

The Art of Teaching Play: A Phenomenology of Froebel's Gifts in Practice

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Abstract

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Elora Crawford

This research explores the art and education history of Kindergarten gift play, a guided activity with abstract blocks and learning objects. Through a phenomenological inquiry, it asks: what is the essence of teaching through play with the Froebel Gifts? Its presentation of Gift Play object-interviews with former teachers at the Froebel Education Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, encounter both abstract and concrete constructions: first, Kindergarten's 19th-century educational beliefs and practices as first introduced by its German founder, educational reformer Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852); and second, the concrete and symbolic Kindergarten system of Gifts and Occupations, objects and guided activities for learning through play. Hermeneutic phenomenology and posthumanist object-interview heuristics structure a holistic, multi-dimensional, and material-sensitive description of the 'essence' of 'teaching play' and 'gifts' as lived and as living, reanimated in renewed understandings of Froebel's gifts, to pedagogy, and to the art of play.

Keywords: Froebel Gifts and Occupations; Object Interviews; Play-based Pedagogy; Kindergarten History

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Foremost and finally, the Froebel Foundation entrusted with a big bin of materials, school ephemera, invaluable records, and original sets of the Gifts in their dovetailed wooden boxes. These are sets previously used by Froebel staff and students, the ones I played with as a child. With them, I developed this research. I treasure these. I am so grateful.

To a former Froebel school teacher,

My mother Natalie.

I dedicate this work to your prime example.

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Self and Subject

The First Gift: The Sphere

Chapter 1: Introduction

At its essence, what does it mean to *teach through play*? How does play-based pedagogy *play out* in practice? This study explores these questions through the lived experiences of former teachers at the Froebel Education Centre in Ontario, Canada, an experimental model primary-elementary school that operated between 1970 and 2016. Unique in its use of 19th-century Kindergarten materials in a contemporary setting, the school used Froebel Gifts and Occupations in guided play activities. The *gifts*, abstract modular toys, and *occupations*, creative art activities, were designed by German education reformer Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) as the concrete complement to Kindergarten, his better-known invention. The First Gift is a crocheted sphere; the building gifts (numbers 3–6) are divided wooden cubes (fig. 1). Their geometry unfolds through play: recreating natural forms in miniature; giving concrete structure to abstract ideas. In *Gift Play* (teacher-guided play with the gifts) they are used to ‘draw out’ children’s creative, self-active discoveries. In the present phenomenological study, I engage Gift Play as a qualitative research method. Alongside four Froebelian teacher-participants, this thesis attends to the embodied experience of play-based pedagogy, and to the participatory role of materials designed for teaching play.

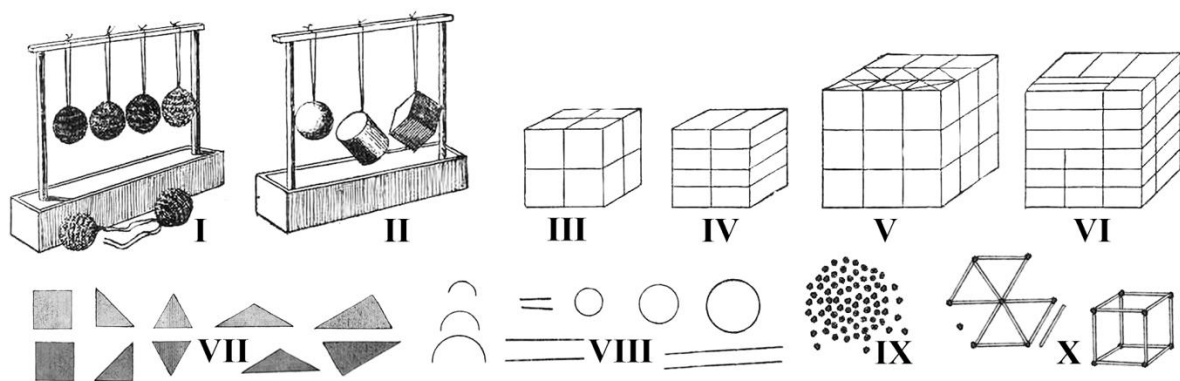
Research Rationale

My research asks: *what is the essence of teaching play with Froebel’s gifts?* To locate the ‘essence’ of something, phenomenology reflects on experiential dimensions of the phenomenon as lived (Creswell, 2018; van Manen, 2016), in effect, assembling the whole in its parts. This makes it particularly well-suited to studying Froebelian pedagogy. Primary rationale for my topic is threefold. First, the Froebel Gifts and Occupations are often considered historic artifacts rather

than recognized as living teaching tools, and contemporary studies of their classroom use remain rare. Educators at the Froebel Education Centre, however, refined gifts-based teaching practices through five decades of experimentation. Documenting their legacy contributes a valuable record. Thirdly, phenomenology generates theory from practice: Gift Play interviews reanimate Froebelian ideas within today's play-based pedagogy. As later chapters will demonstrate, this approach offers insight into the nature of learning through play, the debated role of adults in children's play (Pyle and Danniels, 2017), and the materiality of meaning-making in early childhood education, contributing to new materialist education discourse (Lenz-Taguchi, 2014).

Figure 1

Froebel Gifts 1–10



Note. This original illustration depicts ten Froebel Gifts as used at the Froebel Education Centre according to the staff manual (Corbett, 1980, p. iii). See Appendix C for tabular descriptions.

Over the course of this thesis, I follow a hermeneutic (*interpretive*) phenomenological protocol (van Manen, 2016) pieced with Froebelian theory, performance phenomenology (Kozel, 2008), and posthumanist heuristics (Adams and Thompson, 2016). I begin with a twofold bracketing: first, in the section that follows, I reflect on my subject position in this study; second, I situate the historical (Chapter 2) and theoretical (Chapter 3) pre-understandings of my object of study. Methodological considerations are discussed in depth in Chapter 4. This protocol orients me to the lived experience of teaching play, guiding my engagement with experiential data (Chapter 5) and culminating in a phenomenological report on the essence of teaching-play (Chapter 6). I conclude with a discussion of the study's significance (Chapter 7) and final reflections (Chapter 8) that return to the sphere where this research begins.

Positionality

The *lifeworld* is the starting point of phenomenological inquiry (Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 2016, p. 9): “the world as we immediately experience it.” In turn, my study begins in the sphere of my own life, in lessons learned through childhood play at the Froebel Education Centre, from 1996 to 2007. Here, constructing with toys whose essential geometry reveals itself through play, and discovering the durable symmetry of plain-weaving paper slats through a sliced paper loom, I accumulated formative experiences from which my current occupations as an artist, educator, and researcher have emerged. Froebelian forms are seen in my recent work in paper weaving, abstract paper folding, and parquetry (fig. 2). My positionality in this research is connected to my participants' lifeworlds. This closeness is a generative ground: my research is likewise responsive to meaningful relationships with my *gifted* former teachers, and materials called Gifts. Both I came to know as a child and with whom I learn anew as a researcher.

Figure 2

Occupations in Paper and Parquetry

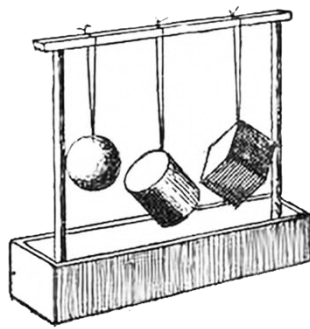


Note. Original works by the author, 2024. Paper-cutting, parquetry, and paper-weaving (L to R).

Notes on the Text

Illustrated chapter glyphs in this thesis appear interstitially. They should orient the reader towards subtle correspondences of chapters' themes with the gaining complexity of Froebel gifts 1 to 8 in original sequence. All glyphs are adapted from plates in Hermann Goldammer's *Der Kindergarten* (1869) and Edward Wiebé's *Paradise of Childhood* (1869),¹ both of which are in the public domain. All other illustrations, figures, and tables are captioned and numbered in-text. Chapter glyphs appear on their own page. Like the Gifts move through divisions of the whole, here I dissect and assemble the *whole* art of teaching play. Glyphs proceed from the sphere (Chapter 1), the foundational forms (Chapter 2), the wooden blocks (Chapters 3–6), the surface tablets (Chapter 7), and the metal rings and rods (Chapter 8).

¹ Plates in Goldammer's German guide (1869) are drawn by the author based on Froebel's original published letters and designs. Wiebé's illustrated guide published the same year reprinted Goldammer's plates. Wiebé's was the first illustrated Kindergarten guide published in English, as such its figures have been numerous reproduced.



Foundational Forms

The Second Gift: The Sphere, The Cube, and Their Synthesis

Chapter 2: History

This chapter presents kindergarten histories and the development of the Froebel Gifts and Occupations, exploring how Froebel's educational materials emerged in 19th-century Germany and were later adapted in Canada. Historical grounding prepares the way for key concepts in this study's theoretical framework (Chapter 3) and introduces themes to re-emerge in presentation and analysis of Gift Play interviews (Chapters 4 and 5). I structure this chapter around three kindergartens, each foundational to this study: first, Friedrich Froebel's Kindergarten, established in Germany, 1840; second, Canada's first public school Kindergarten in Toronto, 1883; and third, the Froebel Education Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, founded by Barbara Corbett in 1970. These connected histories highlight evolving interpretations and material adaptations of the Kindergarten method; they unfold individual origin stories that continue to inform the discussion of *what*, *why*, *when*, and *how* play came to matter to modern pedagogy.

Froebel's Kindergarten, Bad Blankenburg, 1840

At a village infant school in the foothills of the Thuringian Forest (fig. 3), Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) founded Kindergarten in 1840: a place where *pre*-school-age children (under 7) could play and grow with guidance. His term, meaning “garden of children” (Corbett, 1980a), reflected his views. Teachers (he called *kindergartners*) should guide children's self-active development, rather than teach by rote instruction; should *cultivate* their natural instincts to make sense of their inner and outer spheres through their childlike plays.² Froebel tended to this vision by providing play its material means, in a system of objects, *gifts* for Kindergarten, which he had begun designing by 1835 (Froebel, 1891). The first of these was the ball: for the

² As per Froebel's essay in *Pedagogics*, “Plan of an Institution for Fostering the Impulse toward Creative Activity,” Kindergarten must foremost “provide plays and means for employment” (1895, p. 18).

infant, a familiar plaything; for Froebel, a symbol of unity in the child's discovery of self and other (Froebel, 1887). The second gift, a wooden cube, sphere, and cylinder, introduced both a new material to grasp and Froebel's "law of contrasts" (p. 48). Like this, each gift had concrete and conceptual origins. Froebel, already an educator of several decades' experience, observed *how* children played to determine *what* materials would further their play instincts (to grasp, to spin, to stack). He also assigned symbolic meaning to each object, grounding them in theoretical principles and equally, mathematics. Abstract blocks like these were rare at the time, and "their use in schools was unprecedented," art education historian Arthur Efland notes (1990, p. 127).

Figure 3

Froebel's First Kindergarten, 1840



Note. Froebel Archive Collection, University of Roehampton, UK.

Froebel's recent biographers trace the origins of Kindergarten's novel methods and materials to two pivotal experiences: Froebel's time with Swiss pedagogue Johann Pestalozzi (1808–1810), which informed his commitment to object-based curriculum (Wasmuth et al.,

2024); and his work with crystallographer Christian Weiss (1814–1816), which inspired the precise geometry of the Gifts (Rubin, 2002; Winkler, 2023). Froebel continued to refine the system, adding craft activity *occupations* that extend their formal vocabulary, with help of early kindergartners until his death in 1852. Since then, the system has evolved along divergent traditionalist and progressivist lines, ultimately transforming into the secular and familiar, larger blocks still used in kindergartens today (Corbett, 1989; Prochner, 2011).

For more than the gifts, Froebel’s schools were radical in his time. Kindergartens provided out-of-home early education for *all* children and offered professional training to women teachers, an idea that was often ridiculed (Manning, 2005). Kindergarten’s emancipatory, democratic vision posed a threat to the “deeply conservative” social order then-enforced by the Prussian government (Efland, 1990, p. 128; McNair & Powell, 2021). As a result, in 1851, a nine-year ban³ suppressed the kindergarten movement (Wasmuth, 2020). Froebel died believing his reforms had failed, but the ban had the opposite effect: German kindergartners emigrated, spreading Froebelian ideas abroad. English Froebelian Tina Bruce (2012) notes, this led to its international adaptation. Froebel had once anticipated this, declaring: “If they will not recognize and support my cause in my own fatherland, I will go to America where a new life is unfolding itself and [the] new education of man corresponding with it will find footing” (1887, p. 195).

The International Kindergarten Movement

A few notes on the international Kindergarten movement in England and America (1860–1920) preface my description of Canada’s first public school kindergarten to establish a shared pattern. Historical analyses of the Froebel Educational Institute, London, show that early UK

³ At the time of the ban, the number of Froebelian Kindergartens in Germany had reached 25, according to Froebel’s *Letters on Kindergarten* (1891).

kindergartner training developed in-step with Froebel's vision, but by the mid-1920s, Froebel's guided exercises with Gifts and Occupations were phased out after much debate.⁴ By 1900, British kindergartners were arguing "the letter, and not the spirit" of Froebel's method: 20th-century industrial education's emphasis on didactic manual training of "the hand and the eye," and Montessori's more "scientific" methods, increasingly supplanted symbolic play (Read, 2006, p. 321; Brehony, 2000, p. 81). Reflecting on the disappearance, British Froebel scholar Kevin Brehony (2000, p. 81) observes: "Once the focus on gifts and occupations... had been regulated in importance, it was not easy to discern what was distinctive about the Froebelian kindergarten." It became clear to Froebel's followers that the symbolic and physical properties of Gifts contained the unifying *essence* of Kindergarten's emancipatory method; but in classroom practice with children, rigid interpretations of the system contrasted the playful spirit it said to require. This became the international movement's central debate.

In North America, conservative *Froebelians* strove to preserve the original curriculum, while *Reconstructionists*⁵ adapted to industrial and *free* play, moved by progressive educationalist John Dewey's critiques⁶ and advancements of the Child Study. Eventually winning out, the Reconstructionists' modern toys adapted liberally from Froebel's originals (Corbett, 1989; Prochner, 2011). One influential *Froebelian*, however, was key in Canada's take. This was American educator Susan Blow, who in 1873 established the first publicly funded kindergarten. It closely followed Froebel's guided-play method with Gifts and Occupations (Wolfe, 2002). Blow's efforts to integrate Kindergarten into public schooling directly influenced

⁴ Michael Freidman (2018) finds the Gifts and Occupations had "fallen into disuse" by 1924 (p. 23). See also: Teresa Pugsley, interviewed in this study, trained here in the 1960s and recalls the gifts were not used, they "were kept in the historical archives" (Chapter 5).

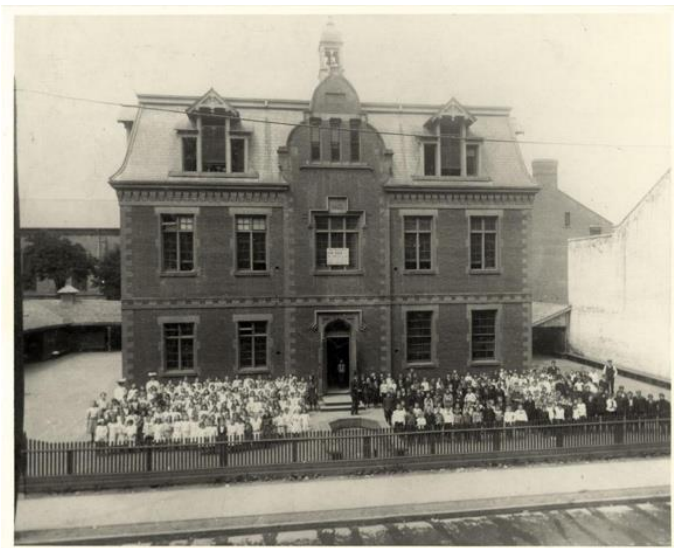
⁵ Barbara Corbett uses these terms in her discussion of the American Kindergarten movement (1989, pp. 11–15).

⁶ Dewey (1900) writes: "To state it baldly, the fact that 'play' denotes the psychological attitude of the child, not his outward performances, means the complete emancipation from the necessity of following any given or prescribed system, or sequence of gifts, plays, or occupations." See: "Froebel's Principles of Education," p. 114).

John L. Hughes, a Canadian educator and Toronto School Board inspector. Hughes oversaw the founding of Canada's first public school Kindergarten in 1883 (fig. 4), inspired by Blow's model.

Figure 4

Louisa St. School, Toronto



Note. Photographer unknown. Toronto District School Board Museum and Archives.

First Public School Kindergarten in Canada, 1883

In fall of 1883, Canada's first public school kindergarten opened at Toronto's Louisa Street School. Its director, American-born Froebelian Ada Marean Hughes (1848–1929),⁷ had trained under two leading Froebel traditionalists: Maria Kraus-Boelte (herself a student of Froebel's widow, Louise Levin Froebel) and Susan Blow, aforementioned (Dixon, 1991; 1994).⁸

⁷ Ada Marean married John L. Hughes in 1888.

⁸ Literature on the Froebelian movement in Canada is limited compared to its US and UK counterparts. Barbara Corbett's *Century of Kindergarten in Ontario* (1989) remains the central reference (see also: Wloka, 2020; Bowlby,

Hughes brought this orthodox training to Ontario, shaping the early kindergarten system according to Froebel's original pedagogy. Model kindergartens followed Froebel's method with the Gifts and Occupations and functioned as training sites for student-kindergartners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1889). According to Toronto Board of Education reports, there were 24 Froebelian kindergartens by 1890 (Table 2.1). These numbers doubled over the next decade as graduates of Ada Hughes's teacher-training course established Kindergartens of their own.

Table 1

Expansion of the Kindergarten Movement in Toronto, 1883–1950

Year	No. of Kindergartens	Total enrolment
1883	1	70
1890	24	1,461
1899	46	4,725
1916	89	8,915

Note. Data compiled from Toronto Board of Education annual reports (1884, 1891, 1900, 1917).

Ada Hughes retired from her position as supervisor of Kindergartens in 1900 (Dixon, 1994). The following decades saw the Froebelian concentration in Canadian kindergarten education begin to wane, paralleling international shifts discussed above. Archival records of Ontario Ministry of Education circulars⁹ trace this slow transition. Early training certificates (1889, 1902) required detailed knowledge of Froebel's Gifts and Occupations, their symbolic

2016). Canadian Glen Dixon contributed rare biographical work on Ada Marean Hughes (1991) and a brief overview of kindergarten's early development in Canada (1994; see also: Prochner, 2015).

⁹ In this section I reference archival holdings of teacher training materials at OISE Library, University of Toronto. Of particular note, the Kindergarten Teacher Training Collection (1894–1992 [Creation]), contains early 20th-century samples of teacher-trainee notebooks and occupations sampler albums. It was created by Barbara Corbett in 1992.

meanings, and pedagogical use. These principal practices remained through the 1910s. By the 1930s, however, Froebel's texts were gradually replaced by readings from Dewey and Montessori (1931, 1935). While courses on the Gifts and Occupations were still offered as late as 1943, the 1948 curriculum had firmly adopted a Child Study focus. For the first time, building activities were described using generic terms, "blocks of all kinds; improvised materials," without reference to Froebel. By 1950 and 1970 course outlines, Froebel appeared only in historical surveys, alongside figures Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Montessori.

Though Froebel's system had faded from public education by mid-century, his pedagogy re-emerged in an unexpected way. In the mid-1960s, while studying Ontario's education history at the University of Toronto Institute of Education, then-doctoral student Barbara Corbett learned of kindergarten's Froebelian roots. This discovery inspired her to found, in 1970, a new kindergarten and school dedicated to reviving Froebel's work: The Froebel Education Centre in Mississauga. The Gifts and Occupations returned through her efforts, not as relics of the past, but as living tools for teaching and learning through play.

The Froebel Education Centre, Mississauga, 1970–2016

Barbara Corbett (1931–2017) opened her Froebel Kindergarten in 1970 at Erindale Presbyterian Church, near her home in Mississauga. The rented room had just enough space for its director, 9 children ages 3 and 4, and a roundtable for guided play with Froebel Gifts.¹⁰ The next year, two assistants joined staff, and 46 children attended either morning or afternoon programs. Grades one and two soon completed the Kindergarten, while portable classrooms added school grades 3 to 8 in 1977. By 1980, a teaching institute had been established with

¹⁰ Data compiled from public records and unpublished paper ephemera provided by the Froebel Foundation.

teaching certificates courses offered in Froebel's theories and practices. The growing Kindergarten & School was renamed the Froebel Education Centre in 1990, and moved into its two-story, open-concept school building (fig. 5), drafted from an architectural model Barbara laid out with Froebel's wooden building blocks.

Figure 5

The Froebel Education Centre, Mississauga



Note. Photographer unknown, ca. 1990s [Gift of the Froebel Foundation].

Unlike the directors of early kindergartens previously discussed, Barbara Corbett's Froebel training was self-directed. She had been a teacher for ten years before she first encountered Froebel's name listed on course syllabi at the University of Toronto. She reflects: "in libraries... down in dusty storage rooms I felt, when I read about Froebel's views of education that I had entered *a land of milk and honey*" (1989, p. vi). In those years (1961–1969) she became dedicated to Froebel's teachings, gaining expertise by interviewing over one hundred individuals (former Kindergartners, school board members, and others) to write *The Public*

School Kindergarten in Ontario: 1883 to 1967 (1968). She assembled in the process a now-public archive of records, correspondences, and kindergartner course work representing Ontario public kindergarten's 60-year Froebelian period.¹¹ She named it after Ada Marean.

Ada Marean Hughes' student notes from her time as Maria Kraus-Boelte's trainee deeply inspired Corbett (1989, p. vi). This fellowship reflects the essential *Froebelian* (as opposed to *Reconstructionist*) teaching-play practices observed at the Froebel Education Centre: seen in its sets of the boxed wood blocks, tablets, metal rings and rods, as so forth, kept on open shelves and used in guided roundtable group play activities in both kindergarten (ages 3-7, see fig. 6) and school (grades 3-8, fig. 7). Her *Staff Handbook* (n.d.) also features Child Study prominently (pp. 5–21): in the Kindergarten, observing recent child development studies; in the school, Ontario school curriculum and a Child Study course for senior students (grades 7 and 8). In this respect it could be said Dr. Corbett's Centre was, in its own way, *a synthesis of opposites*, Froebelian-Reconstructionist; and a *unity of contrasts*, like Froebel's second gift of foundational forms (cube, cylinder, sphere). Yet, much like the Froebel kindergartens before it, the Froebel Education Centre encountered its own set of unreconcilable components.

The school's closure after 46 years in operation in 2016, a year before Dr. Corbett's passing in 2017, is the concluding parallel in my historical review. Throughout its tenure, small class size was central to the school philosophy: it capped total enrolment at around 150 students, though numbers would vary. That said, personal correspondence with former staff and a few public records¹² describe dwindling enrolment numbers in the 2000s falling as low as 27 in 2012, which is likely to have caused the private school's eventual closure. Some former staff members also referred to an increasingly strict cultural attitude on what qualified as "truly Froebelian"

¹¹ Current collection of OISE Library Archives, University of Toronto [Kindergarten Teacher Training Collection].

¹² Informal mentions in the *Mississauga News* (1993; 2012; 2011) verified by available records.

(words used in a 2004 staff self-evaluation questionnaire); this may have limited the school's ability to adapt to its evolving contemporary context. I can draw no firm conclusions here but highlight instead how this legacy remains to be studied and reevaluated for the contemporaneity in its core teaching practices, particularly, the artful abstract objects used in guided group activity. Such is the historical piece to my research rationale, to better understand the essential character of teaching play practices guided with Froebel's Gifts.

Figure 6

Gift Play in the Kindergarten

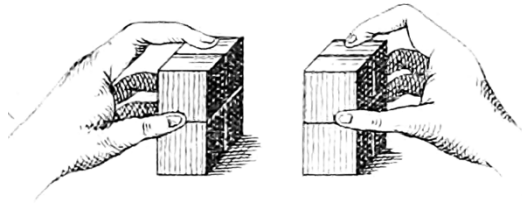


Figure 7

Gift Play in the School



Note. Photographs ca. 1990s, edited for anonymity. [Gift of the Froebel Foundation].



“One Whole, Two Halves”

The Third Gift: A Wooden Cube Divided Three Times into Eight

Chapter 3: Theory

To understand what is *meant* by the essential character of teaching play with Froebel's Gifts, this chapter lays out key concepts and definitions. Returning to my research question, I address what *defines* the essence of teaching through play with Froebel Gifts and Occupations, and what is meant by *essence*. My theoretical lens combines two halves: 1) Froebel's educational philosophy (1887, 1895) and 2) Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology (2014, 2016). From these sources I define a lexicon of terms most relevant to my study: "*essence*," "*teaching*," "*play*," "*gifts*," "*occupations*," and "*lifeworld*." In sum, this chapter builds from the historical grounds of the previous chapter to present theoretical building blocks, Froebelian and phenomenological concepts variously reassembled in this text as a whole.

"Froebelian" Phenomenological Lens

A Froebelian lens imparts an experiential theory of learning; phenomenology, conversely, a method of studying experience. As a dual lens, a Froebelian interpretation of phenomenology contributes different-yet-alike contours to the study of play-based pedagogy. Their contrasts bring clarity to shared concepts. Friedrich Froebel's translated texts on educational philosophy are read alongside Dutch Canadian phenomenologist and educator Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined in *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (2016). In it, van Manen defines hermeneutic phenomenology as "a philosophy of the personal, the individual" pursued against the background of "the *logos* of *other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social*" (p. 7) which develops personal, practical, pedagogical knowledge through *interpretation*. Similarly, Froebel (1887) sees self-active play a mutually developing relationship between self, other, and 'universal laws of Nature' (pp. 33-34).

He observed the hermeneutic value of play in terms later familiar to phenomenology,¹³ writing: “to the thoughtful adult this little play may become... a point of departure and comparison, through which the phenomena of life may be interpreted” (1895, p. 193). In kind, thinking through contrasts and comparisons in Froebelian-phenomenological terms below provides a useful frame of reference for my later interpretation of teaching play as a phenomenon.

Lexicon of Concepts

“Essence”

Van Manen’s phenomenology defines *essence* as the “internal meaning structure” of a phenomenon (2016, p. 10). Essence and *spirit* are joined concepts in my study of Froebelian pedagogy; they both attempt to name that which makes the Froebel approach to teaching, play, and learning distinct. The term *essence* is present in Froebelian and phenomenological theory. Froebel writes, “it is the life-work and destiny of all things to unfold their essence” (1887, p. 2); and van Manen (2016) writes, essence is made known through the study of how a phenomenon unfolds in life, how it is felt; or, experienced.

“Teaching”

“The question of the essence of teaching,” writes van Manen (2016), “is concerned with the pedagogy of teaching” (p. 43). In this study, *teaching*, *teaching-play*, and *teaching through play* refer interchangeably to professional practice, how and where teaching *plays out*, and to pedagogy, the manner of *being* a teacher. Thus far, the Froebelian approach to teaching has meant “to guide” rather than “to instruct” (as described in Chapter 2). The use of the term

¹³ While phenomenology and Froebelian theory, not yet historically linked, noticeably draw from a shared genealogy of ideas prominent among 18th-century German thinkers, the philosophical tradition of phenomenology was established in 1900, a half-century after Froebel’s death.

kindergartner (“children’s gardener”) in place of *teacher* examples how Froebel’s “garden” theory of education (school as a *kindergarten*, or “child’s garden”) extends to its pedagogy of teaching. In my study, the question of the *meaning* of Froebelian pedagogy is guided by van Manen (2016), who argues: pedagogy is neither the theory of teaching nor its application, but “powerfully operates in between” (pp. 145-146). Teacher-participants’ lived experiences contribute a deeper meaning of the Froebelian pedagogy of teaching (Chapter 6) as a sensitive, relational dynamic of “guidance” and “drawing-out” development through play.

“Play”

Froebelian views on play as “the highest stage of child-development... highly serious and of deep significance” (Froebel, 1887, p. 54) inform how *play* and *learning* are twinned concepts in this study: play is learning and learning is play. Play, for Froebel, involves the productive *interplay* of one’s “inner life” and “outer world” (p. 289). He writes that play is how a child, through self-initiated activity, “makes the external internal, the internal external, and finds the unity between the two” (p. 289). Still, what defines the essential character of play is primed for further description in my study. Historical debates on the nature of Froebelian play (Chapter 2) continue to inform how value is assigned differently to *free-* and *guided play* in learning. From a phenomenological view, play theory too often overlooks its lifeworld realities, the *felt* attributes, play’s tangible *spirit*. Thus, the lived existential dimensions of play and the spirit of Froebelian play are central concepts developed in my research.

“Gifts”

Froebel Gifts, *Fröbelgaben* or *gaben* in German, is most closely related to the English definition of “gift” that means charitable donation, contribution, talent, or skill (Oxford German Dictionary, n.d.). It is distinct from the word *geschenk*, meaning “present.” Gifts are the name

given to sets of playthings used in Froebel kindergartens (Appendix C provides a visual synopsis of the Gifts). Originally designed in accordance with mathematical, natural, and symbolic principles, these objects reflected properties of the *given* world and were thus *gifts*. They give form to Froebel's principal law of contrasts and interconnectedness. The Gifts are both a unified system of different parts, and in each boxed gift a self-contained divided unity. In practice, Barbara Corbett writes, "the word [Gift] conveys both the pleasure and responsibility the child has in using them" (1980a, p. 137). During Gift Play interviews in this study, the Gifts are described as active participants in teaching, learning, and discovery (Chapter 5). One teacher-participant says, "the gifts *themselves* draw you out."

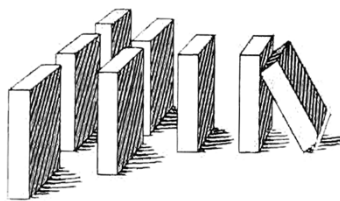
"Occupations"

The relationship between Froebel Gifts and Occupations is understood as this: "The gifts lead to discovery; the occupations, to invention" (Froebel, 1887, p. 278). Geometric forms (shape, surface, line, point) discovered in gift play develops the child's interest and ability to create new forms. While gifts are toys with which children play, and occupations are materials with which children create (Corbett, 1980b). While gifts retain their material form, occupations transform materials. Thus, the occupations—drawing, sewing, perforating, paper folding, paper weaving, modeling with clay, and constructing with peas and sticks—are curricular means of synthesizing, applying, and extending the artistic vocabulary of the gifts through craft.

"Lifeworld"

In van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, the *lifeworld* is where research emerges with interest and returns with knowledge to inform it. As it functions in my study, the notion of lifeworld also sheds light on objectives shared between pedagogical phenomenology and Froebelian education theory. The term "life-world" itself conjoins inner *life* and external *world*,

recalling Froebel's principle of interconnectedness, the unity among diversity, and his educational method of developing "life-unity," meaning, "harmony in feeling, thinking, willing, and doing" (1887, p. 3). As used by van Manen (2016), the lifeworld refers to positionality, the "everyday" lived experiences that effect how meaning is made (p. 40). Its proposition for phenomenology is that research is intrinsically embedded in the sphere of a researcher's own life, experiences, and encountered phenomena. In Froebelian pedagogy, this understanding of lifeworld-centred meaning-making finds likeness in teacher perspectives on "child-centredness" and "following the child" (discussed in Chapter 5) which example how teaching should respond to the child's lifeworld. For Froebel, child-centred learning is what motivates one's awareness of self in relation to given structures, or "laws" of phenomena, and education is a process of self-development for universal benefit (1887). Van Manen writes that phenomenological research is similarly pedagogical. The interpretation of lived experience "edifies the personal insight" which likewise contributes to "one's ability to act toward others, children or adults, with tact or tactfulness" (2016, p. 7). Learning through phenomenology, he continues, "is itself a kind of *Bildung*... the curriculum of being and becoming."



Given Structures

The Fourth Gift: The Cube Divided Four Times

Chapter 4: Methodology

Learning begins with experiences in play, at the Froebel school, and phenomenology is the study of experience. In this study, phenomenology is the mode by which I answer: *what is the essence of teaching through play with Froebel's Gifts?* This chapter details my methodology and presents *Gift Play* as an object-interview method. My overall procedure is adapted from Max van Manen's hermeneutic research phases (2016) and John Creswell's standard protocol for qualitative phenomenological research (2018). It also integrates Froebelian overlays, artist-researcher Susan Kozel's performance phenomenology (2008, 2010) posthumanist object-interview heuristics developed by and Catherine Adams and Terrie Lynn Thompson (2011, 2016). The result is a protocol of learning by doing, researching by re-writing, and approaching data with wonder. These methods direct my particular sensitivity to the *mutuality* of human and non-human guides in the relational process of building knowledge, and *the whole in its parts* as pursued in my thesis, analysis, and synthesis of teaching play.

Phenomenological Orientation

The hermeneutic phenomenological methods described Max van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience* (2016) guides my study of teaching play as experienced by Froebelian educators. Van Manen outlines six research phases: 1) turning to the phenomenon, 2) investigating lived experience, 3) reflecting on essential themes, 4) writing/rewriting, 5) maintaining a pedagogical relation, and 6) balancing parts and whole (pp. 30–31). As described in the previous chapter, several conceptual overlays between phenomenology and Froebelian pedagogy justify my use of the uniquely suited science. Particularly relevant throughlines here are their shared theoretical commitments to the unfolding *essence* of all things and the law of

connections found among contrasts, concepts which are referred to this study's procedures. Such is the rationale for my approach to phenomenology as a methodological approach to studying Froebelian teaching practice, and a preview of my study's phenomenological findings for pedagogy. My phenomenology of *teaching play* through the example of Gift Play is both an attempt to bring its experiential mode of collective meaning-making into finer focus, and an experiment in applying the Froebelian teaching practice of *Gift Play* as a novel phenomenological method.

My thinking-with phenomenology is further shaped by two other critical phenomenologists, dance artist and critical feminist scholar, Susan Kozel (2008, 2010) and posthumanist phenomenologist, Catherine Adams (2011, 2016). Kozel inspires my procedure in significant ways. Kozel troubles binaries between subject/object and researcher/participant often implied in 'objective distancing' of the bracketing phase of classic phenomenology. These binaries are incompatible with my research context, in which I am an active participant. Secondly, Kozel's artistic research method confers a 'productive tension' to structure as something to 'push up against' that "enhances creative expression" (2010, p. 205). Her artistic research framework guided my approach to designing Gift Play interviews early on, and contributes to my thinking on the theme of the creative constraint (discussed in Chapter 5).

Education scholar Catherine Adams, a colleague and collaborator of van Manen,¹⁴ approaches phenomenology through a posthumanist framework. *Researching a Posthuman World: Interviews with Digital Objects* (co-authored with Terrie Lynn Thompson, 2016) draws

¹⁴ Catherine Adams and Max van Manen have been experimenting with "thing writing" as a phenomenological teaching practice at the University of Alberta since the early 2000s (Adams & Yin, 2017). This collaboration has had a material influence on van Manen's philosophy of phenomenology. For example, van Manen's (2014) book *Phenomenology of Practice* adds "lived things" (materiality) to his earlier list of four existentials which appear in *Researching Lived Experience* (originally published in 1990).

upon actor-network-theory, posthumanism, postphenomenology, and new materialist discourse, for example Karen Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action. Intra-action describes the mutual, agentic force of humans and non-humans to co-create meaning, contribute to the *felt* atmosphere, and direct flows of experience. It modifies the word *interaction* to imply a shared between-ness, a *becoming-alongside*, that differently describes the relationship between people and (play)things. Adams and Thompson's work on object-interviews applies this concept in the study of digital technologies (2011, 2016), while my study examines physical things, or rather, traditional toys.

Research Design and Participants

Guided by van Manen's injunction to stay "close to the experience as lived" (2016, p. 67), I designed two 1.5-hour, roundtable Gift Play group interviews with four former Froebel Education Centre teachers (1970s–2010s), to elicit life-story descriptions of teaching, play, and gift play materials as teaching tools. These semi-structured, conversational interviews were guided by three thematic prompts, recreating Froebel's guided play routine (see "Gift Play Interviews as a Phenomenological Method," below). All interviews were video-recorded, transcribed, member-checked and returned to the teachers for their review, additional life-story comments, and final editing. The materials used during the gift plays, the same sets used at the Froebel Education Centre, were gifted to me by the Froebel Foundation for my research.

Participants named in this study were recruited within an established network of former teachers at the Froebel centre. The four participants' collective experience represents five decades of the kindergarten school (1970–2016). Teresa Pugsley was a staff member at the Froebel Education Centre from 1976–2007, and volunteer until 2016. Anneli Charron taught at

the school between 1994–2016. Katherine Ilson taught between 1997–2011, and Jenni Morley taught between 2005–2015. My experience as a student at the Froebel Education Centre from 1996–2007 informs my research design. I actively join in parallel play research with the teachers and the gifts, documenting both my own teaching-play memories and those of my co-investigators. The teachers whose memories are shared in this document are teachers that I have known since childhood. Our shared lived experiences foreground a richly affective, feeling space from which we access, reconstruct, and spark shared memories.

Procedures: Applying Phenomenology

My study follows a series of guideposts: 1) turning to the phenomenon, 2) gathering the given, 3) reading transcripts hermeneutically, 5) reflecting on essential themes, 6) sustaining wonder, 7) reporting the essence, and 8) maintaining the whole and its parts.

Turning to the phenomenon I start with the experience of teaching play. I consider *closeness* as a generative ground. Like Kozel (2008, p. 58) my method “precisely relies upon shared experience.” I have ‘bracketed’ my study of the experience of teaching play with a twofold self-positioning and subject-positioning. I situate my pre-given *lifeworld* (my own positionality as a former Froebel student) and I articulate pre-occupations (historical background and theory) to reflect in my study how phenomena are always already shaped by discourse. Making pre-assumptions clear brings focus to encounters with each transcript, anecdote, or experiential account.

Gathering the given I collect experiential examples of teaching play as primary source material. Van Manen emphasizes that the research question should dictate the investigative method appropriate to it (2016, p. 173) and that good interview data contains concrete, first-

person descriptions of the phenomenon as experienced. Thus, I chose to conduct conversational *gift play* interviews in which the structure of the encounter itself mirrors the phenomenon under study. Additional experiential accounts were drawn from my research diary and lived-experience descriptions found in Barbara Corbett's book *A Garden of Children* (1980a).

Reading transcripts hermeneutically I read, annotate, and rewrite sections of transcripts and lived-experience descriptions iteratively with van Manen's threefold reflection: *holistic* (capturing a 'sententious phrase'¹⁵ for each given narrative), *selective* (highlighting standout statements about Froebelian play's essence), and *detailed* (line-by-line explication of key passages) (2016, pp. 92–93). Through the reflective activity of "textual labour" (van Manen's phrase), I come close to the rhythms and repetitions of essential qualities.

Reflecting on essential themes and significant statements I craft textual anecdotes, focused, present-tense stories that punctuate the essence of teaching play to develop descriptions. I apply van Manen's 'existentials' to draw out essential themes that will guide my phenomenological description: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (relationality), lived things (materiality). To these, Adams and Thompsons (2016) add two other interpretive themes: "following the actors" and "listening to the invitational quality of things" (pp. 38, 40). These themes are prompts that help build out a holistic, multidimensional description of experience.

Sustaining a sense of wonder I adopt an openness to "punctive ruptures" along the phenomenological inquiry (Adams and van Manen, 2017, p. 784), meaning I am sensitive to the affective *punctures*, and this way I prevent premature theorizing and remain attentive to the emotional qualities of meaning. Maggie MacLure (2013), post-qualitative researcher of early

¹⁵ 'sententious phrase' is a term used by van Manen (2014) for a concise, meaningful phrase that rewrites or reduces an excerpt of text into its essential narrative value.

childhood education, writes about wonder— “the wonder of data in the gut, or the quickening heartbeat” (p. 229)— through what it means to open to research data differently. I journal moments of surprise, emotional resonance, or dissonance. I wonder my way through writing, reading, and rewriting phenomenologically.

Reporting the essence, I weave composite descriptions with the intent to convey the core meaning of teaching play. I produce a vocative, *expressive* text that attempts ‘to show, rather than tell,’ the experience of gift play (van Manen, 2016, p. 36). The end and the aim of a phenomenological study is to “develop textual and structural descriptions” (Creswell, 2018), that is, descriptive passages that discuss the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced.

Maintaining the whole in its parts guides my phenomenological attitude and verification of findings. To discern between essential and incidental themes I maintain an orientation to the whole in its parts: I look for “aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be” (van Manen, 2016, p. 107). In my phenomenological descriptions I include insights that reflect faithfully the experience of my participants and teaching play as I have come to know it.

Gift Play Interviews as a Phenomenological Method

The central method of my phenomenological approach is my adaptation of Gift Play as a form of research. To structure this method, I adapted gift play descriptions (Corbett, 1980a) into a procedural framework, refined in a pilot pedagogical inquiry with a former Froebelian teacher, and developed through subsequent art education workshops. Gift Play as a phenomenological

interview is both narrative and hermeneutic, since gift plays encourage both storytelling and connection-making.

Gift Plays are a collective, reflective roundtable activity that follow this general routine: 1) *starting with experience*, either shared together prior to gift play (e.g., nature walks, story time) or otherwise individual experience from which to build; 2) *setting the stage*, where a prompt is given to thematize play; 4) *parallel play*, where time is given to think and make; 5) *drawing-out*, where guides ask questions to further play or storytelling; 6) *presentations*, where each participant shares what they made and why; 7) *the connecting story*, in which the group weaves individual plays into one combined narrative.

Building from this routine, I posed three thematic prompts which guided three interrelated gift plays, which concluded with a final connecting story (see Appendix B):

- **Gift Play 1, Learning Experience:** “Select a Froebel Gift and build a construction to describe a moment in your learning history. What early memories of learning shaped your path to teaching?”¹⁶
- **Gift Play 2, Teacher-Training Experience:** “Select a Froebel Gift and build a construction to describe a moment in your teacher training. When did you come to understand the gift play differently?”
- **Gift Play 3, Teaching Experience:** “Select a Froebel Gift to describe a moment in your teacher experience. When did you see the teaching applications of gift play activated?”

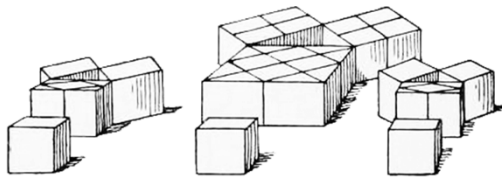
By engaging teachers in embodied construction and reflective narration, and by attending to “what kinds of questions seem to elicit concrete lived-experience material” (Adams and van

¹⁶ Preselection of Froebel Gifts was determined based on the available materials given to this research by the Froebel Foundation.

Manen, 2017, p. 786), these interviews are designed to generate vivid, anecdotal data ideally suited for my phenomenological reduction and thematic analysis.

Conclusion

As a study of pre-reflective experience, the promise of phenomenology is this: the whole of experience plays out in miniature. Moments of encounters, events, reflect meaning metonymically. As Adams and van Manen (2017) note, phenomenology enacts a productive paradox: it must both “gather” and “deconstruct” across examples of experience “to produce an exemplar, vocative phenomenological text that brings the living originary meanings of the lived experiences back to the reader” (p. 784). By taking embodied memory as its object and bracketing the complexity of externalizing the internal, phenomenology draws out meaningful “reductions” that illuminate experience as it is lived, and thus, return lessons to professional practice. This chapter positioned phenomenology as a research fold to Froebelian pedagogy and, conversely, Gift Play as a method for doing phenomenology. Drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2016), performance studies (Kozel, 2008), and posthumanist object-interview methods (Adams and Thompson, 2016), I connected my Froebelian-phenomenological theoretical lens to concrete research procedures. I described how lived experience descriptions, episodic anecdotes, and the phenomenological reduction work together to sustain “direct contact with the experience as lived” (van Manen, 2016, pp. 77–78). In the chapters that follow, I will present the anecdotes generated through Gift Play interviews and explore what thematic structures of meaning they reveal of teaching and learning through play.



A Form of Life, of Beauty, and of Knowledge

The Fifth Gift: A Wooden Cube with Diagonal Divisions

Chapter 5: Gift Play Interviews

This chapter gathers the given Gift Play interviews. Together they reflect teachings, play, and meaning-making practices at the Froebel Education Centre, Ontario, Canada, from stories retold by former kindergartners and teachers on staff between the years 1976 and 2016, representing 40 years of the school. As described in Chapter 2, this small private school was unusual for its use of original Froebel Gifts and Occupations in the kindergarten (ages 3-7) and at their school (grades 3 to 8). It was also *animated* by theirs and others' teaching practices. I asked former teacher-participants to reconstruct memories of teaching play most personally significant to them in three group gift plays during our research interviews held over two afternoons. In what follows, I write about the research setting and situate the multiple actors, my participants and the gifts brought into our discussions. Stories are interwoven with anecdotes, observations, and conversational interludes.

Research Question and Gift Play Interview Setting

What is the experience of teaching play with Froebel Gifts? According to these stories, teaching play is mutual, environmentally attune, in-the-moment pedagogy afforded by material constraints, or structured *contrasts*. My interview method shares these qualities. To start, my research relies upon the embodied knowledge of the Froebel teachers I interview (see Chapter 4, *Research Design and Participants* section for discussion). Mutuality here means I participate in Gift Plays with them, contributing my perspective as a former Froebel student. The interview environment is dynamic and cheerful: two group sessions take place around a wooden table in mid-summer afternoon light. We gather in the art studio classroom attached to Jenni Morley's house, herself a former Froebel teacher and participant of this study. The conversational structure

sparks in-the-moment reflections on what play means, what education should do, and what Gift Play contributes to the pedagogy of teaching practiced at the Froebel kindergarten and school. Spontaneous song and occasional spoken unisons accentuate the joyful levity. Experiences of memories play out as they were lived, embodied and emotional. The depth of our discussions and the concreteness of my participants' anecdotes are afforded by the material constraints of the *gifts themselves* here used. The Fifth and Sixth Gift were chosen because they contain the most pieces. Since "you must use every piece" (Anneli, Interview 2) these gifts "draw more out" of the stories they help tell. Two other gifts were used, once each: the First Gift, a shared set of solid colour crochet spheres, and the Seventh Gift, of solid colour parquetry tiles I laser-cut from wood and painted, and whose shapes (squares, triangles, circles, half-circles) extrapolate from the surface geometry of the solid gifts (1-6; see Appendix C).

Opening the Gift and "Seeing it as a whole" — *Prelude*

The start of each Gift Play begins with a closed box. "*It's almost like you can't really open it until you start to get the idea*" (Jenni Morley). The kindergartners assume their roles in the performance when they hold the gifts that I have set out in front of them. They begin to 'set the stage' in different ways.

Jenni: We used to "knock on the door" and "pull at the doorstep." Or "the shake."

[Shaking the gift] "*Is there a story in there?*"

Anneli: Exactly, you have to shake it and see.

Pulling open the grooved lip of the sliding top reveals the first layer of the cube. The Sixth Gift's lid opens to architectural blocks, posts, and lintels, laid flat in a square. The lid of the Fifth Gift slides to a mosaic of whole, halved, and diagonally quartered squares. But the blocks are not

dumped out. To open the whole gift, we slide the lid partially closed, flip it over, and pull the tab from under the cube. The blocks land on the table in a sequence of soft knocks. This way, attention is directed to the senses.

We are ‘listening to the invitational qualities’ (Adams and Thompson, 2016) of the Gifts. Their material qualities, how they are *felt* and how they are designed: these are significant in the routine of Gift Play. Katherine sets the stage this way: “*Listen to the sound of the blocks drop.*” Jenni repeats, “*The sounds. I love the sounds of the blocks.*” Lifting the box, the whole cube is intact. “Seeing it as a whole before you take it apart” (Teresa Pugsley) is a conversational refrain. This material ethic extends to how the whole is kept in play. Anneli emphasizes the point, “*You must use every piece*” and Jenni adds, “*I’ve always loved that you have to use every piece. To me that’s where it would draw more out of a student.*”

Learning from Teachers — Gift Play 1

The first Gift Play prompt asks participants to recall a significant moment in their learning history to reconstruct with the Sixth or Fifth Gift: *What experiences of learning shaped your path to teaching?* There is a parallel across these replays. Teresa, Jenni, Katherine, and Anneli all share stories of memorable teachers, answering *how* and *what I learned* with *who I learned from* or *alongside*. The connecting theme shows learning is a social, relational process of becoming.

“I could do a better job myself, and I can’t even read!” (Teresa, Gift Play 1). Teresa builds her childhood classroom in London, where she first became inspired to teach *differently*.

Mine isn’t a happy memory. It’s from a long, long, long time ago. But it’s never left me.

This is my classroom, roughly, when I was seven. And this is the blackboard. And I

couldn't read. I just couldn't get it. I was a wiz at math, but that wasn't very much help. Our teacher would bring the kids who were good at reading to the front of the class. They would sit in a circle with her, to read. Those of us who were really struggling got left on our own, to practice. Well, you can't read if you can't read. I sat there as a seven-year-old thinking, "This is really stupid. I'm never going to learn to read like this! I could do a better job myself, and I can't even read! I just know this isn't the right way to do it!" And that's what made me want to teach. That's what made me want to teach five- and six- and seven-year-olds because I wanted them to learn to read properly. It's a simple story, but it never left me.

Figure 8

Teresa reconstructs her childhood classroom with the Fifth Gift.



In Teresa's anecdote, the teacher figure becomes a point of self-differentiation. Teresa, age 7, comes to know herself in contrast to her teacher (who here at three blocks tall is a dominating presence, second only to the blackboard in size). Her arrangement of the Fifth Gift

(fig. 8) shows spatial hierarchy. The chalkboard and teacher are the focal points, taking the most blocks. The circle of readers is clustered around the focal points, while non-readers are isolated in rows, excluded. The spatial arrangement makes visible the *felt* experience of separation. As it relates to this study on teaching play, the anecdote gives insight into Teresa's *lifeworld*, the external actors and experiences that inform her inner life, which inform her professional practice as a Froebel educator. Further, this particular gift play also illustrates what Froebel called 'a form of life'— a construction with the gifts that depicts the *things* of life (e.g., houses, people, significant objects), often drawing out meaning from experiences, self-identity, and social relationships.

“I call her a green light” (Jenni, Gift Play 1). Jenni also constructs a form of life in her first Gift Play: she builds a scene with her first-grade teacher, who was different from other teachers, “I noticed all the teachers are up at the front, but she’d always walk back and forth and come along and connect.” Jenni illustrates a memory of coming to know her teacher as a “whole” person and shares with the Sixth Gift (fig. 9):

At the end of the school year, we were all invited to come to her home. She had a big Edwardian house with a porch around it. These are the steps coming down. We were all playing, she brought out lemonade, and there were games and everything. And then she introduced us to her husband, who was a Vietnam vet, and he was in a wheelchair. There was something in that moment where she unfolded as being a person who has a vast experience of life. Somehow, I picked up on her having a huge life of her own. That's where all of her connection with us came from, because she was a great human being to begin with. This is her introducing us, and we're just in wonder of seeing our teacher,

who we only see in the classroom, unfolding before us as a whole person — bringing us into her life.

Figure 9

Jenni reconstructs her teacher's home with the Sixth Gift.



The student-teacher relationality established in this anecdote is different from Teresa's example, though both inform their teaching perspectives. For Jenni, she resonates with her teacher's ability to be personal with every student formed her understanding of *mutuality* in education: where the 'whole teacher' unfolds alongside the 'whole child.' "*I call her a green light,*" Jenni says. Katherine's first Gift Play, similar to Jenni's, depicts an experience of learning "the way a teacher could respond to a child, and make you feel okay, and valued, and loved" (Katherine Ilson).

"It's not just me. We're a group" (Anneli, Gift Play 1). A third relational dynamic presents in Anneli's first Gift Play (fig. 10), where she describes learning in a group. Anneli arranges the blocks of the Sixth Gift into a circle and narrates an experience from her student-

teacher placement at the Froebel Education Centre in 1991, where Froebel kindergartner Mrs. Hart was her supervising teacher.

I started in January, and when February came, she asked me to lead the opening circle for Father's Day.¹⁷ I said, "Me? I can't do that!" I was shaking at first, a bit nervous, but after a few minutes I started to relax. I felt the fathers and the children and the all the other kindergartners there with me too, they were a part of it, it was not just me. We were a group. We were doing opening circle together, taking turns with things.

Figure 10

Anneli's Opening Circle with the Sixth Gift



Anneli's learning experience adds to a relational understanding of teaching play.

Learning is not won alone. Group activities, where everyone takes turns, ease the anxiety of the

¹⁷ Father's Day was held in February at Froebel, not June, Anneli notes.

individual. Learning is mutual. A supportive social environment allows safety and permission to express oneself, to listen to what others offer, to draw connections, to learn. As an interview method, the role of Gift Play here draws out expressive, embodied detail. The small blocks become the children, the larger blocks the parents and kindergartners beside them. Blocks are combined to make the weather board and calendar. She points to these and sings, “*What is the weather, weather, weather*”—acting out how groups cohered in collective song. Anneli has extra pieces after constructing the opening circle. Holding them, considering them, she remembers details of the memory, and arranges the last pieces inside the circle as Mother Cat, a favourite game often played during opening circle. These details revive shared memories around the table, animating the group learning dynamic.

“The heart, the hand, the mind all at once” — *Interlude*

After the first Gift Play, returning the blocks to their boxes sparks in-the-moment reflections on the corporeal, temporal, and material dimensions of this play. As participants disassemble their stories, they discuss their observations and assemble their cubes. Katherine marvels at how the blocks become instilled with stories as they are played with:

It's that whole feeling of 'the hand, the heart, and the mind all at once.' To have the blocks in your hand, to have just built a world with them, and then putting your special story away... It's a joyful, fulfilling experience to have those three things together.

As Jenni stacks her blocks on the lid, she calls putting the Gifts away “delicious.” It is satisfying when things are in order, she says, “it gives us a bit of framing without the restriction. There’s a restriction, but it’s not a negative one.”

Teresa calls this restriction a *responsibility*. The formal refrain of the whole-divided and returned is a lesson in social reciprocity. Opening the gift, seeing the whole in its parts, and then packing away the gift, returning the parts to the whole, imparts a consideration of others. In her words: “Then it’s ready for someone else to play. It’s not been left in a mess.” Katherine’s evocative phrase beginning this interlude bears repeating. It is a phrase that captures the breadth of these multiple, material-motivated responses in this conversational interlude: Gift Play is holistic, it occupies the hand, the heart, and the mind all at once. Because of this, it often stays there, in tactile memory: “*It has never left my heart*” (Teresa).

Training at Roundtables — Gift Play 2

The second Gift Play brings forward experiences from Froebelian training: *when did you come to understand Gift Play differently?* The four Froebel teachers each recall memories at roundtables doing Gift Plays with Barbara Corbett, the director of the Froebel Education Centre. Collectively, these anecdotes narrate how play-based theory meets practice, and conversely, name ways lived experience finds meaning in theory.

“Can I tell you what I want you to build today?” (Katherine, Gift Play 2). Katherine describes a memory where Dr. Corbett playfully intervened in her group’s gift play when one child refused to build. Her gift play arranges ten children and two teachers around a table.

One morning, one little boy wouldn’t build anything. “I’m not building anything today.”

Okay. The next day, “No, I’m not building today.” On the third day, same story again.

After a few days, I mentioned it to Dr. Corbett at a staff meeting. “Oh, that’s interesting,” she said. Then the next day, I start the gift play and Dr. Corbett shows up at the table. She

starts asking some of them, “Do you have an idea of what you’re going to build today?” And then she leans into the little boy’s ear and says, “Can I tell you what I want you to build today?” She whispered it in his ear, so none of us knew what she’d said. And he builds! And then he tells us what he’s built, it was a fine, normal gift play. Later I asked her what she’d said. She told him, “Nothing. I don’t want you to build today.” And so, he does build!

For Katherine, this example illustrates a teaching environment “where you look at things differently.” Dr. Corbett’s intervention conveys the spirit of playfulness that characterizes play-based pedagogy in practice, “where the environment matters,” as Katherine says.

“This was nothing like anything I’d read” (Teresa, Gift Play 2). Similarly, Teresa’s Gift Play illustrates how the environment matters in teaching; how changing the environment changes behaviour in play. She builds a memory from the early 1970s of a Gift Play with Dr. Corbett that left two big impressions: first, “the way she talked to the children and the things she drew from them” and second, the way Dr. Corbett was using the gifts, actually *doing* gift play, which was unlike Teresa’s training at the Froebel Education Institute in London,¹⁸ where Froebel’s Gifts were kept in the historical archives. “This was nothing like anything I’d read” she says. In the memory Teresa recreates, one child is repeatedly piling up their blocks and knocking them down, as Teresa demonstrates with her own blocks. This meant they were not listening to their peers present. So, Dr. Corbett redirected attention by changing the environment. Teresa acts this out, quietly moving the loose blocks into her arms (fig. 11). Teresa reflects: “it was such a revelation

¹⁸ Teresa trained as a primary teacher from 1961–1964 at the Froebel Educational Institute in Roehampton, England, which was then affiliated with London University and now is incorporated as the Froebel College at Roehampton University.

to me to see the gifts being used like this. But I saw, too, that she wasn't prepared to let one child either spoil it for the others or think he could just mess about." Teresa's memory reflects the value of respecting the Gifts, but not so much that you do not use them with children. The Gifts are meant to be played with; they are not museum objects.

Figure 11

Teresa reconstructs a memorable Gift Play with Sixth Gift



“I know the experience, and there are words for it now” (Jenni, Gift Play 2). Jenni and Anneli describe how Gift Plays during teacher training session were affirming in different ways. At the Froebel Institute, studying Froebel theory gave Jenni vocabulary to what she had “experienced as true in her own life.” She recreates the office room and roundtable of the Froebel Institute, which housed a teacher training program for Froebel kindergartners, directed by Barbara Corbett. It was “a cozy room” where “my thoughts and experience came into a frame, a stacked frame, like an open box. I could go in and explore the learning experience,” Jenni describes: “Time after time, the cacophony of thoughts in my mind would come into order because of something someone said, or a song or response that affirmed what I had experienced

to be true in my own life. It felt like, I know the experience, and there are words for it now.”

Jenni illustrates the process of thoughts coming into order in her three different arrangements of blocks: jumbled, ordered, and within the stacked frame (the roundtable room). Doing Gift Plays in staff training felt special, says Anneli, who recalls fondly, “When we had staff meetings or conferences, we’d always play with the gifts.” Often Dr. Corbett would narrate the connecting story at the end, “including each one of us, and even as an adult I felt so special that she included me, my story,” Anneli says.

Together, these four anecdotes narrate how play-based theory meets practice, and conversely, how lived experience finds language in theory. Theory informs practice, but it is also informed by practical experiences, in-the-moment pedagogical tact, and a playful spirit. These stories also sparked a conversational interlude on the learning environment that played out, singingly, at the round tables. It is discussed as the second Gift Play is returned to their boxes.

“A joyful environment makes learning so possible” — *Interlude*

Jenni: So often there would be a song started from something in the moment. The way Barbara would come along with verses that got repeated, whether it was sung or just said, it was about moving to a pleasant and understanding way to be instructor-guide in a moment. Singing was a big learning moment, it would go to a deeper place because you’d sing or act it out, it wouldn’t just be told.

Katherine: All these things are tied in, because there’s actual joy, physical joy when you sing. The joyful part of you activates. These things are all connected, the way that environment for learning happens, because people learn more when

they're in a joyful, accepting state. The way Barbara set up the environment makes for excellent learning. This experience makes learning so possible.

Teaching Gifts and Discoveries — Gift Play 3

Where the first prompt reflected learning experiences, and the second prompt gathered teacher training experiences, the third prompt arrives at teaching practice. It asks: *when did you experience the teaching applications of Gift Play?* This discussion was furnished by the First Gift in one session, and the Seventh Gift in the other. Here, anecdotes show the role of Gift Play in deep reveals, discussion tools, demonstrative teaching, and drawing out discoveries.

“There’s the reveal” (Jenni, Gift Play 3). Jenni swings the First Gift sphere, and it becomes a symbolic proxy for the *Titanic*. She recalls two moments in which Gift Play facilitated deep reveals of young children’s inner, emotional life and personality. In the first, a quiet child who struggled to express himself verbally used Gift and Occupations play to process traumatic imagery from the film *Titanic*, which he had seen at home. “He got the concept, but he couldn’t process it” Jenny says, “So, it was coming out through his art and occupations.” The second story involves a girl who consistently refused to present her gift plays. Noticing her reluctance and recurring constructions, Jenni playfully guessed aloud what her creation might be, which prompted the child to respond with a firm and surprising correction:

She seemed to be making the same gift play repeatedly. So, one day I was just like, “Is it an octopus? On a floating picnic table? And it’s playing violin?” And she says, “No, it’s a bloody giraffe and it needs a Band-Aid” in a very strong British accent—I had never heard her voice until that moment. But there’s the reveal. Because she corrected me.

Unfolding is the deep reveal of inner life that happens when building with the Gifts or doing art occupations, a child's (pre)occupations play out around the table. Jenni adds, "I think I even got a Band-Aid for her after that. Furthering the play was a lot of what I loved at Froebel."

Furthering the play, for Jenni, means the teacher is unfolding and learning alongside, in-step with the child. Together, these episodes illustrate how Gift Play can act as a medium for inner life to unfold and be drawn out, offering teachers 1) insight into a child's emotional world and development, and 2) a way to further play.

"We play too" (Katherine, Gift Play 3). As Katherine plays with the first gift, she turns it on its head like a stick-figure, and she is reminded of teaching in the school, with grades 3 to 8. As she speaks, I intuitively mirror Katherine's gesture, holding the ball in my hand with the string extended straight down to the table (fig. 12). Katherine describes two memories. The first is a teaching application with the Gifts as discussion tools with school-age groups. In the example of novel studies, Gift Play would guide chapter discussions and facilitate language development. The second memory is leading by example, teaching through nonverbal instruction in the school.

What I'm remembering—and what I'm doing this for [holding the gift upright]—is the way a teacher would lead silent reading time after recess. When students would come back upstairs, whichever teacher was on duty would be standing at the archway, reading. It would be quiet up there. The kids would come up, they'd see you reading, and they would whisper; they would quietly get their books and read. That prompt of you standing there, leading by example and reading, was important.

Katherine's example of leading by example is subtle instruction, body language, that acts as an invitational gesture. I stay for a moment with the idea of *leading and teaching by example*. It reminds me of how the Gifts themselves teach by example. Their lessons are to be revealed through observing and experiencing them. Similarly, observing the teacher reading quietly in the doorway is a subtle instruction, an unspoken invitation for the students to follow suit. I offer this in-the-moment reflection with the group, and they add:

Jenni: It sets the tone.

Katherine: In terms of teaching by example, we play with them! We play too, as the teacher. If it's recess, we often would play with them.

Teresa: And we build something with the gift.

Katherine: And you build with them, yes.

Figure 12

Katherine's teaching memory with the First Gift



Making Mary Poppins Fly (Teresa, Gift Play 3). Teresa's teaching anecdote furthers the theme of the Gifts as discussion tools. She tells the story of how a collaborative Gift Play helped a group of children plan a dramatic performance of *Mary Poppins*, particularly, how to make

Mary Poppins fly. Initially wanting to use wires to make her fly, Teresa encouraged them to do a Gift Play together to sort out another solution:

They were playing and sorting it out and finally, one child said, “Well, if we put a chair here, she can jump off it and fly in! That will be her entrance.” And I thought, how neat it was that they had come to a conclusion that they were really happy with, when they started out thinking she had to fly. And it was so childlike, to try to find an answer that satisfies, that doesn’t have to be the real thing, but they can solve the problem to their satisfaction just fine and be content with it. And they did perform it for the school.

Collectively, these vignettes describe teaching play moments where the Gifts are discussion tools that draw out deep reveals. These experiences also highlight the relationship between the teacher and the teaching tool, which brings up pedagogical tact — determining the right moment to further the play, and how.

Pedagogical Tact – *A Connecting Story*

Particularly in Gift Play 3, recollections of teaching moments in practice prompt a discussion on situational responsiveness, intuitive knowing, sensitivity, and timing. Here, pedagogical tact, or *how* and *when* a teacher acts, is not determined by fixed rules, methods, or routines. Rather, it emerges in reading the moment and responding in kind. Examples of pedagogical tact become a throughline, connecting stories from both group interview sessions. In-the-moment reflections on teaching practice collected here include knowing when and how to intervene in children’s play, knowing how and when to draw connections to curriculum, having a flexible learning plan, and following the child *wisely*, respecting the agency of the child. The

titles of the following paragraphs, key interview phrases, assemble a connecting story¹⁹ on pedagogical tact: *Furthering the play, the larder is stocked. Following the child, but not their every whim, teaching unfolds how child development unfolds. It's indirect education, that's why we call it guidance.*

“Furthering the play.” In play-based pedagogy, the role of teachers is debated. A common notion is that adults should not intervene in a child's play, that adult intervention compromises play's intrinsic value. On the other hand, the example of learning through play the Froebelian way is parallel, partnered, and mutual: teachers and children are collaborators in play. However, this is not a unilateral rule, it is exercised tactfully. The Froebel teachers give insight to how play interventions are approached:

Katherine: Knowing the moment when not to intervene is also important. If they're in the zone and they're playing, building, playing with a doll or imaginary friends, that's not the moment to intervene.

Teresa: Sometimes a word or two can take their play to a whole new level, because sometimes they get stuck.

Jenni: Continuing the play. But you're not in front directing them, you're wondering alongside them.

Furthering the play requires sensitivity and discretion: knowing when not to intervene, and when a material intervention (a word or two from the teacher) can deepen the play. Jenni adds that Gift Play is unique from free play, it is meaningful because it is mutual. She says:

When we, the kindergartner, are a part of the play or part of creating, the children are getting to know the creative within us, as opposed to the teacher. They are connecting

¹⁹ A connecting story is the final step of a Gift Play, where the kindergartner (typically) tells a story that includes all the constructions and contributions around the table.

with your expressive, creative ideas. I think that itself gives a big “yes” to them—everything’s giving them permission.

When the teacher plays and creates alongside the children, children get to connect with the teacher’s creativity expressing itself; the mutuality gives them permission. Collaboration is a key feature in teaching play, but it requires that educators bring diverse subject knowledge to the table.

“The larder is stocked.” Having a “stocked larder” means teachers come prepared with a teaching plan and come prepared for that plan to change. The meaning of “a stocked larder” is different depending on the teaching context, as shown across several moments of dialogue:

Anneli: Sometimes I was able to do maybe 75% of what I had planned, and 25% was what the children came up with. You always had to be prepared for something different. I had all my books at Froebel, and I memorized as many songs as possible. Because changes happen quickly at Froebel!

Jenni: It’s a living curriculum, and if it’s not living in the moment, it falls flat, as opposed to being alive with connections. I think that’s where the professionalism was, too. We always had things ready, but we didn’t need to use them. The larder is stocked.

Anneli and Jenni are former kindergartners who led the younger groups, ages 3–5, primarily. For them, living curriculum means the lesson is alive with connections to the children’s lived experience and interests, and alive with storytelling, songs, social games, and art activities. The balance between both is maintained by “a stocked larder” where the educator is prepared for multiple different unfoldings. Following a living curriculum means that “either it’s alive today, it’s there and you flow with it, or it’s not there and you let it go, and you follow what is” (Jenni).

Teresa emphasizes the point: “This was your plan, not theirs. You’ve got to let ‘your’ plan go, and that’s not always easy!” She illustrates this with a memory. A teacher has an art activity planned based on *Charlotte’s Web*. She brings in the teaching example, a glass jar with a pipe-cleaner spider inside it that she made at home. She hands out the materials, but nobody made a spider. Children encounter materials in ways that cannot easily be planned for, nor should they be contained.

The larder, or teacher’s metaphoric *supply closet*, takes on specific meaning in practice for teachers in the school (grades 3–8) who balance child-led curriculum with educational outcomes as given by provincial curriculum requirements. As Katherine says,

In the school, you must have the actual Ontario curriculum “in your larder” as well. But it’s expanded on. You have it in there even when you’re doing a Gift Play or something else, because you want to find the right moment. When a student brought something up and it was related to curriculum, you would delve into it then, covered. You kept that in mind, and you needed to know it.

Continuing this thought, Teresa adds, “You may have to put it off, but you have still got to know that it’s there. Somewhere you’ve got to cover it, but you find another way.” Teachers have their larder stocked with Ontario curriculum, not to follow it line-by-line, but comprehensively such that they are able to approach it with pedagogical tact: finding the right moment to deepen curriculum connections when opportunities emerge in play. Katherine gives the example of student projects, like *Mary Poppins*: “Imagine all the things that can come up there. ‘Oh, I need to sew something’—so now you’re teaching an occupation. Those moments are huge for child-led, purposeful learning.”

“Following the child, but not their every whim.” I reflect for a moment on what it means to “follow the child”—a potentially misunderstood notion, and one that is familiar to what I know about Froebel. Returning to the example of *Mary Poppins* and the many learning applications of preparing a dramatic play, a distinction is made between purpose and whim.

Katherine: You’re following the child in that way, because it is purposeful learning.

Teresa: You don’t follow every child’s whim.

Jenni: There’s some wisdom involved.

Teresa: A lot of it, yes.

“Teaching unfolds how child development unfolds.” In this way, following the child relates to Froebel’s idea of child development as a mediated unfolding. Kindergartners guide their groups along events as they unfold, the course of learning development follows the emergent *right* path. Teaching unfolds how child development unfolds; both are emergent, in-the-moment. Child-led curriculum is mediated by wise educators who have their larder stocked, they have a sense of the overall educational outcomes, and they balance their expectations with respect to the agency of the child, whose investment in their own learning gives education meaning.

Jenni: If you do push your concept, it’s dry as toast.

Teresa: And you only have the satisfaction of knowing you’ve taught something. What you really need is the satisfaction of knowing the children have learned something.

“It’s indirectly educational. / That’s why we call it guidance.” Discussion with Froebel teachers gives meaning to why teachers are called kindergartners (children’s gardeners). The method of instruction is “guidance” (Teresa) such that it focuses on bridging experience and

vocabulary. Katherine gives examples of how the kindergartner/facilitator bridges experience and vocabulary in Gift Play:

Katherine: We might start with just one aspect of something, maybe the first Gift Play is just a cube. You might say, "This is my cube," and you're feeling the sides, and "isn't this smooth?" and "this part is pointy." We would go through the geometry of it, at the level they're at. In a Gift Play we might say, "I love how you've used the rectangular prisms to build your frame, and you've layered them two-up because you said it was high, so it has height and depth."

Teresa: Yes, the language would go in there to draw their awareness.

Katherine: We wouldn't ask them, "what shape did you use there?"

Teresa: No, no.

Katherine: But we would, exactly, draw their awareness to something.

When Katherine brings up this point, it resonates around the table. The practice of giving language as to draw awareness is a *key* reflection; it opens into multiple related concepts. Jenni calls this "indirect education"—it is not "everybody sits down in rows" to "learn this and remember that and be tested on Friday." It is a different approach to teaching subject knowledge.

Teresa: That's why we call it guidance.

Katherine: For them, it's experiential.

Jenni: It's "I see you," it's relational. That conversational part is really helping them to love learning. It's the 'unfolding.'

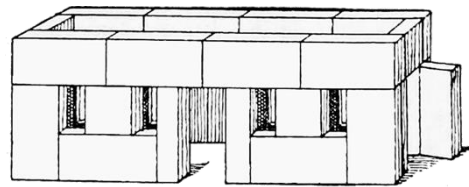
Katherine: It's "how many blocks did you make Dr. Corbett?" "Oh, she's three because..."

Teresa: It's very relaxed, informal conversation. It just becomes the normal conversation to them. And they start to do it too. They start to use the right words; they start to put it into their own vocabulary.

Altogether, this dialogic excerpt contributes a meaningful answer to the research question: *what is the experience of teaching play with the Gifts and Occupations?* It is relational, conversational, unfolding, informal, and embodied— “That’s why we call it guidance” (Teresa).

Conclusion

Opening the Gifts in this chapter explores the many parts of teaching play: the student-teacher relationship, the learning environment, teaching tools, and teaching practice. Stories from four former Froebel educators form a narrative frame for phenomenological inquiry, to observe and reflect on the experience of teaching play made visible by following the routine of Gift Play. The hypothesis I have made, by researching this way, is that the essence of Froebelian pedagogy can only be understood in practice, particularly, in the practice of Gift Play.



“...form becoming feeling”²⁰

The Sixth Gift: A Wooden Cube Divided into Pillars and Bricks

²⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (1943, p. 17)

Chapter 6: Reporting the Essence

What is the essence of teaching play? The previous chapter's gift plays find the following to be true: teaching play involves pedagogical tact, to know when to further play. Educators "follow the child," such that teaching unfolds how development unfolds, through guidance. The environment matters, it carries the spirit of play. In this chapter, I reorganize my total findings through structured themes given by van Manen (2014) to draw out five existential aspects of the phenomenon of gift play teaching. This way, I attend both to the whole and its parts differently, to better understand the essence from new forms of division, paralleling the analytic logic of the differently divided wooden gift cubes. *Corporeality, relationality, spatiality, temporality, and materiality* – already these dimensions have subtly informed the presentation of select anecdotes, excerpts, and observations in the previous chapter. Such is the correspondence between these two chapters. Here, I return to the parts of the whole, and the whole in its parts. I define the essence of teaching through play with the Froebel Gifts. First, I discuss the protocol as followed in my analysis, unpacking the parts I assemble in my report on the essence of teaching, play, and the gifts as lived.

Protocol as Followed

The first phase in my phenomenological reduction was to read the transcripts holistically, selectively, and line-by-line, to generate "sententious phrases" that reduce the lived-experience description into its essential moral. I then generated a list of sententious phrases first divided chronologically by the three gift plays in each session (interview A and B). There are a few interludes which require their own sub-headers: *handling the gifts* (unpacking and putting them away), and *in-the-moment teaching reflections* (pedagogical tact, timing, and guiding principles).

I combine the two interviews this way, collecting all the sententious phrases under the question from which they came as response. Since both interviews included reflective interludes on handing the gifts and teaching practice, those become secondary categories where sententious phrases from both interviews are grouped. This way my interview data was reduced from 78 pages of interview transcripts to 45 pages of excerpts and summaries, then further reduced to an 8-page list of sententious phrases (labeled with the speaker's name in most instances).

The second phase was the “guided existential inquiry” method (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen notes that we all experience reality through five essential aspects “existentials” including: “lived-body (corporeality),” “lived-time (temporality),” “lived-space (spatiality),” “lived-relation (relationality),” and “lived-things (materiality)” (van Manen, 2014, p. 303). This structure of human existence provides “universal themes to explore the meanings of our lifeworld and of the particular phenomena” being studied. Two key heuristics further guided my analysis of my interview data and generate additional sententious phrases. The categories “follow the actors” and “listening to the invitational nature of things” (Adams and Thompson, 2011) became ways of grouping observations made during the interview by me and my participants equally, and observations I made studying the interview documentation.

In order to further reduce these meanings to their essential teachings I returned to my research question, *what is the essence of teaching play with Froebel Gifts*, further naming *what essential meanings does gift play reflect on teaching practice?* I differentiated between essential and incidental findings through the filter of my own proximity (lived experience, lived practice, lived research) and through meanings historically and theoretically pre-established. I identified one vital phrase of each category. Paired with van Manen's existential category, this generated a

declarative statement for each category, as tabulated in “Findings toward Phenomenological Essence of Teaching Play” below (Table 2).

Table 2

Findings toward Phenomenological Essence of Teaching Play

Existentials	Gift Play Sententious Phrases	Answering the Research Question
<i>Lived body</i> <i>(corporeality)</i>	“The hand, the heart, and the mind all at once”	Teaching play is an <i>embodied</i> process
<i>Lived self/other</i> <i>(relationality)</i>	“We play too”	Teaching play is a <i>mutual</i> and relational practice
<i>Lived space</i> <i>(spatiality)</i>	“A whole altogether, sitting together” “A joyful environment makes learning so possible”	Teaching play is attuned to its <i>environment</i>
<i>Lived time</i> <i>(temporality)</i>	“Follow the child, not their every whim” “The larder is stocked”	Teaching play is <i>in-the-moment</i> pedagogy
<i>Lived things</i> <i>(materiality)</i>	“The gifts themselves draw you out”	Teaching play involves <i>material affordances</i> and creative constraints.

Note. Gift Play interview analysis according to Max van Manen’s (2014) five existentials.

Existential Components of Teaching Play

Reflecting on the lived experience of Froebel educators, who have outwardly expressed in their Gift Play constructions and anecdotes what they have learned to be true of teaching through play, comparing these with Max van Manen’s five existential themes (2014, pp. 303–

307), I compiled a reduction of essential findings, below. With them I develop textual descriptions of *teaching play* and *gift play* in the following section, “Reporting the Essence.”

- Teaching and learning through play connect gesture with thought and feeling (lived body)
Corporeality directs to the senses: “how is the phenomenon we study perceived, sensed, and touched by the body?” (van Manen, 2014, p. 304). The stories here say: “The hand, the heart, and the mind all at once.”
- Teaching play is participatory practice that gives permission to creativity (lived self/other) The relational component to experience poses: “How are people or things connected? What meaning of community? What ethics of being together?” (p. 303). The stories here say: “We play too.”
- Roundtable play establishes atmospheres of belonging and possibility (lived space)
Spatiality considers: “How do we shape space, and how does space shape us?” (p. 305). The stories here say: “A joyful environment makes learning so possible.”
- Play pedagogy requires tact and flexibility, balancing structure and improvisation (lived time) Temporality calls upon senses of past, present, and future as felt in the phenomenon (p. 305). The stories here say: “Follow the child,” “the larder is stocked.”
- Teaching play relies on the pedagogy of materials to further learning through play (lived things) Materiality asks: how do we experience the agency and moral force of things? (p. 307). The stories here say: “The gifts themselves draw you out.”

Reporting the Essence

‘Essence’ is not named directly in the collected examples from teachers experiences in this study, but the *spirit* of Froebelian play (long in question) is animated and developed through their stories and in my research as a related theme. The definition of ‘essence’ as “inner structure,” discussed in Chapter 3, can be found in teacher’s descriptions of play’s revelatory nature. One participant describes the “deep reveals” of a child’s personality that unfolds in their gift play and occupations work; others give example to the ways “the gifts themselves draw you out” because of their own integral logic.

In *Pedagogics*, Froebel wrote: “the spirit in which the play is conceived, in which the play is played, gives play its significance” (1895, p. 34). What, then, gives *play* its spirit? I have pursued this question concretely to identity its felt attributes and expressions in teaching practice. This part of my Froebelian-phenomenological study evokes the hermeneutic orientation toward meaning-making. In my study I have addressed the essence of *teaching play* by first asking, what is the experience of *gift* play? Finally, what meaning might its essence reflect on practices in pedagogy and experiences in one’s lifeworld?

Teaching Play

Teaching is guidance. It follows that learning is not given, it is self-actualized; motivated by instinct and guided by the instincts of others, who, with “just a word or two,” can bring clarity to insight through contrast, creativity through constraint, or supply material means with which to express oneself more entirely. This instinct is pedagogical tact, developed by experience, particular to teaching, and governing the in-the-moment decisions; temporally – “knowing when

not to intervene”– and equally, materially – what experiences or things can be brought in to supply the means for discovery (what words, what tools, what *gifts*).

Tact imparts the professionalism of teaching play. It informs the practice of teaching such that “the larder is stocked,” meaning, the teacher is materially prepared with a lesson plan but emotionally and intellectually readied for things to not go to plan. The course of education is directed by the child, as learning is their return: “a teacher’s satisfaction does not come from knowing they have taught something, but from knowing the children have learned something.” Equally, learning is “gardened” by the teacher as a guide, an experienced playmate.

Froebel teachers are informed by child development but not limited to it. They speak to the whole person within the child, not a limited, partial self, but a full being holding within them “the future of this person.” They follow the child’s interests with a curious, unfixed, wonderment. Thus, teaching and learning unfold *together*; are mutually responsive play partners.

To teach through play is to step into mutual participation. This participation is permissive; it grants freedom, not as the absence of rules or formal structure, but as the presence of rules equally respected among teacher and child, thoughtfully communicated, and routine.

Teachers give orderly form to structures that become known to the child and are thus workable; they are able to push up against them, test the boundaries of their own force against the forces they encounter, in the struggle of developing oneself in contrast and connection to the given world and its inherent structures.

The teacher, as gardener, observes with care what each child uniquely expresses from within themselves and nurtures this; she *draws them out*. Froebel teachers honour the well-being of the whole child *and* the whole group. This requires relational awareness and pedagogical tact. The teacher must know her students like a gardener knows their plants, knowing when to water,

when to wait, when to gently prune so as to redirect lively energy towards self-betterment. The teacher-gardener acknowledges the environment of teaching play as an active contributor to learning; plants need more than just water to grow. They attend not just to what is taught, but how presence, tact, permission, and tone shape the learning moment.

Teaching play is embodied. It lives in gesture, in voice, in timing. It lives in touch and tone. Lessons become part of the body; they are remembered in “the hand, the heart, and the mind all at once.” Teaching play is a practice of presence.

Gift Play

Gift play is guided play. Its guidelines are generative, like a stacked frame, says one teacher, where all the diversity of experience is given order: “it’s a peaceful feeling.” Certain laws allow freedom, rather than restrict it. The essence of gift play is maintained by ethic.

Gift play contains a strong ethical force. Its routine – opening the gift, seeing the whole cube in its parts, using every piece, packing away the gift to return the parts to the whole – imparts a sense of responsibility. Responsibility is implied by a gift; something *given* must be returned, reciprocated. The routine teaches a consideration of others, Froebel teachers here say. Gift play teaches mutual respect, of belonging to and beholden by a larger learning community, a *whole* school.

The gifts are given agency with respect to their particular material form and essential contribution to the learning process: “The gifts draw you out, *because* you have to use every piece.” Each object of learning contains mathematical lessons drawn from scientific study of natural forms, these complexities are indirectly made known to children while they curiously play. They compel discovery, they further play.

Each set of objects are gifts kept in their own boxes; each is a unified form and multitude. All of the pieces must be brought in to play. “*Look at that block, all alone. What can that piece be?*” one kindergartner acts out. This essential ethic of gift play comes from “a spirit of honour” say the kindergartners, honouring and caring for the gifts, and in turn, to take care of each other, and all things given by the natural world (all the pieces, every each one included). The routine of gift play is a ritual of reciprocity, of closure with intention, with *attention* to intention, and inclusivity.

Gift play is meaningfully inclusive. Each child is given a chance to build and then an audience to describe it to. At the end, the connecting story brings details of each child’s building into one collective narrative that most frequently beings, “*Once upon a time...*”. One kindergartner reflects, it feels “so special” to have your experience reflected back to you. Others express the ethic of seeing, and being seen, as meaningful “true connection” that brings the emotional and spiritual sides of learning into holistic practice.

Gift play structures thought concretely. It provides in its form a concrete narrative structure, “you have a beginning, middle, and end with these” one teacher says. The visual representation allows inner thoughts to become external expressions. They give language to the senses, and sense to tactile material, to motor skill, tacit knowledge. The blocks become instilled with our stories, one teacher remarks, while placing her characters back into their cube.

Gift play builds *corporeal knowledge*. It is felt understanding. Sense impressions guide meaningful discovery. You learn by building, by comparing weight and texture and density, by touching. “Gift play, beyond theory, builds a kinesthetic knowledge through the experience” (Teresa). Its logic is in the hand, and through the hand, it travels to thought. Experiences of gift play stay in the heart (Teresa).

Conclusions

Returning the essential knowledge of these phenomena to their counterpoints in history and theory, I offer the following research conclusions:

Froebel Lost in Translation

What remains to be newly given to the spirit of Froebel, as a historical figure in education reform? I argue that new translations are needed in theory and practice to revisit the contemporaneity of his more obscure teachings. Cited at various points in *Chapter 3* of this thesis, Helge Wasmuth (2022) is an American Froebel scholar and co-author of recent biography, *Finding Froebel* (2024), has produced new and revealing English translations of Froebel's original writings that reference the German text concretely and critically. Wasmuth's essays and translations allow a greater depth of insight and connection-making, particularly in shared language and etymology between Froebel's most significant ideas and concepts in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology.

The most significant Froebel word lost in translation is '*Bildung*' which Wasmuth writes has been invariably flattened to "development" or "edification" in English editions of Froebel's most widely read works. Yet *Bildung*, in Froebel's philosophical framework, means something more profound: an emergent (*unfolding*), holistic process of self-formation that transcends linear developmental stages. Wasmuth (2022, p. 5) excerpts a letter Froebel wrote in 1842, translating it and reflecting: "Play must be a young child's principal activity because play nurtures all the child's aptitudes and strengths; it is crucial '*for the first care/nurturing, education, and edification (Bildung) of the child*'" (emphasis added). Thus, we might find the 'spirit' of play in the lost language of *Bildung*, and in the point of comparison and process followed in my

phenomenological approach. Max van Manen writes on hermeneutic phenomenology as itself a kind of *Bildung*, which he defined: “the curriculum of being and becoming” (2016, p. 7): education in the present tense.

Form Becoming Feeling

The formative role of the gifts in the process of being and becoming is captured well in personal anecdotes, where the teachings of gifts are described as becoming embodied in the heart, the hand, the mind all at once. American Architect Frank Lloyd Wright famously recalled instrumental teachings of the gifts in his *Autobiography* (1943, p. 17):

At the Centennial in Philadelphia... mother made a discovery. She was eager about it now... The Kindergarten!... She had seen the ‘Gifts’ in the Exposition Building. The strips of coloured paper, glazed and ‘matt’, remarkably soft brilliant colours. Now came the geometric by-play of those charming checkered colour combinations! The structural figures to be made with peas and small straight sticks: slender constructions, the joinings accented by the little green-pea globes. The smooth shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterwards leaves the fingers: *form becoming feeling*... A small interior world of colour and form now came within grasp of small fingers. Colour and pattern, in the flat, in the round. Shapes that lay hidden behind the appearances all about. Here was something for invention to seize, and use to create.

In this anecdote, as in the present study, the gifts meaningfully contribute to learning: they reveal “hidden” shapes and structures; they give *feeling* to form. In this view, materials are not neutral tools but memorable teachers with their own logic and vitality.

The ideas here and in my research resonate with a growing body of scholarship in early childhood education that seeks to challenge binary logic separating “active” learners from “passive backgrounds,” most notably for me in Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi’s scholarship of “New Materialism and Play” (2011). The reprisal of materiality is unfolding across educational disciplines. In “New Materialism in Art Education” (2017), authors Emily Hood and Amelia Kraehe suggest most educational frameworks “overlook the thingness of things... [and] the energetic contributions that material objects make in the creation of art” (p. 33). The essence and ethic of teaching play with Froebel Gifts resist this tendency. The examples given in this study, the ways playthings perform and embody knowledge alongside children and teachers, should fortify this ongoing advocacy for the importance of thoughtful play materials and creative curriculum supplies in educational settings. Particularly, this report on essence reflects principles and internal logic that matter most to learning through play, and why.

The Froebelian Spirit, the Spirit of Play

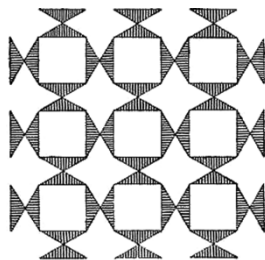
What then can be said of the “spirit” of Froebel as revealed through this study? Natalie Crawford, former Froebel staff, and my mother, is quoted in Jennifer Wolfe’s early childhood education textbook *Learning from the Past* (2002, p. 127) to have said: “To be a true Froebelian one must follow ‘the spirit’ of his work. It is not to be committed to the form of the work. Form itself is an empty shell. Many, since his time, have made the mistake of following the form and neglecting the spirit of his work.” This idea is present in Chapter two, where I discussed the origins of Kindergarten and its translations into the Canadian school system context in Ontario. The spirit of Froebelian play was expressed in competing terms. It was both reformist and traditionalist, caught between “the hand and the eye” emphasis of the 20th century technological

revolution, and orthodox faith of Froebelian disciples,²¹ who claimed that ultimately “the letter, and not the spirit” was adapted by Modern kindergartens (Read, 2006; Brehony, 2000). In Chapter three, I sought to define research terms theoretically which emphasized the abstract ephemerality of “the spirit of play” Froebel and his followers moralized. I thus took up a phenomenological inquiry to situate, through Gift Play interviews in Chapter five, how the “spirit” of Froebel’s work expresses itself in lived experience, lived *contemporary* practice. My conclusions on the spirit of Froebel’s material teachings are reflected in this chapter. The spirit of Froebelian play is in form and feeling, playful and committed, both materialist and reformist, both individual and collective. It is carried by an ethic of *interconnectivity* between self, other, and the mutually dependent natural, knowable world.

Conclusion

The spirit of Froebel’s pedagogy cannot be captured through form alone. Just as the gifts “are not museum pieces; they are to be played with,” so too the Froebelian spirit is known only through play. This study traced that spirit historically and phenomenologically. Through guided gift play, teachers model attentive curiosity, supplying children with a means of expressing themselves in response to the developing force of materials. Attending to the gifts as co-educators repositions materiality as pedagogically vital. In returning to Froebel’s original texts and their living enactments today, I find that the essence of teaching play is not a fixed truth but an ongoing inquiry, carried forward only in practice, and mutually developing.

²¹ Ada Marean Hughes and Barbara Corbett were heirs of this tradition.



New Formal Symmetry

The Seventh Gift: Parquetry Tablets

Chapter 7: Pedagogical Significance

Historical Record and Recent Continuations

This study contributes to the historical record of Froebelian education in Canada. As documented in previous chapters, the Froebel Education Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, between 1970 and 2016 represented a unique enactment of the Kindergarten model, extending its methods through grades 3 to 8. The material practices and teacher experiences assembled and reflected on through this study preserve a rarely recorded lineage. This research in particular highlights the materiality of Froebel's gifts, and how they "draw out" and develop learning through play. This is significant to contemporary understandings of Froebel kindergarten methods in practice, placing essential importance on material methods worthy of continued use and exploration.

Gift Play as a Research Methodology

This study develops and applies Gift Play as a novel qualitative research interview method that is participatory, semi-structured, material-sensitive, and phenomenological. Informed by Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology (2016) and object-interview heuristics devised by Catherine Adams and Terri Lynn Thompson (2011, 2016),²² this method invited former teachers to handle and reflect on Froebel's Gifts as teaching tools and co-participants. Participants re-constructed teaching memories while building representations with the Froebel blocks themselves, prompting both narratively rich, concrete anecdotes and in-the-

²² In an endnote, Adams and Thompson (2011) write, "we believe it is reasonable to apply our heuristics to a full range of teaching and learning technologies and artifacts, from *Froebel's gifts* to interactive whiteboards" (p. 747, emphasis added). This research serendipitously sees that through.

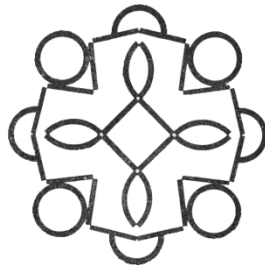
moment, tactile insights. This interview method is adaptable and uniquely well-suited to future studies in phenomenology.

Froebelian New Materialist Phenomenology

This study is in conversation with an emerging discourse of contemporary Froebelian scholarship that offers new translations and frameworks for which to read and revisit Froebel's contributions to educational philosophy. I have explored Froebelian theory and practice through a phenomenological lens, guided by Max van Manen (2016, 2015) and other recent extensions of his hermeneutic method. I briefly outlined connections between Froebelian play materials and new materialist play, which are primed by my study to become more wholesomely explored.

Summary

The gifts, often viewed as historical relics, are shown here as living pedagogical forms: expressive, symbolic, and agentive. Teaching play, as described through this study, is not a delivery mechanism for information, but a way of *being* and *becoming* in relationship with ideas, with children, with materials, and with oneself. The pedagogical significance of this research is thus historical and conceptual: I have asked old tools new questions.



Curves and Through-Lines

The Eight Gift: Metal Rings and Rods

Chapter 8: Personal Significance

Here in the final chapter of this study, I return to my lifeworld. As an artist, teacher, and researcher, I have found personal significance in this research.

Gifts to Research and Art Practice

I have found myself, in many moments of this research, using gift play to structure my own ideas, to divide my thesis chapters into subsections (assigning each of the Third or Fourth gifts' blocks an idea) or to reconnect with the pleasant tactility and push-and-pull of their material constraints, particularly when my writing felt at times too abstract. In my research journal (February 2024) I wrote, *Play is the intermediary of theory and practice. It's where ideas are tested, played out, acted.* This lesson returns through art practice to research an essential lesson in trusting the process, not skipping too soon to theory, but letting ideas play out themselves. This is the essential method of hermeneutic phenomenology, too, which makes meaning from concrete experiences, rather than from memorizing theory as read. Ideas must translate to practice to find true, meaningful form.

Gifts to Teaching Practice

Concurrent to this research, and subtlety informing and informed by it, I have brought sets of gifts into classrooms, workshops, and informal social settings to witness how their logic plays out across contexts. In my work as an art educator, children's tutor, and university instructor at Concordia University's Department of Fine Arts, I attentively observed how both children and adults interact with the blocks in their boxes, how curious they become about balance, gravitational force, symmetry; how quietly expressive they become in their

constructing. In the process of this research, I have developed greater trust in objects and materials to animate the experience of learning, and I have discovered how eagerly children and adults develop themselves in relation to new tools, generative framing, and reasonable “rules” that require creativity.

Gift Play Connecting Story

“The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life” Froebel asserts quite famously (1887, p. 55). Alongside my former Froebel teacher-participants, I played out memories of learning, training, and teaching following my Gift Play interview prompts. My first gift play brought out a parallel in my current work and the “germinal leaves” of my childhood inquiries (fig. 13). I narrated my construction with the Sixth Gift during a Gift Play interview:

Figure 13

My Froebel Playground with the Sixth Gift



Elora: This is the Froebel playground. This is the structure, the swing set, and the little playhouse on the sandbox. Here I am in the school on the second floor, I’m twelve or so, and I’m doing a writing assignment here at my desk. It’s a news report I decided to write about the playground, newly re-built. I remember asking Froebel staff about the

playground, why it mattered, and so on, and I discovered that to describe the playground I really had to first describe what Froebel was about, and Froebel's philosophy of learning through play. So, my hook went, "Froebel's theory is to learn through play, and with this new playground, children can do just that." This was the moment I started to understand the philosophy behind all the practice, and to give language to my experiences at the school. I started thinking about how it was different, how it was important, and how it was beneficial to me and others around me... It occurs to me now, that this short childhood report was my thesis research in miniature. Somehow those words just remained in me.

Gifts and Reciprocity

Throughout the writing process of this thesis, I often wondered about all the stories I could not tell, and how to honour these. What does it mean to be responsible for life stories 'gifted' in research? In my discussions with Froebel teachers, I was reminded that an ethic of responsibility underlies the routine of Gift play. It begins and ends with the gift as a whole. Receiving it whole, and returning it as found, imparts a sense of shared responsibility. A gift implies something received, and something given, and something created in surplus of the exchange. American critic Lewis Hyde (2007) writes that an 'essential part of an artist's work cannot be made, it must be received' (p. 146). The invoked part of one's work includes the experiences encountered in one's life, with which, as Hyde writes, "imagination has the power to assemble... into coherent, lively wholes: it has a gift" (p. 153). This comes with an obligation to carry the creative spirit forward, for its increase.

Closing the Gifts is a “to be continued”

Katherine: Normally at the end of a connecting story, we might say "the end," but this story doesn't get a "the end." This story is still going. This story is to be continued.

Elora: It's also nice to think about how even closing the gift is a 'to be continued.' It's a closure and a beginning.

Katherine: For the next person.

Elora: Yes, it's ready for the next person.

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Appendix A: Research Ethics Certificate



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Elora Crawford

Department: Faculty of Fine Arts\Art Education

Agency: N/A

Title of Project: 'Artist-Kindergartners': Teaching and Learning
through Gift Play

Certification Number: 30018401

Valid From: May 16, 2025 To: May 15, 2026

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Gift Play Interview Guide

SUGGESTED RESEARCH Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the essence of Froebelian learning through Gift Play. This study will guide understanding of Froebel's methods as taken up by educators at the Froebel Education Centre (1970-2016). Together, in our conversation and gift play, we will generate definitions for terms like play-based, child-centred, and holistic.

- What is your relationship to Froebel education?
- In your experience, what is the role of Gift Play in Froebelian learning?
- How would you describe the essential structure or routine of a gift play?
- How do you imagine the role of the Kindergartener (teacher) in gift play?
- What is the role of the learner in gift play?
- What is the role of the gifts themselves in gift play?
- Froebel theorized three forms of knowledge as outcomes gift play: forms of life, forms of knowledge, and forms of beauty. What do you associate with these terms and how do you define them?

GIFT PLAY 1: Early Life Learning History

- Select a Froebel gift (5, 6 or 7) and build a construction to describe a moment in your learning history. What early memories of learning shaped your path to teaching?

GIFT PLAY 2: Teacher Training

- Select a Froebel gift (5, 6, or 7) and build a construction to describe a moment in your teacher training. When did you come to understand the gift play differently?

GIFT PLAY 3: Teacher Experience

- Select a Froebel gift (5, 6 or 7) and build a construction to describe a moment in your teacher experience. When did you see the applications of gift play activated?

CONNECTING STORY:

- What do you see as the throughlines in these three gift plays?
- How might we weave a story that synthesizes the knowledge outcomes of these three plays?
- How might we use an occupation to extend our learning?

Appendix C: Synoptical Table of the Gifts

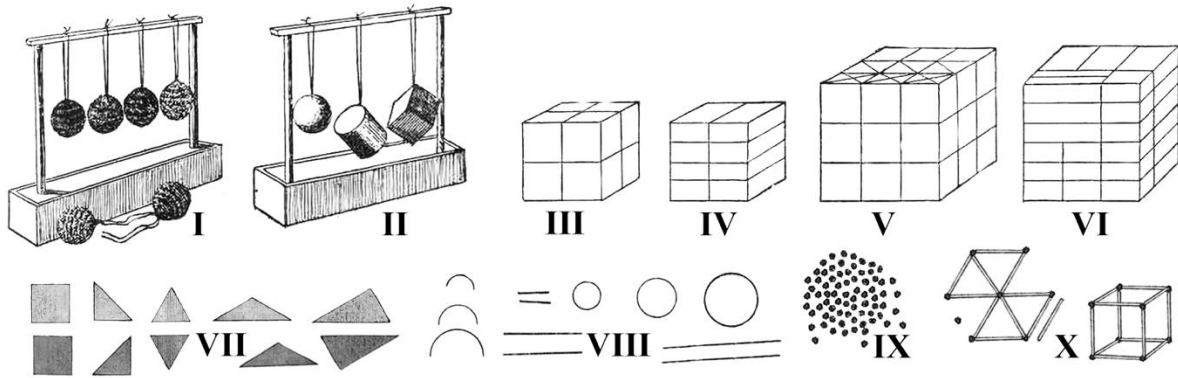


Table 3

Froebel's Ten Gifts

SOLIDS	I.	Six woolen balls of red, yellow, blue, green, orange, and purple.
	II.	A wooden sphere, a cube, and a cylinder.
	III.	A wooden cube which divides into eight smaller cubes.
	IV.	A wooden cube which divides into eight rectangular prisms.
	V.	A wooden cube which divides into twenty-one whole cubes, three cut in quarters, and three divided into halves.
	VI.	A wooden cube made up of eighteen rectangular prisms and six that are halved into square prisms or smaller rectangular prisms.
SURFACES	VII.	Tablets, both large and small, of various geometrical shapes.
LINE	VIII.	Metal Sticks and Rings.
POINTS	IX.	Small beads.
LINE and POINT	X.	Sticks and plasticine balls.

Note. Each Gift is kept in its own box or container. Table adapted from *The Froebel Gifts: A Manual for Kindergartners and Teachers* (Corbett, 1980b, p. iii).