

The Spectacle of Education: Kindergarten at the 1876 Centennial Exposition

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While it was one of multiple kindergarten exhibits at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, the Kindergarten Cottage offered something unique: a live performance. From the exterior it was just an ordinary building on the fairground. The cottage was described as containing a “well-ventilated, well-lighted and pleasant room” where the teaching took place.¹ The building itself was thirty-five by eighteen feet in size, and was built of pinewood.² It was funded by the Rhode Island committee of the Women’s Building, at the sum of \$1,500.³ Inside this funded exhibit existed a real kindergarten classroom, with orphan children as the students. In full view of the U-shaped desk where the children went about their daily rituals, were booths allowing a voyeuristic experience for paying patrons of the fair (Fig. 7.1). For entertainment and education, a patron could watch a live representation of Friedrich Fröbel’s kindergarten, in a fully interactive experience. Not only that, but the children were also actively learning in front of the spectators’ eyes. Compared to stationary exhibits of kindergarten, the Kindergarten Cottage brought a form of reality to the fair, and allowed the spectators to feel like they were experiencing something that was not manufactured or orchestrated, but indeed something that was real. This was however, a performance at its heart. In a worldwide event that placed precedence on the captivating intrigue of newness, the style of teaching created by Friedrich Fröbel represented both a performance of a new “invention” and an attempt at bettering society through education. Because kindergarten was still a relatively new invention in the United States, this event presented a chance to market kindergarten to the entire country. Far from just a kindergarten classroom with seats for spectators, the Kindergarten Cottage was a conscious attempt at advertisement. The children themselves seemed oblivious to this fact, as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody noticed in her visit to the cottage. She remarked that while the alcove for visitors was crowded, the children were “unconscious of everything except their pretty work, their merry play, their happiness in each other, and their joy in Aunty’s approving smile.”⁴ This performance for marketing purposes was unbeknownst to the children who simply acted as if this was any other school

¹ Frank Leslie, *Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition* (Philadelphia, Pa, 1876), 158

² McCabe, James D., and O. S. Fowler. *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1876), 644

³ Leslie, *Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition*, 158

⁴ E.P. Peabody, *Kindergarten Messenger* (Cambridge, Mass), 7

day. And so it was, that on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday between 10:00 am and 12:30 pm, a visitor to the fair could sit in on a kindergarten class, and bask in the spectacle of it all.

Kindergarten stemmed from German educator Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852). His ideology was based in nature. In *The Education of Man*, he wrote about how we should view children's development from the perspective of a plant. On the subject of early teaching (and annihilation of bad traits) he writes that trimming a grapevine, though done with the best intentions, "may wholly destroy the vine, or at least impair its fertility and productiveness."⁵ The act of teaching can be done in a productive way, but also a destructive way. Fröbel stressed the importance of letting nature teach children, and not to interfere. He wrote, "young animals and plants are given rest, and arbitrary interference with their growth is avoided, because it is known that the opposite practice would disturb their pure unfolding and sound development."⁶ Children, in Fröbel's view, are treated as "a piece of wax, a lump of clay, which man can mold into what he pleases."⁷ To learn naturally, was to be allowed the ability to explore under the watchful eye of a teacher. But, the key point was that "Fröbel's system is not to be taught mechanically" and that a teacher must "come to the work with a heart of love, and a mind with all its creative power in full activity."⁸ This ideology became a literal invention: a form of learning that was based in the natural world, and stressed free learning and discovering over mechanized insistent teaching.

One of the main aspects of Fröbel's kindergarten was a collection of "gifts". They were a succession of objects (given in a specific order) that sought to "teach the relationship of the whole to the parts."⁹ These gifts included "colored, woolen balls; divided wooden cubes or blocks; sticks; parquetry; rings; and jointed slats."¹⁰ One of these gifts was a cube divided into eight smaller cubes. In other words, building blocks. The child may "place them upon each other, or side by side; count them, or arrange them in a thousand different ways, to suit his inclination."¹¹ While Fröbel's kindergarten was based in nature, it did unconsciously feature mechanized functions like a clear order to the gifts, and definitive outcomes for

⁵ Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man* (New York: A. Lovell & Co., 1885), 9

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8

⁸ *Christian Examiner* (Vol. 67), *Kindergarten in Germany*, 325

⁹ Roberta Wollons, *Kindergarten and Cultures* (Yale University, 2000), 9

¹⁰ Karyn Wellhousen and Judith E. Kieff. *A Constructivist Approach to Block Play in Early Childhood*. (Delmar/ Thomson Learning, 2001), 6

¹¹ *Christian Examiner* (Vol. 67), *Kindergarten in Germany*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Company, 1859), 327

each step along the learning process. The gifts in themselves were produced objects, created by manufacturers. They could be bought and sold, and created profit. This natural form of teaching was still a business.

There was a competitive atmosphere in the children's building blocks industry. Milton Bradley obtained the rights, with the collaboration from Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, to manufacture Frobel's "gifts" in 1869. The Embossing Company was a main competitor in the indoor play equipment industry. They advertised themselves as creating "toys that teach." Starting in 1870 they began manufacturing alphabet blocks, and later in 1907 they distributed Harbutt's Plasticine modeling clay.¹² On September 15, 1914, an advertisement in *The Bookseller, Newsdealer and Stationer* listed their merchandise as including "A, B, C blocks, building blocks, spelling blocks, color cubes, dominoes, checkers, cribbage boards and other specialties for young and old."¹³ The kindergarten model of Fröbel's became a competitive industry.

As the selling of building blocks and "gifts" was industrialized, the invention of "kindergarten" equally needed to advertise and market itself in a modern world. The Kindergarten Cottage was partly meant to introduce kindergarten to a wide audience. Sixteen years previously, the *Christian Examiner*, based in Boston, published what is thought to be the first printed mention of kindergarten in the United States. Though a small amount of kindergartens were functioning in the United States by 1876, it was not exactly popular. Kindergarten had been started by Fröbel in Germany, and had extended to neighboring countries, but had not caught on in the United States as of yet. The Kindergarten Cottage presented a prime opportunity to market this form of education to the United States. Like any other invention at the fair, kindergarten was being sold to the public. The Kindergarten Cottage also had competition on the fairground, in the form of a Miss E. M. Coe's American Kindergarten. She claimed that her system was "an improvement upon Froebel's", and was in reality "an adaptation of his system to American wants."¹⁴ Elizabeth Peabody objected to the American Kindergarten, calling it "misleading and dishonest", and that Coe "repudiates Frobel's materials as well as the graduated processes of work for development, and begins to instruct in reading in a way of her own."¹⁵

¹² Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*. (Harvard University Press, 2001), 140

¹³ *The Bookseller, Newsdealer and Stationer* Vol. 41 (New York), 318

¹⁴ James D. McCabe and O. S. Fowler. *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition*, (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1876), 644

¹⁵ Lascarides, V. Celia and Blythe Hinitz. *History of Early Childhood Education*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 242.

What set the Kindergarten Cottage apart from other kindergarten exhibits was the fact that it included a real live kindergarten class. The small children that performed kindergarten for were from the Northern Home for Friendless Children, an institution that was started in 1853 and resided in a building on 23rd and Brown Streets in northern Philadelphia (where the Eastern State Penitentiary currently stands).¹⁶ An annual report from the 1850s spoke about two of the children (age eleven and six) who were housed in the orphanage. Their uncle committed suicide, their parents were “both lost in the wreck of the San Francisco”, and their aunt was “aged, poor and blind”.¹⁷ Many of those housed in the orphanage had experienced trauma in their early childhoods. A synopsis of medical and surgical reports of the orphanage from 1865 reported that many of the children were taken from “wretched hovels and from crowded tenement-houses, and from unhealthy localities where destitution, neglect, contagious diseases, and, in fact, everything calculated to injure and enfeeble their constitutions” surrounded them”.¹⁸

These unhealthy environments, in addition to their traumatic upbringing, could have had destructive consequences on the children’s developing brains. In a more stress-free environment that includes “positive interactions with caring adults” the result is stimulation in a child’s brain, “causing synapses to grow into neural pathways that strengthen and facilitate the child’s learning potential.”¹⁹ Therefore the invention of kindergarten, a learning space for young minds that includes a knowledgeable adult at the helm, represented a positive environment that would contrast drastically to the orphan’s traumatic environments. It is not a surprise that the students chosen for this presentation of kindergarten at the 1876 Centennial were children that most likely experienced traumatic events in early childhood. The act of teaching these children to be better adults was a strong message to audience members that kindergarten can help create better citizens and a safer world. The Northern Home was said to be “the first public and charitable institution in this city to introduce the kindergarten.”²⁰

There is however doubt to the claim. James Laughery Paul wrote in his account of Pennsylvania Soldiers’ Orphan Schools that it was the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphan Institute, led by Miss Rachel S. Walk in 1874, that was the “first orphanage established in the world in which the kindergarten system has

¹⁶ James Laughery Paul, *Soldiers’ Orphan Schools*, (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, 1877), 170

¹⁷ *First Annual Report* (T.K. and P.G. Collins, Philadelphia, 1854), 9

¹⁸ James W. Bushrod, *Synopsis of Medical and Surgical Reports* (*American Homoeopathic Observer*, March 1, 1865, *American Periodicals*), 308

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25

²⁰ *Christian Advocate*, *Our Philadelphia Letter*. (Philadelphia: *American Periodicals*, Jul 10, 1884), 452

been established.”²¹ Miss Rachel S. Walk was also present at the Pennsylvania Educational Hall at the Centennial Exhibition. She arranged the representation of Kindergarten for the Soldiers’ Orphan Institute. The *Pennsylvania School Journal* reported that “All the furniture and fittings of a kindergarten are exhibited, and seven schools, five located in Philadelphia, one in Pittsburgh, and one in Easton, send contributions of children’s work.”²² The article proudly proclaims, “The kindergarten attracts much attention.”²³ This static presentation of kindergarten differs greatly from the live presentation at the Kindergarten Cottage. It lacks the sense of spectacle and entertainment. It is intriguing that the status of being the *first* to adopt kindergarten as a form of teaching was a fact to boast about. It further demonstrates the “new” quality of kindergarten.

It is true that the spectacle of the Kindergarten Cottage was very much focused on the immediacy of viewing the teaching live in person. However, there was also a key element of looking years into the future at the positive effects kindergarten can have on the children’s lives. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody visited the Kindergarten Cottage at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition and wrote about it in the *Kindergarten Messenger*. Peabody addressed the use of education as a way to slow crime. She wrote that kindergarten instruction is “a means of averting the tendency to crime, by planting *early* the seed of good habits, and thus anticipating the deadly crop of evil sown broadcast among the children of our streets and alleys between three and seven years old.”²⁴ Kindergarten therefore takes on an importance to society itself, as a way of stopping deviance before it begins. It is this interpretation of what kindergarten offers that makes it into not only an invention that betters society but a spectacle for an audience to enjoy. Specifically, it was a method of lessening crime from children in the lower class, by providing early education and a positive learning environment.

When the end of the school day arrived, the finale would begin. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody observed this curious spectacle:

²¹ Paul, *Soldiers’ Orphan Schools*, 174

²²J.P. Wickersham, Ed. *Pennsylvania Educational Display* (Lancaster: The Pennsylvania School Journal Vol. 24, Pearsol & Geist, 1875), 413

²³ *Ibid.*, 413

²⁴ E.P. Peabody, *Kindergarten Messenger* (Cambridge, Mass), 9

Then came the song of ‘Good-by,’ and, turning with a courteous bow, and kissing their hands to the visitors, the tiny brotherhood and sisterhood marched, singing, out to their dressing-room, and the happy morning was over.”²⁵

In the environment of the world’s fair, where spectacle reigned supreme, even the act of teaching children became a performance. The young orphans became, whether they liked it or not, actors putting on a show. The world’s fairs sought not only to entertain, but also to educate. The fairs could make a surface-level mundane event a spectacle. The Kindergarten Cottage existed in an environment where audiences were mentally prepared for such spectacle. They were at a world’s fair, and their predisposition was one of wonder and excitement. Having kindergarten exhibited presented it to a massive, worldwide audience that was ready to be amazed.

Looking to the future, The Kindergarten Cottage was a form of inspiration for the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago. In *The Christian Union* of September 24, 1892, a columnist wrote “The experience of the kindergartner who had charge of a similar enterprise at the Centennial Exposition gives undoubted assurance of the feasibility of this undertaking. The children will be seen at their work and at their play without being conscious that they are observed”²⁶. The Kindergarten Cottage served as a *model* for the kindergarten presentations at the World Exposition held 17 years later.

In the world of the world’s fairs, everything can be spectacular. The normal was placed on display and to great effect. At the world’s fairs, a kindergarten classroom can become a play. A child playing with building blocks can become a form of voyeuristic entertainment. And Fröbel’s original ideology of kindergarten can become a spectacle that entrances audience members from around the globe.

²⁵ Ibid., 8

²⁶ *The Christian Union: A Family Paper* (Vol. 46), Correspondence (September 24, 1892), (New York), 566