

## Letters to the Editor

To the editor:

While I appreciate the efforts of Caroline Winterer in researching “Avoiding a ‘Hothouse System of Education’: Nineteenth-Century Education from the Infant Schools to the Kindergartens” (Fall 1992), I must protest some misinterpretations that came from her secondary or tertiary sources, particularly as they relate to the Froebelian kindergarten. Since my own paper (ERIC ED 264980 PS 015596—“Compensatory Early Childhood Education: Froebelian Origins and Outcomes”) was cited as a reference, it seems appropriate to point out that I viewed assimilation of immigrant children as just one of many reasons for kindergarten popularity at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the cited ERIC paper and several others under my name, I refer to two distinct interpretations of the Froebelian kindergarten. One was authentic, developed by German-speaking immigrants such as William Hailmann, Emma Marwedel, Maria Krause-Bolte and John Krause. This explains why kindergartens were more successful in Michigan, under Germans, than in Boston (p. 304). The other was that of Elizabeth Peabody, who “just didn’t get it” when confronted with Froebel’s humanistic philosophy. Winterer’s article, based upon the Peabody version, presents the Froebelian kindergarten as “a rigid pedagogical system” in which such profound truths as “human perfectibility” were discovered through the symbolism of circle games (p. 300). This is not an accurate portrayal.

For example, illustrations on pages 302 and 303 show the American commercialized version of kindergarten activities as initiated by Milton Bradley and picked up by Prang, Ernst Steiger and other manufacturers of school supplies. The balls in Plate I are Froebel’s First Gift, recommended for small babies. By the 1890s, they were often used by a circle of forty children going through a routine dictated by their teacher. These exercises were first published in Bradley’s 1869 manual, instigated by Elizabeth Peabody and apparently plagiarized from the work of a German gymnastics teacher named Goldammer. St. Louis kindergartner Susan Blow wrote from Europe in 1879 to warn that he was “a humbug and an ignoramus,” but by then Bradley’s popularity was assured (ERIC ED 330431 PS 01476—“Early Childhood Education Commercial Exhibit Controversies, 1890–1990”).

Traditionally trained Froebelian teachers mastered these Gifts and Occupations so that they could spontaneously interact when children used the same materials in an individualized and creative manner. Their notebooks and artifacts have led Weber and others to the erroneous conclusion that they then expected children to follow similar models or patterns. However, as kindergartens moved into the public schools,

teacher preparation included only a superficial acquaintance with Froebel. Those who were assigned to teach kindergarten did depend upon didactic use of these mass manufactured materials and their accompanying manuals, but this was not the authentic kindergarten (ED 299031 PS 01749—"Kindergarten Teacher Training in the United States from 1870 to 1920").

To give but one example of how misunderstandings have come about, the Snail Game was developed by Froebel as a transition technique to calm children down after vigorous outdoor play. They joined hands and coiled the line around the teacher, then uncoiled and went indoors. It was in the Jarvis translation of *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* that the mystical symbolism of a circle was added. Archival collections and museums in the former East Germany show clearly that up to his death in 1852 Froebel was still experimenting with innovations like the sandbox, the zither, and the playthings that later became known as the Gifts and Occupations. His underlying belief in joyous self-learning and self-realization, with teachers becoming facilitators instead of disciplinarians, was announced in 1863 and never wavered. It is a philosophy that seems to elude most contemporary educators and historians.

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To the editor:

I would like to thank Dorothy W. Hewes for her comments on a portion of my article, "Avoiding a 'Hothouse System of Education': Nineteenth-Century Early Childhood Education from the Infant Schools to the Kindergartens" (Fall 1992). She reminds us that Froebel's system was often distorted as it entered the American mainstream, and that Elizabeth Peabody, usually portrayed as the patron saint of the American kindergarten, was in some ways responsible for this distortion. Most educators and physicians, as I demonstrated in the article, adopted the Peabodian version of Froebel, and upon it based their endorsements of the kindergarten's salutary effects on mind, body, and spirit. Nevertheless, it is worth making the distinction between the pure and diluted Froebelianisms that competed for a place in America's kindergartens.

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Editorial note: Letters are printed verbatim.