St. Louis was too hot for kindergartens.¹⁵⁰ He already knew of the importance of kindergartens and wanted to bring the movement to St. Louis, but he was waiting for the right person to spearhead the movement.

¹⁴⁵ William Torrey Harris, cited in Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 40.

¹⁴⁶ Sarah Jane Van Ausdal, “Case Study in Educational Innovation: The Public Kindergarten in St. Louis, 1870-1900” (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, 1985), 63.

¹⁴⁷ The Des Peres kindergarten is known as the first public kindergarten because it was the first *continuously running* classroom. Van Ausdal, “Case Study in Educational Innovation,” 4.

¹⁴⁸ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 59.

¹⁴⁹ Van Ausdal, “Case Study in Educational Innovation,” 58.

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody to William Torrey Harris, 18 May 1870, WTHP Susan E. Blow Letters 1872-1893 Jun., Box 7 of 21, MHMLRC.

He was not so impressed by Peabody as he would be with Blow, believing Blow better understood the distinction of how to use play as schoolwork and not simply free time.¹⁵¹ When she approached him after Peabody's attempts, Harris felt he found who he was looking for. Interestingly, in a letter Blow wrote to Harris in November 1873, two months after the Des Peres kindergarten opened, she too expressed a dislike for Peabody. After receiving a letter from Peabody asking her for the details of her kindergarten, she wrote, "[r]ecognizing that our kindergarten is an experiment and knowing something of Miss Peabody's character I feel a great disinclination to write her anything more than the simple facts of number of pupils – hours employed per day etc..."¹⁵² This suggests Blow and Harris both distrusted Peabody's involvement and felt similarly in their goals for the kindergarten.

Blow and Harris were right in their misgivings about Peabody's faith in the public kindergarten movement. By the late 1870s and 1880s, Peabody no longer felt kindergartens should be public, but rather that private institutions would be sufficient. She believed the bureaucratic nature of public schools was not in the best interests of young children. The "business character of superintendents had fallen below the philanthropic spirit which should always preside over education... [Public schools had] deteriorated in spirit while apparently improving in form."¹⁵³ She made these statements at an American Froebel Union meeting, which shows her lack of understanding for Froebel's ideas. Blow always reiterated that kindergartens should be public, in keeping with Froebel's intentions,

¹⁵¹ Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 65.

¹⁵² Susan Blow to William Torrey Harris, 10 November 1873, WTHP Susan E. Blow Letters 1872-1893 Jun., Box 7 of 21, MHMLRC.

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Peabody, "Report of the Sixth Meeting of the American Froebel Union," *Kindergarten Messenger and the New Education* 3 (January, 1879): 2.

as private institutions would end up only serving affluent children. Harris too, explained how important kindergartens would be to poor children, who would have access to them through public education. "In families of great poverty the child forms evil associations in the street, and is initiated into crime. By the time he is ready to enter school he is hardened in vicious habits, beyond the power of the school to eradicate."¹⁵⁴ Both Blow and Harris were unwavering in their commitment to public kindergarten education, and as Peabody was in disagreement less than ten years after she pleaded with Harris to allow her to lead the movement, it is clear that Harris made the better choice in waiting for Blow. They developed a strong bond, supporting each other as friends and colleagues. Blow often wrote to Harris for advice and support. She understood that her kindergarten would not have existed without his endorsement and she admired him for his efforts.

After Susan had successfully launched the St. Louis kindergarten she set out to develop a kindergarten teacher training program in St. Louis. Most teacher education programs lasted just a few weeks with mere technical training. Teachers would apply exactly what they learned in their courses to instruction in their classrooms. Susan sought a more elaborate and rigorous training program. "The teachers must know the why," she stressed, "as well as the what and how."¹⁵⁵ Her students would receive six months of

¹⁵⁴ William Torrey Harris, cited in Blow, "Kindergarten Education," 41.

¹⁵⁵ Susan Blow to William Torrey Harris, 3 December 1876, Fol. 1v, WTHP Susan E. Blow Letters 1872-1893, Box 7 of 21, MHMLRC.

training before they could be considered qualified teachers.¹⁵⁶ Just as the kindergarten curriculum was created to develop the whole child, her teacher training programs were set up to develop the whole teacher. She believed teachers should be well versed in multiple subject areas in order to be the most effective educators for children. To prepare, she returned to Germany in 1877 to study under Baroness Marenholz von Bulow, president of the German Froebel Society and expert on his theory and pedagogy.¹⁵⁷

When she got returned to St. Louis she quickly expanded her curriculum to include lectures from visiting scholars, and discussions of literature, religion, and philosophy.¹⁵⁸ She believed it was important for kindergarten teachers to be cultured and intellectually astute. Laura Fisher, a graduate of the first or second St. Louis Kindergarten Training School class recalled how Blow would emphasize the study of culture, as in order to become good teachers, trainees “must have their intellectual horizons widened... and their understanding of human development and its problems deepened.”¹⁵⁹ Blow believed children deserved to be taught by people with the capacity to understand them and the knowledge to guide them.

This training program was immensely successful. It was open to the public as well as aspiring teachers, and consequently drew in crowds of as many as 200 people. It reached beyond its intended attendees and worked to educate and culture the entire community. In addition to the training program, Susan established a teacher certification program in St. Louis. She created a system where teachers could be certified to train other kindergarten

¹⁵⁶ Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers*, 54.

¹⁵⁷ Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers*, 53.

¹⁵⁸ Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ Laura Fisher, “Susan Elizabeth Blow, 1843-1916,” in *International Kindergarten Union: Pioneers of the Kindergarten in America* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 190.

teachers or to teach kindergarten children. In order to qualify for certification, candidates had to have a recommendation from a supervisor, a vote from the Kindergarten Society, which were directors from every kindergarten in St. Louis, and the approval of the Board of Education.¹⁶⁰ Susan successfully created a system to turn out highly qualified teachers, who would be able to spread Blow and Froebel's ideas to other public school systems.

Blow became known as the "mother of the kindergarten." Although there were many important figures involved with spreading the kindergarten movement throughout America, it was her thoughtful implementation of the kindergarten into the St. Louis public school system and rich teacher training courses that secured the kindergarten's place in the United States. She did not let her status as a woman deter her from stepping boldly into the public sphere and working to create social reform. Harris saw the potential in her to affect real change and used his influence to create a space for her to test her theories. Both Harris and Blow understood that children, rich and poor alike, needed a safe, friendly environment to develop their senses, minds, and bodies. Her first classroom in the Des Peres School was the catalyst that caused the kindergarten movement to grow and benefit children across the country.

¹⁶⁰ Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers*, 54.

Chapter III

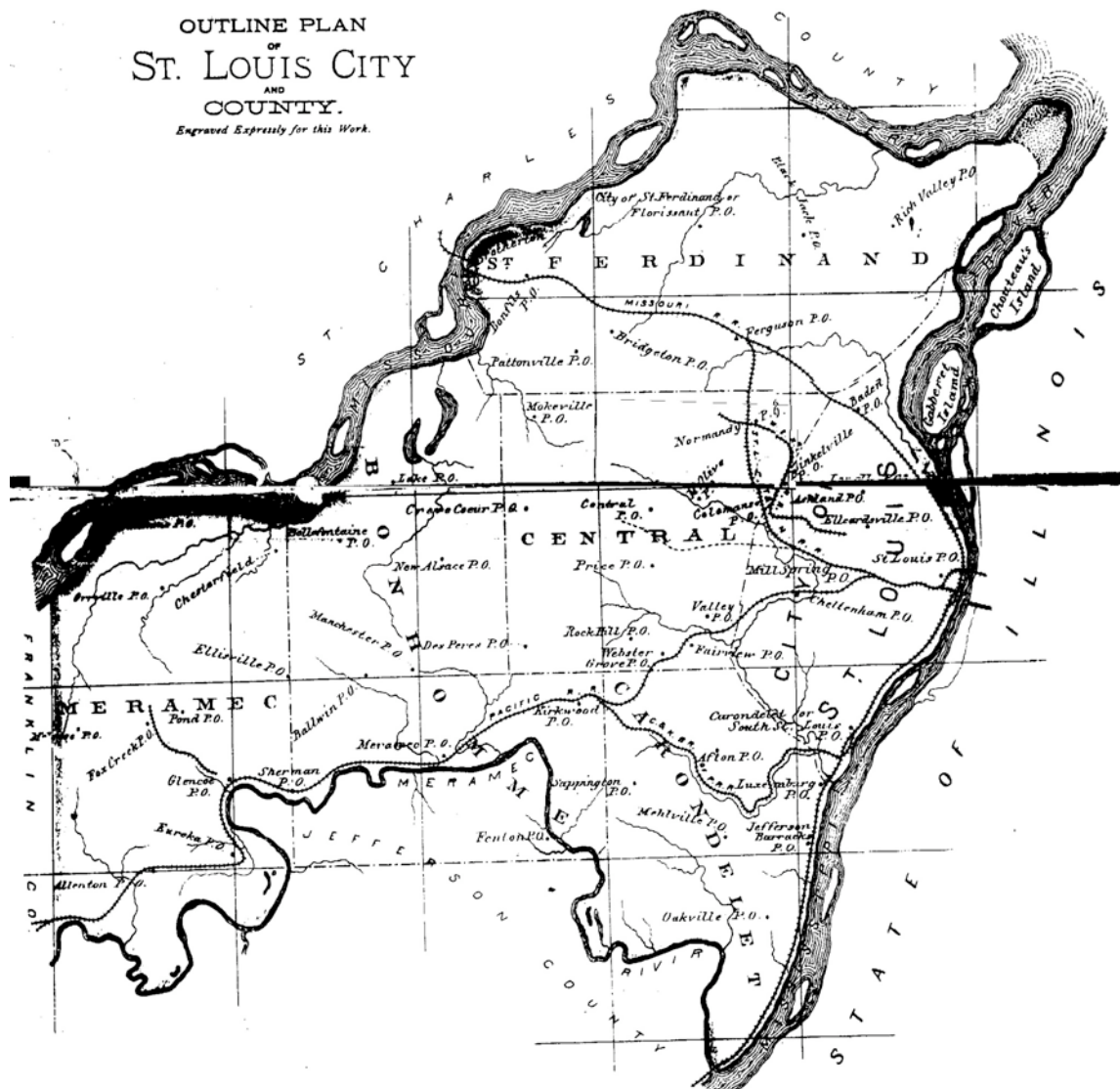
“Going to School Without Knowing It:” The Success of the Kindergarten Curriculum at the Des Peres School and its Nationwide Impact

Blow’s first publicly funded kindergarten at the Des Peres School was referred to as “the experiment.”¹⁶¹ Kindergartens had been established in other parts of the country but most were small private institutions. “The experiment in St. Louis was a crucial one,” she explained, “and had it failed it would have been difficult to prevail upon other cities to introduce the kindergarten into their public schools.” Needless to say, the small class at the Des Peres School had a lot to prove. Blow succeeded in gaining widespread support and making the case that kindergartens should be incorporated into public schools across the country.

Several key factors contributed to the success of the kindergarten in the Des Peres School. It was located in Carondelet, which included a large German population that was already familiar with kindergartens and willingly supported the movement. Additionally, children benefitted from the curriculum Blow created based on Froebel’s ideas. Primary school teachers recognized the differences between children who had attended kindergartens and those who had not. Extensive teacher evaluations were conducted, documenting teachers’ observations that children who had gone to kindergarten showed a greater ability to express themselves with language, had better manual skill, and had collected a larger bank of general knowledge.¹⁶² The success of Blow’s Des Peres School kindergarten, made a strong case for public schools to include kindergartens nationwide.

¹⁶¹ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 38.

¹⁶² Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 45.



Map 1: "St. Louis Township Map, 1883." From Scott K. Williams, "Forgotten Places of St. Louis, Missouri," <http://www.usgenet.org/usa/mo/county/stlouis/towns.htm>.

The demographic and educational histories of Carondelet were crucial to the establishment of the Des Peres School and success of its kindergarten. Carondelet lies in the southeastern corner of St. Louis. Before it was annexed by the city on 5 April 1870, it was

established as an independent town by the county court on 27 August 1832, and was home to a largely French Creole community.¹⁶³ In its early years, Bishop Rosati of St. Louis was concerned for the welfare of the children in Carondelet, as they had no access to education.¹⁶⁴ He turned to community women to help improve the town and to instill Catholic values. In the fall of 1836, he brought over four Catholic nuns of the Sisters of St. Joseph from France. The Sisters of St. Joseph was founded in France in 1647. They disbanded during the French Revolution when many sisters were imprisoned and reformed in 1807. Their purpose was to improve the lives of the poor and care for orphans. In Carondelet, they were housed in a log cabin where they opened the first school in the town. Their enrollment reached twenty, and although they were warned of the limited resources of Carondelet's residents, they saw it was their mission to teach the poor Creole children. They allowed parents to pay tuition in pieces of wood and had children use boxes as desks.¹⁶⁵ Three years later, they opened a school for the deaf, St. Joseph's Academy, and began building a boarding and day school chartered by the State of Missouri in 1853.¹⁶⁶ The Sisters of St. Joseph were committed to bettering the lives of impoverished children through schooling, and were the first to provide education for Carondelet's young residents.

Despite its origins as a working class Creole town, Carondolet in the late nineteenth century became a middle-class German neighborhood. In the spring of 1849, a cholera

¹⁶³ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 37, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 15.

outbreak sent a panic throughout the town.¹⁶⁷ However, while one tenth of people in St. Louis perished, out of Carondelet's roughly 1,265 residents, no one died of the disease. The town subsequently earned the reputation of a healthy and beautiful community.¹⁶⁸ On 17 May of that same year, a huge fire broke out on the steamboat *White Cloud* in the St. Louis levee devastating fifteen city blocks. When the displaced St. Louisans were looking for a new place to live, a healthy and beautiful city seemed ideal. Consequently, some of these residents moved from St. Louis to Carondelet. The Blow family was among the new arrivals.¹⁶⁹ Henry Blow's contributions to the town's schools would occur after the Civil War and with the support of Carondelet's growing German population.

Jacob Steins, a German, was Carondelet's first immigration agent. In 1848 many Germans moved to the United States due to unemployment among artisans, land shortages, and political turmoil in their home country. Stein brought immigrants from his native Cologne and the lower Rhine country to the southern end of Carondelet. Here, they received a friendly welcome and began work building homes. The large number of documents printed in German and English by the city council, suggest Germans had a significant influence in Carondelet, and created a community of their own.¹⁷⁰ They started a singing club, *Saengerbund*, and congregated at Stein's beer house.¹⁷¹ In 1857, there were 369 German immigrants, which made up the largest of the various immigrant populations

¹⁶⁷ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 20.

¹⁶⁸ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 22, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 19.

¹⁷¹ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 24.

in Carondelet, including French, Irish, Swiss, Canadian, and English, among others.¹⁷² The town had become a diverse, international community.

During the Civil War, Carondelet's German population avidly supported the Union cause. By 1864, a quarter of the town's residents were German, and over half the total population was immigrants.¹⁷³ Henry Blow was a leader of the Republican movement in the town and was backed by all but one of its German residents, while half of Carondelet's population was staunch Democrats.¹⁷⁴ Although this division strained relationships between community members, Charlotte Taylor Blow Charles, Henry Blow's sister, extended the Home for the Friendless, a shelter for women and children that originally opened in 1853, to those who had lost husbands in the war. The shelter was open to anyone in need regardless of their political allegiances.¹⁷⁵ With the shelter, Carondelet women asserted some authority in the community's civic life.

After the war, Carondelet leaders worked on the town's education system. Henry Blow led a group to collect funds to build a permanent school. Construction on the Blow School began on 4 July 1866 by the Good Hope Masonic Lodge, which would become Carondelet's first permanent public school. By April 1870, after Carondelet was annexed by St. Louis, the school was no longer big enough to accommodate all school-aged children, as it was built only two stories high with a total of eight rooms. Therefore, St. Louis established a building program to provide education for the town's children. The Carondelet School, a three-story brick building, capable of holding 700 children, was

¹⁷² Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 25.

¹⁷³ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 34.

¹⁷⁴ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 27.

¹⁷⁵ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 33.

constructed next.¹⁷⁶ In addition, because of the law requiring segregated schools, Carondelet built a school for black students in 1873, “Public School Number 6.”¹⁷⁷ These new schools worked towards the goal of providing all the children of Carondelet with an education.

In 1875 the German residents of Carondelet organized the Carondelet Germania Turnverein, whose members encouraged the expansion of schools further. Turnvereins were fitness clubs that also encouraged intellectual pursuits, political involvement, health, and exercise. Members typically were abolitionists, and after the war, the “Turner” movement flourished in St. Louis. They sponsored lecture series, bands, orchestras, art classes, and acrobatics. These clubs strongly supported the kindergarten movement and lobbied for physical education to have a place in the public school curriculum.¹⁷⁸ The support from such a large group of residents and the emphasis on improving education in Carondelet helped the kindergarten experiment in the Des Peres School to succeed.

It is not surprising that the German population in Carondelet was supportive of Blow’s public kindergarten, as it was a German institution. German immigrants were looking for ways of expanding German instruction into public schools. By 1860 there were 38 German schools with 5,524 pupils, and 98 teachers in St. Louis alone. Immigrants saw the schools as an important way to maintain their German identity.¹⁷⁹ In 1864 they succeeded in getting German language courses included in public school curriculums. This

¹⁷⁶ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 37. Camille N. Dry, *Pictorial St. Louis The Great Metropolis of the Mississippi Valley: A Topographical Survey Drawn in Perspective A.D. 1865*, ed. Rich J. Compton (St. Louis: Todd A. McGraw), Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 38.

¹⁷⁸ Harris, *History of Carondelet*, 40.

¹⁷⁹ Van Ausdal, *Case Study in Educational Innovation*, 59.

decreased student enrollment in private German schools, as more German families switched to public education.¹⁸⁰ The assistant superintendent of German instruction in St. Louis, Francis Berg, believed education could never begin too early, and recognized the lack of kindergartens in the United States, “though [their] value has been acknowledged by every American pedagogue.”¹⁸¹ When Blow opened her public kindergarten based on Froebel’s curriculum, Germans in St. Louis saw it as a natural addition to their city’s school system and an affirmation of German theories about education.

Even the school building reflected a German influenced design. Blow’s first kindergarten opened in room four of the Des Peres School, which was built as a four-room schoolhouse in 1873 to meet the needs of Carondelet’s continuously increasing population. It was built by German-born School Board architect, Fredrick W. Raeder, and was designed to include as much light and ventilation into the classrooms as possible. All the classrooms were positioned in the corners of the building to have access to windows on two sides. The furniture was constructed especially for young children, with long, low benches and tables to accommodate sixteen children each. Blow made a special effort to make the classroom a warm, colorful environment, unlike the typical grim classroom atmosphere of the day. She put plants and flowers on the windowsills and decorated the walls and blackboards. She felt it was important to create a friendly, fun environment to mimic the type of learning going on in the classroom.¹⁸² Blow would later become an architectural consultant, making sure kindergarten classrooms were properly designed for young children, as the structure of the classroom was essential in creating a positive learning environment.

¹⁸⁰ Van Ausdal, *Case Study in Educational Innovation*, 60.

¹⁸¹ Van Ausdal, *Case Study in Educational Innovation*, 61.

¹⁸² Faust, *History of Des Peres School and Susan E. Blow’s Kindergarten*, 2.



Figure 5: Des Peres School 1876.
Photograph Courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow and the Blow Family, PA 19.2," PH02956.

Other kindergartens existed in the United States before the first class at the Des Peres School, but Blow's kindergarten was the first continuously running and publically funded kindergarten. She recognized the value of private kindergartens but asserted a need for early childhood education for even the poorest students. "[H]ad the Froebelian movement developed only upon these lines (as private schools) the kindergarten must have remained forever the privilege of the wealthy few, and the occasional gift of charity to

the abject poor.”¹⁸³ She believed that having affluent and poor children in the same room would be beneficial to both groups. “If he is a child of poverty, he is saved by the good associations and the industrial and intellectual training that he gets. If he is a child of wealth, he is saved by the kindergarten from ruin through self-indulgence and the corruption ensuing on weak management in the family.”¹⁸⁴ In one of her lectures, she quoted Addams from her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, which Blow found “very illuminating,” on the importance of play to prevent crime.¹⁸⁵ “The relation between play and crime is that both are reactions against social order. Social order demands work. It also demands that healthful reaction against work which we call play. Deny to the young this healthy reaction and you betray them into... crime.”¹⁸⁶ Blow used Addams’ words to describe how kindergartens would be beneficial to impoverished children. She understood that they needed a release, and a school that used play for learning would therefore be the best method for these children. Whether deterring children from a life of crime or saving them from self-indulgence, Blow believed the kindergarten was a place where all different types of children could benefit, learning with and from each other.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Susan Blow, “Kindergarten Education”, 37.

¹⁸⁴ Harris, cited in Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 41.

¹⁸⁵ Addams, cited in Susan Blow, “Susan Blow Lectures: Lecture VI: Play Ground, Play and Crime,” in Susan Blow Lectures 1890-1900, Series of Lectures, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Susan Blow, “Susan Blow Lectures: Lecture VI: Play Ground, Play and Crime,” in Susan Blow Lectures 1890-1900, Series of Lectures, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Blow does not reference kindergarten education for black children. There are photographs of all-black kindergartens from 1905 playing with Froebel’s first gift. This suggests that Blow’s kindergarten teacher training was somehow available to black women who could provide a kindergarten education to black children. See Appendix.



Figure 6: First Kindergarten Class.¹⁸⁸

Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow & Kindergartens PA 19.3," PH02930.

While the upper rooms at the Des Peres School were for young children to learn the "three R's: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic," the kindergarten's aim, as Blow noted, was "not instruction, but development."¹⁸⁹ Her objective for children was not academic. Academics could be saved for children's primary school years. An article in the *St. Louis Republican* described the kindergarten's purpose as a place, "to direct the child mind under six years of age into preliminary grooves of order, cleanliness, obedience, a desire for information and

¹⁸⁸ From back of photograph: "There is some question as to this class. It may be the first class at the Des Peres School... It may be a somewhat later class."

¹⁸⁹ *St. Louis Republican*, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, "Geneology folder," MHMLRC, 1; Blow, "Kindergarten Education," 43.

to combine with these the more prominent idea of object teaching.”¹⁹⁰ Blow first wanted to instill in children the desire to learn, before they engaged in the “three R’s.”

She saw play as the best way for children to grow and develop in these pivotal years. “The first self-revelation of the child is through play,” she wrote. “He learns by it what he can do: what he can do easily at first trial, and what he can do by perseverance and contrivance. Thus he learns through play to recognize the potency of those “lords of life” (as Emerson calls them) that weave the tissue of human experience—volition, making and unmaking, obstinacy of material, the magic of contrivance, the lordly might of perseverance that can re-enforce the moment by the hours (and time by eternity).”¹⁹¹ She believed that through play, children would learn to be persistent, an important lesson they could carry with them throughout their lives. Further, she believed, “[t]he child in his games represents to himself his kinship to the human race—his identity, as little self, with the social whole as his greater self.”¹⁹² Play would allow a child to understand they are part of a larger world, as they learned to negotiate and cooperate with their classmates.

Importantly, the kindergarten was also an institution to protect childhood. She quoted from Rousseau’s *Émile* in her book *Symbolic Education*:

Nature wishes children to be children before they are men. If we pervert this order we shall produce precocious fruits—fruits which have neither maturity nor savor and are soon corrupted. We shall have young sages and old children. Childhood has its peculiar manner of seeing, feeling, and thinking; nothing is less rational than the

¹⁹⁰ St. Louis Republican, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, “Geneology folder,” MHMLRC, 1.

¹⁹¹ Susan Blow, *Symbolic Education: A Commentary on Froebel’s “Mother Play,”* ed. William T. Harris (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894), xii.

¹⁹² Blow, *Symbolic Education*, xii.

attempt to substitute our own, and I should as soon think of requiring a child to be five feet high as to have judgment at ten years of age.¹⁹³

Her purpose for creating the kindergarten was not to make children into little adults, but to preserve this precious period of life that poverty or even wealth could rob them of. “[T]o load the mind is a grievous sin,” she wrote, “but we commit a yet more heinous offense when we insist upon the exercise of faculties whose normal development belongs to a later age.”¹⁹⁴ She encouraged development in the kindergarten, but only what would be appropriate for a young child. “The very flowers [the child] loves so dearly become mere instruments of mental torture when we constantly insist upon his analyzing and classifying them.”¹⁹⁵ Specific science lessons could be taught in later years. Kindergartens were about exposure to new things. She wanted children to have time to observe, touch, smell, or paint a flower, before they were instructed to classify or analyze it. Blow’s kindergartens gave children the chance to just be children, discovering, learning, and growing.

¹⁹³ Rousseau, cited in Blow, *Symbolic Education*, 14.

¹⁹⁴ Blow, *Symbolic Education*, 28.

¹⁹⁵ Blow, *Symbolic Education*, 28.

Blow used the gifts and occupations Froebel created as the center of her kindergarten curriculum. He had formed a system where each gift would be introduced at a

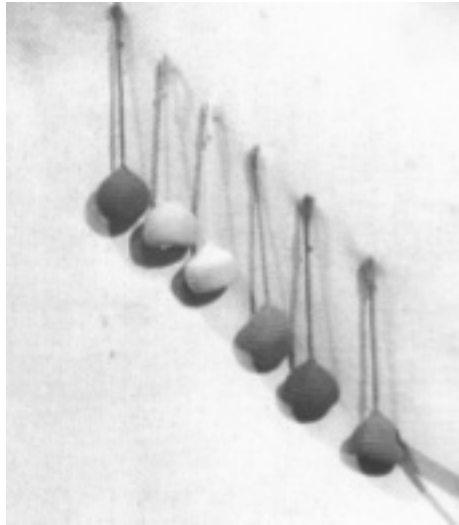


Figure 7: Froebel's First Gift.
Photograph Courtesy of CHS in "Susan
Blow & Kindergartens, PA 19.3,"
PH02949.

specific time in a child's life to correspond with their natural state of development. The first six gifts kindergartners received were solid shapes. For the very young child, they were first given six fuzzy wooden balls in different colors.¹⁹⁶ Their purpose was to strengthen the child as a whole: developing their limbs and senses, their focus and attention, and encouraging free, independent action.¹⁹⁷ The spherical shape of the object was also important. "[C]lasp[ing] [the ball] will soon strengthen the muscles of the child's fingers so as to fit them first of all for voluntary handling of the ball, and later for the right handling of other things."¹⁹⁸ They would additionally learn to analyze contrasting colors and the properties of direction, motion, and position. He included directions for mothers or teachers on how to present the gifts to the child and how they should be used. These instructions also encouraged the involvement of the adult with the child so the child could see the adult as more than just a figure of authority.¹⁹⁹ "Come, let us live for our children," Froebel announced.²⁰⁰ He wanted adults

¹⁹⁶ Friedrich Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, trans. Josephine Jarvis, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), 32; Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1997), 42-45.

¹⁹⁷ Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 34-35.

¹⁹⁸ Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 35.

¹⁹⁹ Beaty, *Preschool Education in America*, 42-43.

to be active in the lives and education of children to “promote family life and educate the nation and all mankind.”²⁰¹

The second gift Froebel designed was a sphere, cylinder, and cube all linked together, suspended on a stick.²⁰² From this gift, children could begin to learn about opposites and develop their language skills, learning such words as “up, down, there, where, how... here, etc.”²⁰³ They could also learn how to answer questions and engage in dialogue.



Figure 8: Froebel's Second Gift. Photograph Courtesy of CHS in “Susan Blow & Kindergartens, PA 19.3,” PH02949.

“What does the sphere do?” “It dances.”
“But what does the sphere do now?” “It swings.”
“Who dances?” “Who swings?”
“Shall the sphere also rock?”²⁰⁴

This would be followed by the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth gifts in the form of blocks. With these gifts, children would be instructed in areas such as social studies, architecture,

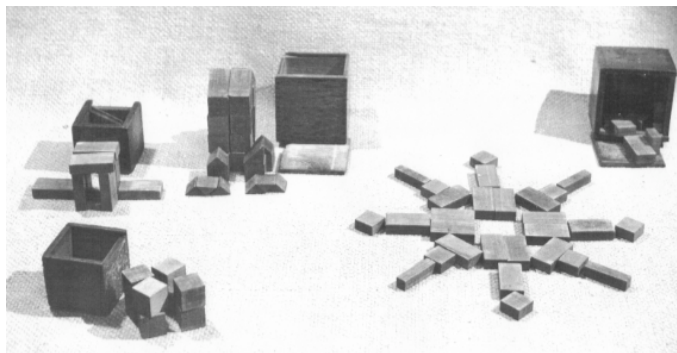


Figure 9: Froebel's Third Through Sixth Gifts. Photograph Courtesy of CHS in “Susan Blow & Kindergartens, PA 19.3,” PH02950.

language, science, mathematics, and socialization. They could create maps, produce patterns and learn about symmetry and balance, tell stories, test

gravity, learn through trial and error,

²⁰⁰ “Come, let us live for our children” has also been translated as “Come, let us live with our children.” (Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 3.)

²⁰¹ Froebel, *A Selection From His Writings*, 93.

²⁰² Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 70-103; Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 46-49.

²⁰³ Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 103.

²⁰⁴ Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, 75.

and develop social skills such as sharing, cleaning, and cooperating with others.

Blow's curriculum, titled "Little Children: Program for 4 Year Old Children, Weeks 1-37," laid out specific guidelines for how to use Froebel's first gift. In her lesson, she instructed teachers to put different colored, hard and soft balls into bags. Children were then told to reach into the bags and "[f]ind the two kinds of balls by feeling. Then take out balls. Squeeze. Hold up soft red ball. Hold up hard ball. Hold up soft blue ball. Roll hard ball. Roll soft ball. Notice sound. *Children walk like soft ball – like hard ball.* In rolling notice straight."²⁰⁵ With this playful activity, children would not only get a sense for different textures, but she also encouraged children to use their imaginations, thinking abstractly as they moved their bodies to mimic objects. The lesson continued with children forming spherical shapes out of clay and soap bubbles. They also learned about direction, rolling the balls in straight lines or circles, and how to distinguish between different colors.²⁰⁶ Blow took the theory and design of Froebel's first gift, and crafted her own curriculum, using his method of learning through experience and play. After studying his pedagogy and visiting kindergartens in Germany, she was able to bring this form of developmentally appropriate education to American children.

Another activity she created with Froebel's first gift demonstrated Blow's commitment to learning through guided play. The teacher would swing the ball in the air and declare, "I'm a blue bird!" The children would then follow, "swinging their balls and naming birds. *The balls should be swung as high as possible so that the children may feel they*

²⁰⁵ Susan Blow, "Little Children: Program for 4 Year Old Children, Weeks 1-37," in Susan Blow Lectures 1890-1900, Series of Lectures, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC, 2. (My italics.)

²⁰⁶ Susan Blow, "Little Children: Program for 4 Year Old Children, Weeks 1-37," in Susan Blow Lectures 1890-1900, Series of Lectures, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC, 2.

are flying. Blue birds fly – yellow birds fly – orioles fly – etc. All the balls come home and are put to sleep in the nest. Outgoing – incoming – home.”²⁰⁷ Once again, she instructed the children to mimic the gifts, this time by imagining they were birds. Lessons like these demonstrate how Blow translated Froebel’s early childhood education theories of learning through guided play into a set of concrete activities for children ages four through six.

Blow also incorporated Froebel’s “occupations” into her curriculum. Activities such as sewing, weaving, modeling, performing plays, and creating art were supposed to represent the arts of mankind. It is telling that boys too, engaged in these activities at this time. Yet Froebel attended both an all-boys and an all-girls school growing up, so he was more willing to disregard the “gender” attached to certain activities. Another activity during a typical kindergarten day was gardening. Froebel emphasized the importance of nature in his childhood and kindergarten curriculum, and consequently Blow made sure kindergartens had space outside for children to explore. These activities allowed both sexes to experience a broader range of activities and acquire a larger skill set than they might otherwise have obtained, if they were confined to the activities prescribed for their own sex.

²⁰⁷Susan Blow, “Little Children: Program for 4 Year Old Children, Weeks 1-37,” in Susan Blow Lectures 1890-1900, Series of Lectures, Box 2 of 2, MHMLRC, “Sixth Week – Oct. 13 – 17.” (My italics.)

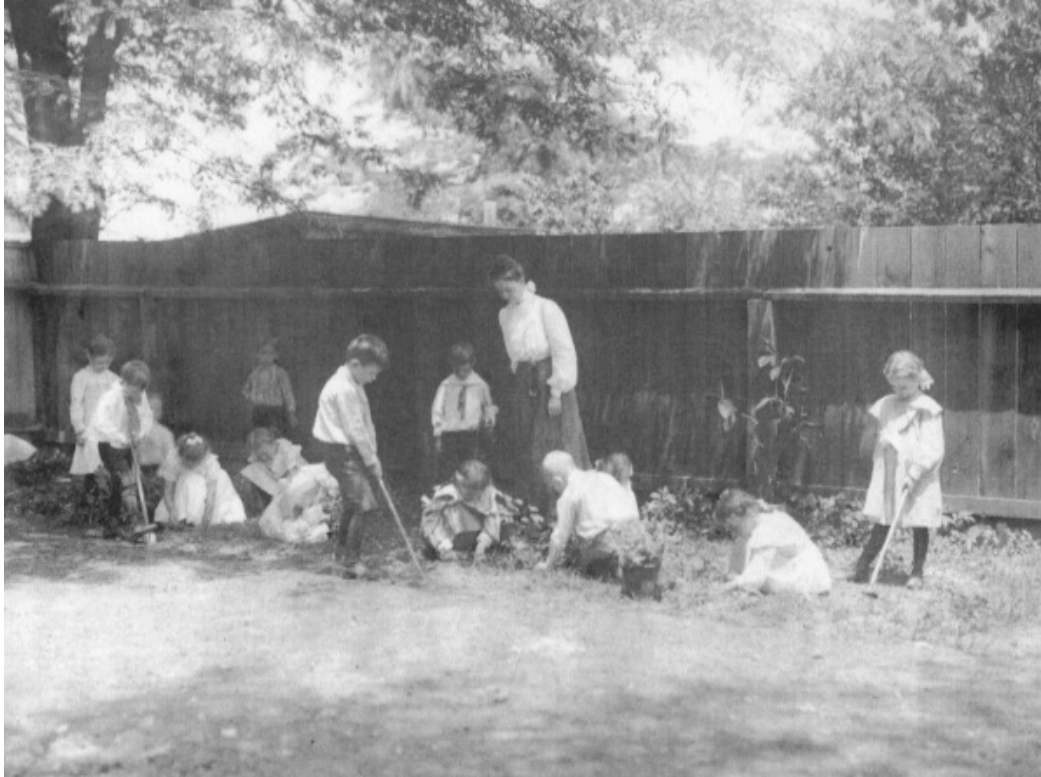


Figure 10: "Working in Their Garden," Des Peres School Garden, 1905.
Photograph courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow from the St. Louis Kindergarten 1905, PA 19.4."

Blow's detailed curriculum, with the objectives and lessons carefully planned out, shows how theories of early childhood education trickled down into Blow's kindergarten classroom at the Des Peres school. She was the figure, especially in the United States, who incorporated two centuries of changing conceptions of early childhood education — Comenius's recognition of children's potential for learning before primary school, Locke's belief that learning could be hidden by lessons that appeared as games, Rousseau's identification of the boundary between the world of children and that of adults, Pestalozzi's idea that women could take on the role of educators, and Froebel's incorporation of the previous ideas into his invention of the kindergarten. Her curriculum speaks to all five of these earlier scholars' work. The key element of play that linked each of these educators is

the most prominent aspect to her curriculum as well. As children flew around the room, becoming the birds they imagined their toy balls to be, they may not have understood they were learning about nature, direction, color, form, and physical movement. As one article in the *St. Louis Republican* described, “all through the kindergarten there were very few children who did not seem absorbed in their tasks...in point of fact, they have been to school without knowing it. Herein lies the merit of the kindergarten system.”²⁰⁸ Blow developed the kind of “secret” teaching Locke had described as a way to engage children in play without having them realize they were actually taking part in an educational lesson.

Yet this type of curriculum did not go without criticism. There were arguments, perhaps coming from parents or administrators, based on the cost of kindergartens, whether children so young would be able to benefit from education, that kindergartens would “spoil the children and fill the primary grade with intractable pupils,” and that teachers would not be adequately prepared and lead unproductive classrooms.²⁰⁹ Despite these objections, Blow with the integral help of Harris was able to “[steer] the kindergarten cause through stormy waters to a safe harbor.”

By 1898, twenty-five years after the first public kindergarten began at the Des Peres School, the number of public kindergartens had increased to 1,365 in 189 cities. The number of teachers jumped to 2,532 and the number of pupils to 95,867. School systems in

3. ²⁰⁸ *St. Louis Republican*, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2, “Geneology folder,” MHMLRC,

²⁰⁹ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 38.

different cities with children from varying economic backgrounds were convinced of the benefits of kindergartens because of the student evaluations from primary school teachers, and carried out Blow's curriculum in their classrooms. Blow explained, "[the kindergarten's] results cannot be tested by examinations or expressed in statistical tables, but must be gathered from the testimony of experts who have had time and opportunity to study its influence."²¹⁰ Laura Fisher, director of the sixty-nine public kindergartens in Boston, compiled 127 letters from first grade teachers and found 102 to be in favor of kindergarten education, 25 unfavorable.²¹¹ The most common criticism was in reference to the disciplinary issues such as talkativeness. However, Blow noted that "in the kindergarten, talking is not forbidden, but, on the contrary, children are encouraged to share with the kindergartener and with each other all their happy experience of effort and success."²¹² She believed this criticism was therefore "unjust," and thought the new disciplinary rules governing primary school would not be difficult for kindergarten children to grow accustomed to after a few short weeks. The vast majority of teachers wrote glowing reports of their first grade students who had come from kindergarten programs.

For the evaluations, the first grade teachers were asked four questions:

1. How many years have you taught children in the first grade?
2. About what proportion (per cent) of your children have come to you from the kindergarten?
3. What, if anything, have you observed as to the characteristics of kindergarten children as compared with other children?
4. How do you think the kindergarten training has affected the progress of the children in the primary grade, particularly in your own grade? Has their progress

²¹⁰ Blow, "Kindergarten Education," 43.

²¹¹ Blow, "Kindergarten Education," 45.

²¹² Blow, "Kindergarten Education," 43.

been quicker in point of time? Has the character of the work done been improved?²¹³

The responses were largely positive. “Kindergarten children are alert and active,” one teacher described, “with eager questioning minds and eyes that see and note everything. They know how to use their hands and how to talk and are loveable and sympathetic. They come to the primary room happy, self-confident, and talkative.” This teacher did mention, however, “the discipline of such children is very hard and it requires the greatest effort on the teacher’s part to accustom them to the quiet, independent work of the primary room.”²¹⁴ Not every teacher experienced such problems. “The discipline in my class during the time I had kindergarten children was good, if not better, than it was when I had children come to me from their homes,” wrote another teacher. “In point of fact, I much prefer the kindergarten children,” she concluded.²¹⁵ This was exactly the general consensus: teachers preferred children in their primary school classrooms that had come from kindergartens first.

Teachers also testified to the ethics and values of students who had attended kindergarten. “The moral side of the child’s nature receives special care in the kindergarten,” one teacher observed. “Many of the mothers are glad to testify to this influence. The rough child grows more gentle, the thoughtless child more careful.”²¹⁶ Another commented, “[t]here was among them more than the usual spirit of kindness, good will and helpfulness. They were more easily controlled than other children by an appeal to reason or honor. For little children,” the teacher went on, “they had a very quick perception

²¹³ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 44.

²¹⁴ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 47.

²¹⁵ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 48.

²¹⁶ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 48.

of right and wrong.”²¹⁷ Those who went to kindergarten were described as more organized, industrious, persevering, and self-reliant than the other children. They were found to be more confident, helpful, and polite. Importantly, they developed a “love for and confidence in their teachers,” thus creating a positive association with education that they would carry with them throughout their careers as students.²¹⁸ According to Froebel, this was a fundamental aspect of the kindergarten, as his own experience in schools with teachers he trusted and respected had such a profound impact on him. Through her teacher training programs, Blow taught teachers how to be the kind of respectable leaders Froebel envisioned.

Equally as important, primary teachers acknowledged kindergarten students’ appreciation of nature and their fellow peers. One teacher noted, “they have begun to come into that stage where love for all humanity is developed in a simple child-like way,” which this particular teacher regarded as “the most important characteristic of the child from the kindergarten.”²¹⁹ They further stated, “if a flower is given to each member of the class, it is the little boy or girl who has attended the kindergarten who is the first to feel its beauty.” They went on, “[p]ower of expression is well developed in these children.”²²⁰ Another evaluation stated, “[t]he kindergarten child observes more quickly and with greater accuracy. He is methodical in thought, and, consequently, in all expression, oral, written and manual. From an ethical standpoint *he is superior to the non-kindergarten child*. In all

²¹⁷ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 48.

²¹⁸ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 50.

²¹⁹ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 51.

²²⁰ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 51.

ways he is more intelligent, more nearly the being his Creator meant him to be.”²²¹ The appreciation of kindergarten children by primary teachers across the nation showed the kindergarten was a success. When given the chance to develop at their own pace during their earliest years of life, children were able to grow morally, intellectually, socially, and physically. The success of the experimental kindergarten at the Des Peres School allowed children to benefit from playful learning for generations to come.

“I am persuaded that we shall see the day when this mustard seed will have grown into a mighty tree,” Blow wrote to Harris before her kindergarten experiment began.²²² The kindergarten movement did find its home in the United States under her careful watch. She succeeded in providing early childhood education for America’s youth, regardless of their class or gender. The scholarship of Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi, and Froebel are evident in her curriculum. These educators created the foundation for the kindergarten, yet Blow’s efforts allowed children across the nation to benefit from their work. In the kindergarten, children had a place where they were respected by adults, could learn through guided-play, and develop into moral citizens. Her legacy lies in the incorporation of kindergartens in almost every public school system in America. As Froebel would say, Blow truly “lived for the children.”

²²¹ Blow, “Kindergarten Education,” 51. (My italics.)

²²² Susan Blow to William T. Harris, 3 March 1873, WTHP Susan E. Blow Letters 1872-1893 Jun., Box 7 of 21, MHMLRC, Fol 2r.

Epilogue

Gladys Serrin Bliss was a student in the Des Peres kindergarten in 1900. Sixty-three years later, she wrote a letter from her home in Tangerine, Florida, to the Missouri Library and Research Center. "Some of the happiest childhood memories are of the days (1/2 days) spent in the Des Peres School," Bliss wrote. "Have they torn it down completely? Hoping you understand an old (68 yrs) woman's interest."²²³ Her experience in kindergarten, she wrote, had an effect on her for the rest of her life. That was exactly Froebel and Blow's intention. The kindergarten was created to help shape the whole person. Early childhood education was crucial, they argued, precisely because these years had a significant effect on the rest of the student's life. Bliss's letter suggests Blow's kindergarten curriculum profoundly shaped her students.

Since Blow's introduction of kindergartens to the United States, kindergartens have become standard in school systems across the nation. As of 2010, 43 states required their schools to offer kindergarten programs, and nineteen states required attendance.²²⁴ Although Blow's curriculum was implemented all over the country at the turn of the century and proved to be a great success, kindergartens today have changed drastically since she pioneered the movement. The curriculum she worked so hard to create has disappeared in modern kindergarten classrooms.

²²³ Gladys Serrin to Philip J. Hickey, 14 January 1963, in BFP 1837-1861, Box 1 of 2 "Genealogy folder," MHMLRC.

²²⁴ Institute of Educational Sciences, "Table 5.3. Kindergarten Requirements By State: 2010," National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp (assessed November 2, 2011).

Educators are once again debating the value of play in early childhood education, and proponents of a play-based curriculum are the minority. This current debate shows a lack of understanding of the foundation of early childhood education, a tragic loss of the history of America's kindergartens. American educators and policy makers have forgotten the lessons educators and students learned in the nineteenth century. The consensus among primary school teachers was that Blow's kindergarten benefitted children emotionally, physically, intellectually, and morally; the kindergartens educated the whole child. Today, Blow's conception of the connection between play and learning has been lost. Play is once again something parents and teachers fear will waste children's time.

However, a new movement emphasizing play in early childhood education has emerged in the United States and Western Europe. Many people in different fields are working to re-organize kindergarten and pre-school curricula. In London, there are master's programs offered in the field of playwork. Playworkers are trained professionals who have an understanding of child development and the benefits of play. They work in adventure playgrounds—playgrounds designed and built by children—or in communities to turn public spaces into places for children to play. Penny Wilson is a playworker at the Play Association of Tower Hamlets and has been working with the Alliance for Childhood in the United States to bring adventure playgrounds and playwork to America. She has been working on this project for seven years and so far the biggest obstacle, she says, has been to reclaim the word "play." This word has become taboo in American education circles.

Wilson believes the United States has fallen behind its western European counterparts when it comes to valuing play and its impact on children.²²⁵

In the twenty-first century play is no longer synonymous with learning. In 2009, the Alliance for Childhood published a book titled, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* by Edward Miller and Joan Almon, bringing Blow's argument full circle. Though the evidence for why children need to play in school was provided at the turn of the twentieth century, America is starting over. "[M]any people believe that play is a waste of time in school," Miller and Almon explain. "School, they say, should be a place for learning. There's plenty of time for play at home."²²⁶ Miller and Almon aim to reeducate American parents and teachers on the value of play.

Educators in Europe have already revived the theories of Blow and Froebel. In Germany, most play-based kindergartens were transformed into "centers for cognitive achievement" during the 1970s.²²⁷ Yet research showed that by age ten, children who had stayed in kindergartens with a play-based curriculum were more advanced in reading and math than were those who attended the new centers. Children in the play-based classrooms were more socially and emotionally adjusted, and were more creative, intelligent, and expressive. Consequently all German kindergartens reverted back to the play-based method.²²⁸ America, however, has yet to follow suit.

The Alliance for Childhood refers to kindergartens today as a "national disgrace," defined as, "the transformation of public kindergartens from places where love of learning

²²⁵ Penny Wilson, discussion.

²²⁶ Edward Miller and Joan Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* (College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood, 2009), 7.

²²⁷ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 7.

²²⁸ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 7.

was thoughtfully nurtured into pressure-cooker classrooms where teachers are required to follow scripts, labor under unrealistic one-size-fits-all standards, and test children relentlessly on their performance. Kindergarten has ceased to be a garden of delight and has become a place of stress and distress.”²²⁹ David Elkind, author and child psychologist, stated, “what we do in education has little or nothing to do with what we know is good pedagogy.”²³⁰ He discusses the “grand masters,” who contributed to developing this pedagogy: Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson, but states that even though their legacy has been supported by ample contemporary research, it is still “dismissed as irrelevant.”²³¹ Because the contributions from these “grand masters” are no longer taken into consideration, kindergartens have drastically changed since the turn of the nineteenth century.

Kindergarten children today “spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations.” Furthermore “[m]any kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests.”²³² Specifically, children spend four to six times as much time on literacy, math, and standardized test preparation than they do engaging in play.²³³ However, according to educational testing professionals, the results of the tests used to measure the progress of

²²⁹ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 15.

²³⁰ David Elkind, forward to *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, by Edward Miller and Joan Almon (College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood, 2009), 9.

²³¹ Elkind, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 9.

²³² Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 11.

²³³ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 11.

children under eight contain significant errors and are therefore largely invalid.²³⁴

American policymakers refuse to acknowledge these findings and press on with testing in early childhood classrooms. Children are left with unimaginative curriculums and the stress of feeling inadequate or unintelligent at the age of four. Reports of behavior problems among kindergarteners, such as uncontrollably anger and aggression, which in some cases results in the expulsion of young students from school, has increased in recent years. “[E]xperts believe that developmentally inappropriate expectations and practices are causing normal child behavior to be wrongly labeled as misbehavior, and normal learning patterns to be mislabeled as learning disabilities.”²³⁵ That is a long way from Blow’s vision. Blow stated from the beginning of her career as an educator that development should be the focus of the kindergarten, not the academic achievement of students. Froebel’s play-based methods, his gifts and occupations, worked to achieve those goals.

A recent study performed by the American Academy of Pediatrics has shown that play promotes creativity, imagination, dexterity, physical, cognitive, and emotional strength, and healthy brain development. Through play, children learn how to resolve conflicts and how to advocate for themselves.²³⁶ These studies show the same findings Blow found over a century earlier. Play is still a crucial part of childhood, and kindergartens were originally created to ensure children were given time to collect its benefits. The “crisis in the kindergarten” today has caused 95 percent of mothers in the United States, more

²³⁴ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 19.

²³⁵ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 21.

²³⁶ Kenneth R. Ginsburg et al., “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.” *Pediatrics* 119, no. 1 (2007): 183.

than any other country studied, to fear that their children are growing up too fast.²³⁷ Many teachers want to include play into their curriculums but are unable to because they are not given the time and administrators do not value it.²³⁸ Regardless of all the findings indicating the benefits of play, in America's current system, it is difficult to find room for change.

The education system in the United States is robbing children of childhood, creating unrealistic expectations, and labeling children as failures before they have had the time to develop enough to understand the material. Before kindergartens, most four to six year olds did not attend school at all. Blow's point in creating the kindergarten was not to begin primary school sooner; it was to develop children's minds and bodies, to introduce them to the world of education in a way that would make sense to a young child, and to prepare them for a life of academic rigor. To watch the space of the kindergarten become exploited by policymakers to churn out meaningless test results after having studied the dedication of scholars and educators to create a positive, productive, and fun learning environment for children is infuriating. It is, as Miller and Almon described, "a national disgrace." Kindergartens today would be unrecognizable to former students like Bliss. The lessons taught by Blow are invaluable and are slowly being reconsidered by passionate people working to reclaim kindergartens and offer a playful learning environment for America's children once again.

²³⁷ Dorothy G. Singer, Jerome L. Singer, Heidi D'Agostino, and Raeka DeLong, "Children's Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Countries: Is Free-Play Declining?" *Journal of Play* 1, no. 3 (2009): 304.

²³⁸ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 25.

Appendix



"Ball Song" Banneker Kindergarten.
Photograph Courtesy of CHS in "Susan Blow & Kindergartens, PA 19.3," PH02941.

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