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ABSTRACT

Organic education, which was introduced into the United States during the last third of the 19th century, was based upon Froebel's ideal of life as a connected whole. The late 19th century was a favorable period for innovation, for its economic prosperity made leaders feel that with the use of scientific methods anything was possible, and its society was overtly child-centered. For more than a century, America's dominant educational philosophy had been based on John Locke's concept of children as a blank slate upon which teachers should imprint those things that would produce virtuous, hard-working citizens. In contrast, organic educators advocated self-activity and self-direction. They believed that a child's full potential was contained in the child at birth and that the function of adults was to encourage that potential to emerge. In 1988, nearly 100 years after William Hailmann implemented organic education in La Porte, Indiana schools, it seems ironic that one of the most hotly debated issues in preschool education is whether organic education should be incorporated into the public schools. (RH)

# ORGANIC EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

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Organic Education, introduced into the United States during the last third of the nineteenth century, was based upon Froebel's ideal of life as a connected whole. This was a favorable period for innovation, a time with economic prosperity when the nation's leaders felt that by using scientific methods anything was possible and when society was overtly child-centered. The dominant educational philosophy for more than a century had been based upon John Locke's concept of children as a blank slate upon which teachers should imprint all those things that would produce virtuous, hard-working, patriotic, moral citizens. In contrast, organic educators advocated self-activity and self-direction. They believed that all a child was ever to become was locked up inside at birth and that the function of adults was to encourage that potential to emerge.

## The Froebelian System

Advocates of Organic Education, also called the New Education, based their system on Froebel's vision of an integrated curriculum reaching from birth through adulthood. It was determined by individual readiness but consisted of five developmental levels--1) birth through infancy, 2) the second year, 3) ages three through six, 4) age seven through early adolescence, and 5) higher education without age limits. The third, covering kindergarten years, will be



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dealt with in this paper only in its relationship to Organic Education. The fourth, with its focus on the elementary school, was the major emphasis of the New Education.

This ideal of self-activated learning throughout life, which had come to Froebel in childhood because of his own frustrations in school, was not readily accepted. Even after his kindergarten seemed well established, he showed himself to be a realist, accepting a struggle of perhaps two or three hundred years before it could be adopted. On October 9, 1847, he wrote a letter explaining why he felt it should not be in state institutions until it had reached a point of "comparative perfection." Froebel noted that "The State, being fixed in its institutions, cannot but bind and enchain free motion and bring it to a standstill. The State, as such, does not love, foster and protect free development until it has either experienced, or thinks it foresees with certainty, that it will derive profit from it. Just so the farmer does not love the flower of the apple tree or of the flax for its own sake, but merely on account of what it promises . . . Our intended institution ought to have gathered strength enough to be able to bear blossoms and fruit even in fetters, as the vine will do in the latticework on the wall.[1]

Similar opinions were expressed by those educators who introduced the first phase of Organic Education, the Froebelian kindergarten, into the United States. Henry Barnard, impressed by his visit to a demonstration kindergarten at the 1854 London Exhibition, promoted it through his American Journal of Education and his leadership of the American Teacher's Association. As the first federal Commissioner of Education from 1867 to 1870, he was fully supportive of kindergartens as the play stage of education. However, he reflected the position of many knowledgeable educators when he expressed concern about local school boards with a tendency to appoint unqualified

relatives to teaching positions. He wanted to avoid that situation and proposed that kindergartens be established by those sufficiently interested to make sacrifices on their behalf. When they had gathered strength enough, they could be supported by public schools.[2]

Elizabeth Peabody, best known crusader for Froebelian kindergartens, quoted Barnard in 1878 to support her position against public funding, saying that "Education forgets to be a philanthropy and becomes a business, and its progress in the primary stage was most disastrous."[3] In 1866, however, she had advocated that kindergarten teachers be trained in public normal schools and that kindergarten in public schools be opened as soon as the teachers could be prepared.[4]

## Organic Methods in Public Schools

Incorporation of Froebelian ideas into the public schools between the first kindergarten class in St. Louis in 1874 and popular acceptance by 1900 followed a sequence, keeping in mind that the New Education developed irregularly in different areas and that the final goal of complete Organic Education was reached in only a few individual schools and one city school district before its displacement by other philosophical models. Initially, the few kindergartens established in the 1870s were supported by parent fees and the volunteer work of interested individuals. By the early 1880s, kindergartens were increasingly supported by associations, primarily of women, and they included charity classes in poverty neighborhoods and churches.[5] Next, public schools provided rooms but no financial support for kindergartens. Later, public schools provided not only rooms but trained supervisors, and some financial support but continued to receive aid from associations developed for the purpose. By the 1890s, kindergartens were

increasingly integrated into the primary level of the schools and were exerting a powerful influence upon the methods used in those classes.

To appreciate the significance of this change, one must recognize that public schools were themselves a relatively new institution in the United States. Had the Froebelian infl ence upon the upper grades come earlier or later, its reception might have been rebuffed; only with the combination of many social, economic and religious changes in the American culture was it possible for new ideas to become adopted and incorporated so quickly. Although Henry Barnard and other progressive schoolmasters had a basic knowledge of Pestalozzi, very few had developed and applied teaching methods that respected the individuality and developmental stages of children in elementary schools.

The metamorphosis of mid-century America's embryonic common schools into well-organized school systems had been part of the change that came over the country in mid-century. The schools were given heavy responsibilities as the nation developed from a small cluster of original colonies to the vast land stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, and occupied by an increasingly heterogeneous mixture of immigrants from every country in the world. Horace Mann, in the process of establishing himself as "Father of the Common Schools" in 1841, wrote "The Common School is the greatest discovery ever made by man . . . Other social institutions are curative and remedial; this is a preventive and an antidote; they come to heal diseases and wounds; this to make the physical and moral frame invulnerable to them."[6]

In their zeal to organize the public schools into an efficient system, Horace Mann and his fellow educators promoted an authoritarian structure. Age graded classrooms, often with large numbers of children supervised by one teacher, had rows of benched desks screwed to the floor and sequenced

textbooks to be memorized. Although the whippings and harsh discipline of earlier years were declining, the typical teacher faced even a class of young children with the anticipation that each was a potential rebel and that it was necessary to dominate through a combination of firmness and strength. Repression of physical activity and independent thought was routine. Except for structured object lessons, there was no clay modeling, painting, or nature study. Neither teachers nor schools were highly valued and even with new compulsory education laws it was estimated that only about six or seven of each ten eligible children between the ages of six and twelve were attending regularly.

Assimilation of Froebelian ideas into these schools was not easy. At the highest administrative levels, the advantages of kindergarten were seen to be earlier indoctrination of children into routines and the advantage of play methods to develop physical, social and academic skills. For changes to come about, however, community pressure and public awareness were necessary. Vandewalker,[7] documented the critical role of the kindergarten associations as the movement spread to virtually every part of the country by the early 1890s. Although they varied in their intentions, most of these groups were established by middle-class women who contributed both time and money to establish and maintain private kindergartens while they campaigned to get public schools to assume the responsibility. In the process, they not only publicized the idea of the New Education but involved the male members of their families to bring about changes.[8]

As the Froebelians gained strength in their attempt to put kindergartens into the public schools, criticism became more apparent. Some legislative bodies debated the value of the system, and some members were outspoken in their opinions against it. In New York, for example, a Commissioner Sanger

opposed them because it was an outrage to "take children from their cradles and force grammar down their throats" while Commissioner Garard condemned them as consisting of chiefly tumbling dolls about and playing with little blocks. He asserted that "Kindegarten is a barbaric foreign word. We will never get rid of the system if we once get in the way of it. The teaching performed by the kindergarten teachers can be equally well done by primary teachers."[9] Another major objection to the kindergarten was based upon the expense, particularly that of staffing. There was also the problem of legality, since some states prohibited public school funds to be used for children under the age of six.

Despite objections, kindergartens moved into the public schools and teachers of older children began incorporating their methods and attitudes. Vandewalker, who was herself part of the generation of teachers who initiated changes, wrote that the decade between 1880 and 1890 was a period of confusion, with the addition of new subjects added onto the old before teachers and superintendents were able to adjust to the new conditions. She attributes much of this change to the visits of primary teachers to kindergartens, where they began to ask questions. If kindergarten could be made so interesting, why not the older children's classes? Why couldn't she also have pictures on the walls and green plants growing in the windows? Why should the kindergarten get bright colored materials and the primary children none? And couldn't she use the same songs and games?[10]

## The La Porte Model

Advocates of Organic Education were critical of the regimented way they saw Froebel's methods and materials being used in most schools, although there were notable exceptions. The opportunity to develop an entire city school

system as a model program came in 1888, when Dr. William Hailmann was invited to become the Superintendent of Schools in the small mid-western city of La Porte, Indiana. Its Board of Education wanted to "extricate the schools from the ruts of traditional requirements" and he was assured that he would be allowed to do anything he wished. Hailmann had been an administrator of private German-American schools since 1864. He was co-editor with his wife of the influential New Education. An immigrant from Switzerland, he was a translator of Froebel and had visited Europe to observe Froebelian schools.[11]

Hailmann found the La Porte elementary grades teaching only "the three R's, some geography and history" and secondary classes designed wholly as preparation for college. The majority of teachers were without professional training and few were in sympathy with his ideas of change. Most parents, he later asserted, "attacht little value to anything not connected with textbooks and considered manual work, nature study and play as questionable innovations." During his first year, he made no changes. During the second, music, art, manual training and a limited amount of community work were introduced into the high school. Vocational classes included kindergarten teacher training.

By 1892, Organic Education was established in La Porte. A major critic of the public schools, Walter Hines Page, spent most of that year visiting teachers and schools across the country and exposing the dismal conditions--"political hacks hiring untrained teachers who blindly lead their innocent charges in singsong drill, rote repetition, and meaningless verbiage."[12] In La Porte, however, he found a system that he could praise not only for the academic performance of its pupils but for their artistic prowess and other attributes. He wrote about it in the monthly Forum, noting that "The feature peculiar to the schools of La Porte is the development of the social interest. From the start the pupils are encouraged to be helpful to each other. In the

first school year the children begin to work together in groups, and to assist each other in making and recording observations of plants and animals, of the wind and weather. In the classrooms are found small square tables around which the pupils sit, particularly when doing busy work, performing tasks in which all members of the group take part. In this way much of the form work is done. Many of the forms constructed . . . are made permanent and hung up in the classrooms."[13]

Hailmann's articles in New Education and elsewhere, and his books, letters, and speeches explain his rationale in repeated detail. In 1886, for example, he spoke on "The Applications of Froebel's Educational Principles to the Primary School" and classed them as religious, ethical, and physio-psychological. In the first category, he stressed the need to integrate all relationships of the young child. The second concerned the child's tendency toward goodness and thoroughness. The third was what we would now consider growth and development. He described the activities in detail, as in this description of the beginning classes." In the study of things and phenomena, collections and descriptions and systematic observation are recommended as suitable starting points. Collections of the simplist things--of different kinds of paper, wood, cotton, woolen and silk goods, buttons, seeds, spices, etc.--are systematically made and mounted by the children, on suitable cards, offering rich opportunities for a vast amount of general information in lively, natural conversation, not question-and-answer games. . . . Soon the child will learn to take an interest in the language forms as such and will learn to form words from these elements, to build sentences."[14]

In his 1887 book, Primary Methods, Hailmann went into detail about adaptations and modifications of Froebel's ideas as they applied to American public schools. He incorporated suggestions such as the beneficial effects of

ambidextrous work in mental development, noting that they should use both hands in using beads and objects for number perception exercises. He expressed his irritation with the financial limits imposed by "conservatives" who made necessary economies like using cheap white paper instead of bright colors for mounting children's art work.[15] Today's early childhood educators can find much in this book and other writings by Hailmann that remains of interest today.

In La Porte, children worked on committees and in schools gardens. In rooms decorated at all times with the children's work, five community festivals marked Harvest, Christmas, February/Patriotic, April/Floral, and June/End-of-School events. Hailmann described what was happening in weekly newspaper columns and in frequent talks to local organizations. He emphasized group activity for teachers, also, with each one working out her system and reporting at least once every two weeks concerning what she had done. Demonstration lessons by Hailmann and teachers with special interests were supplemented by duplicated materials. Individual children were observed and detailed records kept on the progress of pupils throughout their years in school. Alta Adkins, member of the first kindergarten training class reminisced in 1942 that when the Hailmanns "walked along the streets of La Porte, they seemed like a God and Goddess treading the earth, their steps were so light."[16]

William Hailmann resigned his position as Superintendent of Schools in La Porte to become Superintendent of Indian Schools in 1894.[17] His dream was to develop a national demonstration program or Organic Education for these educationally deprived children. For political, economic, and personal reasons beyond the scope of this paper, Hailmann was not successful.[17] An observation by historian Louis Hartz perhaps may indicate the underlying reason for the failure of his radical new philosophy of education, for he points out that the

public schools are an instrument of conservative strategy used to defuse movements for social change that seriously challenge the established order.[18] In La Porte and across the nation, bureaucratic administrations and authoritarian methods prevailed. Isolated examples remained, as when a speaker at the National Education Association in 1917 described a whole public school based on Froebel, noting that "On the old basis little was askt of the child. The teacher did the work and the child was passive . . . Here the teacher seeks to secure from the children original expression upon which she may exercise the function of guidance for the purpose of leading them thru to higher levels of insight and power through self-activity."[19] However, not until John Dewey's Progressive Education movement was there another national leader to emphasize self-activity and the worthiness of children's choices.

Summary

Open Education challenged administrators, parents, teachers, and all adults who were unable to share their autonomy with children. In the public schools of America, incorporation of Froebelian ideas like nature study and manual training were considered "frills" that could be scheduled into isolated periods of the school day. Recognition that each child has an innate impulse to create, to learn, and to progress continuously from one developmental level to another were partially assimilated into the regular curriculum and their origins forgotten. In 1988, just one hundred years after William Hailmann began work in La Porte, it seems ironic that one of the most hotly debated issues in preschool education is whether or not it should be incorporated into the public schools, replacing kindergarten as the entry level, since it has been in the private nursery schools that the Froebelian philosophy of joyous active learning for self-realization and self-actualization has been best maintained.[20]

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