

“A pleasant way of teaching the little ones to recognise flowers”: Instructional Nature Plays in early 20th century Britain

Abstract

This article analyses plays written for child performers in the early twentieth century. The plays chosen are classified as “instructional” and aimed at developing pupils’ knowledge of the curriculum. The focus is on understanding why these plays were useful for Froebelian educators in the period. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was a German pedagogue, who is most widely known for establishing the kindergarten movement and for promoting child-centred learning. The use of instructional drama was appealing to many of his followers, as it chimed with their understanding of the need for experiential approaches to education. Nature study was particularly important to Froebel, and therefore this article evaluates instructional plays about the natural world, offering a close examination of five examples. They contain active, holistic and multi-sensory learning experiences which would have appealed to Froebelian teachers. They all use elements of anthropomorphism and some also use fairies to engage children with the subject matter. Such devices could be problematic in texts that were written for the purpose of teaching scientific realities and the representation of a human sensibility trapped in plant or animal form could sometimes result in emotionally distressing situations. However, the medium of drama gave children the power to make their own meaning from the material presented, perhaps through re-interpreting the plot with unscripted actions or through lightening the mood with a touch of humour. This was an advantage which the plays had over other forms of literature. These works merit increased respect as educational tools that supported innovative learning.

Keywords Plays for Child Performers • Drama education • Nature Studies • Froebelian Educators • Instructional Drama

Introduction

Child Life, the journal of the Froebel society, a movement inspired by the German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), published numerous adverts for, reviews of and articles about plays for child performers during its publication history (1891-1939), with a notable increase in numbers in the final decade. One hundred and nineteen published works in total are mentioned, the majority of which are collected volumes of scripts. These range from simple action rhymes suitable for the very young to plays for young adults. These considerable numbers suggest that these works were a significant phenomenon, of importance to the journal's readers, yet little scholarly attention has been paid to them. Maria Nikolajeva (2005) has argued that plays written for children, in any form, are not part of an established canon of children's literature. Historians of education, including drama specialists, have also shown scant interest in these play scripts. The reason may lie in the fact that, as David Hornbrook (1998) argues, drama education since World War II has been dominated by child-led role-play activities rather than dramatic performances

The plays mentioned in *Child Life* cover a range of genres, but a particularly interesting phenomenon is the "instructional drama", a term used here to describe plays written with the intention of educating children about aspects of the curriculum. These are plays which, in the words of early drama education pioneer, Harriet Finlay-Johnson, conceal the "powder" of information within the "jam" of playful activities (1912, p. 42). The range of instructional drama included plays designed to support learning in Phonics (Chambers, 1915), Arithmetic (Belton and Howell, 1932), Cookery (Ross, 1928), German (Buchheim, 1905) and History (Compton and Anderton, 1917). Nature studies, as will be discussed below, was a subject particularly dear to the heart of Froebelians and therefore plays about nature are the particular focus of this article.

The plays will be analysed in relation to the teaching methods of Froebelian teachers during the early twentieth century. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the founder of the kindergarten movement and an advocate of child-centred learning (Liebschner, 1992) and was the inspiration for a very significant group of educators in this period, both in Britain and internationally. They were closely associated with much that was seen as new and progressive in education, namely liberating children from desk-bound, rote learning and introducing active, child-centred methods (Howlett, 2013). At the beginning of the twentieth century, such ideas were seen as somewhat eccentric but by the outbreak of World War II, this approach was widely accepted by both the majority of teachers and by political decision-makers (Selleck, 1972). In a collection of reflective essays published in 1952 to mark the centenary of Froebel's death, contributors built a convincing case that "the debt of all who have any love or understanding of children and their needs to Froebel and his followers is

incalculable” (Woodham-Smith, 1952, p.94) and that his doctrine had worked “like the leaven in a measure of meal” to bring about this change (Slight, 1952, p.123).

Interconnectedness: Nature, story and the Froebelian educator

Writing in 1912, R.D. Chalke claimed that: “The modern Froebelian makes nature-lessons the heart and core of the system” (p.225). Froebel believed that it was important to learn about nature in order to understand “the spirit of God that lives in her and rules over her,” and built practical activities such as nature walks and gardening into his educational approach (Froebel, 1887, p. 162-163). The interest of Froebel’s followers in educating children about nature remained strong throughout the period under discussion here.

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, a historian of nature study in the USA, argues that interest in the subject declined in that country from the second decade of the twentieth century (Gregory Kohlstedt, 2010) but this does not seem to be the case in the UK, despite a rather sudden but seemingly coincidental decrease in nature articles in *Child Life* from 1911. Nature articles were still frequent (rather than dominant) and proclaimed the same principles. Indeed, Freda M. Haworth, head of the Natural History Department at the Froebel Educational Institute, declared in 1936 that interest in teaching about nature was increasing (p.82). The 1937 *Handbook of suggestions for teachers*, the nearest thing in the period to a governmental curriculum directive, had a substantial section on nature study and science and recommended gardening activities.

Another key Froebelian principle is unity or interconnectedness: “All is unity, all rests in unity, all springs from unity, strives for and leads up to unity and returns to unity at last” (Froebel, 1888, p. 71). On a visit to the school of another key education pioneer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel had taken much inspiration but regretted that the different subjects seemed to be kept apart from each other (Froebel, 1888). The early twentieth century Froebelian teacher aimed to forge links, often using nature as a starting point to move to other learning. Chalke (1912, p.221) gave an example of “the best modern Froebelian teaching” which started with an observation of a primrose and used this as a basis for teaching, among other things, Art, Craft and Arithmetic. This approach can be seen in the student work of Doris Densham from 1918-19, which is held in the Froebel Archive for Childhood Studies. Her lesson plans included using Autumn as a “centre point”, leading to drawing and modelling leaves and flowers and beadwork activities inspired by sunflowers and a nasturtium leaf.

Part of this interconnectedness concerned bringing literature into the curriculum in a way that was relevant to other studies. Laura L. Plaisted (whose book is to be found among Doris Densham’s possessions)

argued that it was “difficult to over-estimate the value of the story in the education of the young child” (1910, p.115). Thus learning could flow from story to nature as well as vice versa. For example, Catherine Dodd, author of *Nature Studies and Fairy Tales*, a book for teachers in infant schools (1911) suggested using the Hans Christian Andersen story of *The Ugly Duckling* to inspire work such as studying life in the farmyard. There were many literary texts which could contribute to teaching nature through story. Tess Cosslett (2006) has argued that animal stories were a dominant feature of children’s publishing since the eighteenth century and that many writers showed a “determination to be *both* amusing and instructional” (p.39). In the late nineteenth century, the genre of the “realistic wild animal story” arose, with key early proponents being Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G.D. Roberts (Lutts, 2001, p. 32). Nonetheless, explicitly educational, sometimes specifically school-orientated, materials arose to meet the need. Froebel himself, in his *Mutter und Kose-lieder* (1844) had written rhymes and songs which aimed to teach children about the natural world. The student Doris Densham’s exercise book entitled “Principles of Education 1918” lists “nature plays” (or games) from this volume, detailing which aspect of nature was covered by each example. In the early twentieth century, there was a proliferation of nature books which combined story and fact in many different ways. For example, the *Look-about-you Nature Study Book One* by Thomas W. Hoare (1907) was based on the fictional adventures and discoveries of a family with a keen interest in the natural world around them. Douglas English’s *Book of Nimble Beasts* (1910) included stories of animals, some of whom could talk, in very natural settings and carrying out largely natural activities. The volume was illustrated with photos of real animals.

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt (2010) has suggested that the use of stories for teaching about nature was neither unproblematic nor unchallenged in the early twentieth century, giving the example of a group of distinguished scientists who expressed their concerns about this issue in the pages of the journal *Science* in 1902. Cosslett suggests that authors from the eighteenth century on have wondered “if the writer’s task is seen to be educational, should they not be leading the child reader away from irrational and superstitious belief?” (2006, p. 37). This was a difficult dilemma for those writers that used fantastical elements in their educational nature stories. This included the authors of talking animal stories and also those writers who used magic and fairy characters, which frequently appeared in Victorian scientific books for children, sometimes as metaphors for natural phenomena (for example, as flower fairies) and sometimes as guides (Keene, 2015). Cosslett (2006) details the various ways in which writers grappled particularly with the issue of representing talking animals, offering up rationales and framing devices to help the child reader understand the technique. Nonetheless, the resulting stories could be confusing in terms of their emotional import. If an animal or plant has human

rationality and feelings, then their situations can become either unbearable or absurd for the reader, as modern critics in the field have testified. Maude Hines has described how she finds an 1822 text, *The Blue Flower*, where a flax plant narrates its extreme suffering at the hands of humans “simultaneously comical and disturbing” (2004, p. 23). Margaret Blount (1974) recounts her own reactions to anthropomorphic animal stories as a child reader, describing how aware she was of the contradictions inherent within them and how she felt that their credibility was precarious. She was therefore “not quite under the spell” (p.18). These are issues which need to be considered in an evaluation of educational nature literature.

The contribution of plays for children

One new approach to learning that was developed in the first decades of the twentieth century was the use of drama in schools (Bolton, 1998). Such a physically active, multi-sensory, holistic activity agreed exceedingly well with the Froebelian approach to education. One of the key pioneers in the field was Henry Caldwell Cook, who justified using drama as a teaching method with the comment “the natural means of study in youth is play” (1917, p.1). Finlay-Johnson, referred to above, insisted that her “dramatic method of teaching” was “more in keeping with child nature” than being a “passive bucket” to be filled with information (1912, p. 31). What is crucial to note, however, is that both these early enthusiasts were promoting child-led dramatic activities, not the performance of scripted plays. Indeed, Cook was deeply dismissive of “the playlets” written “by inexperienced schoolmistresses”, and claimed that they had “no spark of literary value nor any dramatic power whatever.” (Cook, 1917, p. 188). The feeling that plays created by the children themselves were preferable to material written by adults was often shared by Froebelian educators, as can be seen from comments from reviewers in *Child Life*, who often made the point that “the little players had best be left to adapt stories for themselves” (Child Life, 1926, p. 28). However, the frequent references to scripted plays is evidence in itself that they had supporters and users, and they found a more general acceptance over time. In 1935, *Child Life* published a Special Drama Number, which included an article by Ella Adkins, with a long list of play recommendations (Adkins, 1935). This decade was very much the heyday of the scripted play, which fell out of favour after the appointment of Peter Slade as subject advisor after World War II (Hornbrook, 1998).

Some educators felt that acting out plays devised by adults brought with it particular issues and needed careful consideration. There was an essential difference between hearing a story and being encouraged to act it, perhaps identifying with an unpleasant character. In 1892, a reviewer in *Child Life* wrote of a book of plays by Mrs Hugh Bell: “To make children *play* at wrongdoing may be in accordance with some of our grown-up ideas

as to the delights of the stage, but is hardly in keeping with the true principles of training children” (*Child Life*, 1892, p.48). Almost half a century later, a reviewer found the collection *Ring up the Curtain* “utterly unsuitable” as “the chief characters are unpleasant and the situations give full rein for anti-social conduct. Either these children will dislike being made into scapegoats or they will delight in the chance of being rough and unkind” (*Child Life*, 1938, p.45). However, such views were challenged by developments in the area of child psychology. Susan Isaacs, a very prominent figure in this movement, praised (free) dramatic play as an arena for children to release “inner tensions” and thus control “real behaviour” (1930, p.102). Taking on undesirable characteristics in a play might therefore be therapeutic rather than dangerous, as indeed the playwright Rosalind Vallance argued in the 1935 Special Drama Issue (Vallance, 1935). In short, the key question for educators was whether children were being unduly manipulated by these texts, performing actions imposed on them by adults in a way that was potentially harmful, or whether the text could be the site for beneficial experiential play where the performers could take control and find the freedom to make their own meaning.

Choice of text and purpose of the analysis

This article offers an analysis of five nature plays for children written in the first half of the twentieth century. The plays are examined within their historical context and in the light of the debates of the time, in order to demonstrate the unique contribution that acting scripted plays could make to a child’s learning about nature in this important period for progressive education. Any tensions and contradictions in the text caused by the meshing of fantasy and reality are considered with regard to how the particular qualities of drama might exacerbate them or alternatively point to possible resolutions.

The texts are considered here in date order but this in no way implies that there was a change over time in the material being written. The plays selected seem to be aimed primarily at children in the infant (approximately three to seven) or junior (seven to eleven) age ranges, although this is not specified. The simplest, *The Naughty Crows* by M. Greenfield (1928), is heavily based in the tradition of Froebel’s kindergarten rhymes and the intended performers may be below five. The most involved and lengthy of the plays is *The Blue Tit’s Nest* (Jelf, 1934) and this script includes pictures of child performers who are of mixed ages, from infants to children who seem to be in their mid-teens. The five plays have been chosen to reflect a range of approaches to instructional drama: the action rhyme, the folk story, the contemporary fairy story, a ballet and a play grounded in the realities of contemporary school life.

Little Ida's Flowers (Margaret Boughton, 1911)

This play is part of a collection of “dramatized nursery rhymes”, written to supplement Froebel’s own kindergarten rhymes. The book was reviewed in *Child Life* in January 1911 by a reviewer who grudgingly acknowledged that the plays might be suitable for “entertainment items” (presumably meaning that they could be used in school performances and shows) but who concentrated on expressing distaste for the general principle of scripted plays: “We leave nothing for imagination if we dramatize for children and it has been well proved that they can do that admirably for themselves” (*Child Life*, 1911, p.254).

At the beginning of the story, the flowers are miserable because they have been dancing all night at a ball. The child Ida tells them that they shall have a nice cosy bed – which she finds for them by forcing her doll Sophy to get up even though she is ill. The flowers duly rest until the next night, when the dancing starts again. The flowers are grateful to Sophy and invite her to the ball. Ida also wants to join in. The flowers are initially a little reluctant, more on account of her height than of her mistreatment of the doll, but Ida convinces them that she deserves to be invited because of her habitual care for her garden.

The justification for categorising this as “instructional drama” lies primarily in the fact that the play starts with an activity where plants are distributed to the children playing the flowers. Boughton advises the teacher to bring in a selection of flowers available in the season (a list of suitable specimens is provided) and to play a game whereby each child identifies his/her flower and comes to collect it from her. According to the playwright, “this is a pleasant way of teaching the little ones to recognise flowers” (p. 13). The play also promotes gardening as a worthwhile activity, as the children should aim to be like “Ida dear/For she tends the flowers/All round the year” (p. 13).

Boughton makes good use of some of the potential strengths of drama as an educational activity. The use of the real flowers as props and the inclusion of ring dancing and song throughout the play demonstrate her understanding of the importance of activity and rich sensory experience in learning. In the introduction to the volume as a whole, she also shows a belief in the child’s ability to make a meaningful contribution to the production: “the aim should not be perfection...*but the expression of the child’s nature,*” (p. vii, italics in the original). She asks that the children should be consulted about the production as frequently as possible and roles rotated to give many children a chance of taking the lead. Although suggestions are made for songs or dances, Boughton encourages the teacher to use “any other little song that they [the children in the class] know about stars” or “any dancing song they know” (p. 14). Opportunities to actually change the tone and meaning of the

drama may be limited, but there is some scope for the child playing Sophy, who can show various degrees of sulkiness about her treatment.

The play uses anthropomorphism in the representation of the flowers as dancing, singing individuals, able to feel cold and tired and to be grateful for kind treatment. Fairies are not explicitly mentioned, but the performers and audience may interpret the flowers as fairy characters. Using these magical motifs is intended to induce a sense of wonder and appreciation of the natural world. Although we can never be certain of how each group of children performing the text may have felt, there is nothing in the play which disrupts and damages this possibility. The gentle, dream-like atmosphere which the play produces is not broken by any jarring note or unpleasant event which disturbs the balance of sympathies.

How the Trees Lost their Leaves (Maude L. Darvell and Grace Tuffley, 1925)

This work is published in a collection of plays that Darvell and Tuffley offer for “use on various occasions” (1925, p. 4), by which they may mean school performances and concerts. The collection was recommended in *Child Life* by Ella Adkins as suitable for “very young children” (Adkins, 1935, p. 189). *How the Trees Lost their Leaves* is an adaptation of a play by Laura Kready which appears in a work about the educational value of fairy tales (Kready, 1916).

The story revolves around a bird with a broken wing who asks the trees for shelter. Most refuse her, but Fir Tree offers her a home and Juniper offers her berries. King Frost rewards the kind trees by preserving them in winter when the others lose their leaves. Kready based her original play on a “pourquois” play (p. 148): a traditional fable that attempts to explore and explain natural phenomena. The play alerts children to the difference between deciduous and evergreen trees and encourages observation. There is also opportunity for discussion about migrating birds. The fact that Kready claimed that the play could be profitably adapted by the use of local (“familiar”) trees and the way that the trees talk could reflect their “characteristics” strongly implies she saw the nature study aspect as a significant element of its value (Kready, 1916, p. 148).

The play offers opportunities for multi-sensory learning. The main change in Darvell and Tuffley’s adaptation is the use of verse rather than prose. The verse is, to put it charitably, undistinguished (“But Oak and Willow and Maple, too/Must lose their leaves..oo-oo-oo”) (p. 51), but is there to increase rhythm and musicality. The play opens with “a cloud of birds upon the breeze” (p. 48), which as Kready suggests in the source material, could be developed into a dance (1916, p. 148). Darvell and Tuffley offer extensive

instructions for the making of the costumes and props, suggesting elements which could be made by the children themselves, thus bringing art and handicrafts into the learning experience.

The play uses the device of anthropomorphism in order to facilitate the plot: birds, trees, the frost and the wind have human capabilities of thought, speech and emotion. This does bring about some complications. In particular, plants offering parts of themselves to animals can be problematic: where does the essence of a plant reside and what is and what is not acceptable usage? If a tree has a human consciousness, then the effects of frost and wind become cruel, as is indicated by the fact that the bird with the broken wing himself expresses pity for them. However, these elements are not too disturbing or disruptive. It is easier to accept the tree offering berries than a part of itself which would cause it damage or death, and kindness rewarded and unkindness punished is familiar enough to be comforting.

The Naughty Crows (M. Greenfield, 1928)

This play appears in the third book of a series of school plays published by Evans Brothers with no named editor. It was recommended in a section of the reviews pages in *Child Life* in 1928, which claimed that it was not easy to find suitable plays to satisfy children's love of acting, but which offered a list of ones that were "really good" (*Child Life*, 1928, p. 140). In fact, this particular collection (discussed in tandem with earlier books in the series) was given rather mixed comments: some of the plays had "poor verse" which children should not waste their time learning, while others were "good in every way" (p.141). It is perhaps worth mentioning in passing that the collection contains some material which is quite shockingly and disturbingly racist to a modern reader but this occasioned no comment from the reviewer. *The Naughty Crows* was not singled out for either praise or censure.

The plot concerns a mother crow and her babies. Mother tells the babies that they should not go near the man with the gun but they are intrigued and want to hear the "thing that goes pop" (p. 14). They ignore their mother and are indeed shot by the man. They "flop down" feebly to the ground, proclaiming "we don't care though we *are* shot" (p. 14). Like *Little Ida's Flowers*, the play is intended as a dramatic action rhyme to be used to supplement those that Froebel himself wrote. It is the fact that *The Naughty Crows* in its form and content so clearly connects with this tradition that justifies its assignation to the genre of instructional drama and implies a desire to teach about nature.

The play draws on drama's strengths of multi-sensory and active learning. It is partly spoken (by Mother as an individual voice and by the babies in chorus) and partly sung. It involves movement which,

occurring during the singing, is closely aligned to interpretative dance. Although the text specifies six babies, it is easily adapted to include many more or, alternatively, it could be played simultaneously by several groups so that all children in a class are active throughout. The play also offers opportunities for children to make a contribution to the performance, either through individual interpretation or in negotiating a group response. Apart from the instruction to flop down when shot, there is little direction about which action to perform.

The educational content here revolves around the nature of the relationship between the farmer and the birds and the play provokes discussion about why the tension between farmers and birds exists. This interpretation is given strength when the work is read in conjunction with *The Birds of Killingworth*, a similar rhyme in Boughton's 1911 collection discussed above. In Boughton's rhyme, the farmers explain that they shoot birds because they steal the fruit and grain, but come to see that the birds protect the grain from more wholesale destruction by slugs and caterpillars. The message about nature in *The Naughty Crows*, however, seems brutal. It feels like a truncated fragment of a Froebelian rhyme with a purpose that has not been fully thought through. If it had been published in another context, one might almost suspect a parody. In *The Birds of Killingworth*, the farmers recognise the interdependence of nature and this is morally improving and helps them to care for the world more effectively. *The Naughty Crows*, on the other hand, sets humans against nature and the man with the gun ultimately dominates without consequence. However, the sympathies of the audience and of the participants lie largely with the crows: these are the focal characters into whose worlds the actors must enter and children are likely to identify strongly with the portrayal of a mother and her babies. However, the flexibility of the dramatic form may provide a mechanism for a release of tension and a way around the stark vision presented here. The ultimate fate of the baby crows is not certain. They flop down but this may not represent death – and they may rise again. Their final cry of “We don't care though we *are* shot” (p. 14) may be played as something amusing or signifying a continuing admirable resistance. This play offers a clear example of a situation where the children's choices could contribute to the meaning of the performance and potentially redeem unpromising material.

The Blue Tit's Nest (E. A. Jelf, 1934)

This play is from a collection, all by Jelf and all using a similar approach to drama, which was reviewed in *Child Life* in April 1935. The reviewer praised the plays as having “highly sophisticated stories for all their whimsical content” and felt that they might be useful for a teacher with a specialist knowledge of art and dancing but would be difficult for other teachers to use (*Child Life*, 1935, p.59). This is because the plays closely resemble

ballets. The text is read by a narrator, who is the only speaker. The other children mime and dramatize the actions. As the reviewer notes, the book is lavishly illustrated with many photographs which demonstrate that these plays had been performed before publication.

The Blue Tit's Nest begins when an Arabian magician mysteriously appears in a garden and sees a blue tit that seems to be fearful. In order to free her from fear, the magician turns her and her friends into fairies so that they can fly off to fairy land on a magic carpet. Two brothers and their sister then enter the garden. It emerges that the boys do not give their pets proper attention so the magician turns them into a dog and a rabbit so that they experience what it is like to put themselves in the animals' places. A bee feels sorry for them and informs the blue tits of the situation. The magician says he only has the power to reverse the transformation if the birds also agree to be returned to their original forms. They take pity on the children and accept the bargain. The boys then demonstrate that they have learned their lesson.

The instructional content in the play is moral rather than strictly factual. The purpose is to educate children to show more care for the animals around them. In this respect, it stands squarely in the tradition of literary talking animal stories from the eighteenth century on (Cosslett, 2006). It offers a particularly literal example of the well-established "rhetorical device of reversing roles, translating animal pain into the equivalent human pain" (Cosslett, 2006, p. 14). The child characters, who are presented as essentially good-hearted but thoughtless, themselves offer a condemnation of egg collecting (this would seem to be the reason that the birds were frightened in the first place) and learn in the course of the play that rabbits should have plenty of room and that puppies should not be tied up on a short lead. Jelf reinforces the message of the play by explaining that he wrote it for the benefit of the RSPCA and encouraging producers to raise money on the charity's behalf.

In an article in *Child Life*, Jelf argued that "children express themselves naturally with their bodies" (Jelf, 1931, p. 14) and he used the ballet form to encourage learning through physical action. Another advantage of this type of drama is the relative autonomy that it gives to the child participants. Although Jelf was detailed in his suggestions for the dancing, he was keen for the actors to take these as a starting point and make their own alterations: "High spirits and abandon add to the beauty of the play" (ibid., p. 17). He was aiming ultimately for the children to enter wholly into the spirit of the play so that they could "forget their audience completely" (ibid., p. 17). Moreover, he believed that the play would function as "an excellent jumping off place for the child's own make-believe" (ibid., p. 17). In *The Blue Tit's Nest*, there are plenty of invitations for children to explore the characters through variations of expression and movement. The fairies, for example, are described

as “whimsical, mischievous, happy” (Jelf, 1934, p. 154), which gives children some flexibility in how they should behave at any given point.

The play uses the familiar devices of anthropomorphism and fairy characters in a way that blurs the edges of the two: the blue tits can speak like humans before being transformed into fairies but find a happier, and perhaps truer, version of themselves in fairy form. This taps into a tradition of presenting (non-human) nature in spiritual terms, suggestive of a pantheistic belief where God is Nature and Nature is God. Indeed, the ancient earth sprite, Puck, makes a fleeting appearance in fairy land. Such a tradition allies closely with Froebel’s own beliefs: in his autobiography, he explained that after he began to work outside in the forest, his previously traditional “church” beliefs “changed to a “religious communion with Nature” (Froebel, 1888, p. 25). This mystical presentation of a Nature which protects us as we should protect her transforms fairly straightforward instructional content (ensure your rabbit hutch is big enough; leave birds’ eggs alone) into something more profound and inspiring: a thought-provoking proto-environmentalist text.

The Vegetable Pie (Kate Lay, 1935)

This play is a part of a series by Kate Lay, the author of several educational texts for Macmillan, which was reviewed in *Child Life* in 1935. When discussing the plays together as a series, the reviewer was broadly positive: “They deal with subjects naturally interesting to young children and, on the whole, they are not badly done.” (*Child Life*, 1935, p. 155). The reviewer reserves special commendation for the innovative feature of including cards with the lines of each character printed in isolation. Lay was a playwright who clearly had the practicalities of school life at the forefront of her mind. She also thought about the context in which the play could be performed: “on a lawn, or in the playground, without scenery”. She felt it would “form a delightful prelude to an exhibition of the school garden” (Lay, 1935, p. vi). This association with gardening is the link to the instructional play genre. The work is meant to stimulate interest in this activity among the pupils and to promote its value to parents and others visitors.

The plot is very simple: the vegetables are congratulating themselves on having survived so long into the summer and are mourning their brothers who have been taken. However, their times are up: Mr. and Mrs. Biggs come to collect them to make a pie. Baby onion is left behind as he is too small but just as he is laughing smugly, the daughter of the house decides to pick him for her doll’s dinner. He is carried off screaming.

The majority of the child actors sit cross-legged in rows to represent a plot of vegetables for the duration of the play. The opportunities for multi-sensory and holistic learning are therefore limited, although an illustration shows children wearing costume hats which they could conceivably manage to make for themselves.

The play uses anthropomorphism to engage the children in the learning. This, however, seems clumsily done. As with the mistreatment of the plant in *The Blue Flower* discussed above, the scenario has the potential to be both hilarious and horrifying although it is a reasonable assumption that Lay hoped that the humour would dominate. She builds light-hearted touches into the text: for example, the audience and participants might be amused by the larger onion refusing to acknowledge his fellowship with the baby onion because he is so small, or by the pompous leek who “would scorn to drop a tear” for his brave fallen brethren (p. iii). However, given the risks of identifying with soon-to-be eaten vegetables, the play uses anthropomorphism in a way which fully exposes its dangers. Whether or not humour or horror dominates the production depends ultimately on the spirit in which the children undertake the performance. A talented actor able to carry a joke here and a good-humoured smile there would make all the difference. Children may have been able to contribute to the meaning of this play by neutralising the distressing features of the script and emphasising the light-hearted elements.

Conclusion

This article has offered an analysis of a selection of plays that could be classified as part of the “instructional” genre, focusing on examples that aimed to teach children about nature. Froebel’s kindergarten rhymes offered a starting point for playwrights and in some cases were used quite closely as models (*The Naughty Crows*). Fairies (*Little Ida’s Flowers*) and folk tales with talking animals (*How the Trees Lost their Leaves*) were employed to stimulate children’s interest. Some playwrights began to experiment with new approaches that would maximise children’s engagement and creativity (*The Blue Tit’s Nest*) and others made substantial use of their knowledge of the practicalities of school life and the requirements for performance and spectacle to produce teacher-friendly material (*The Vegetable Pie*).

The use of these plays could form a harmonious part of a Froebelian education. Learning about nature was a key element of this approach and the plays introduced or reinforced knowledge about a number of aspects, including the turning of the seasons (*How the Trees Lost their Leaves*) and the naming of flowers (*Little Ida’s Flowers*). They promoted gardening (*The Vegetable Pie*) and encouraged empathy with and care for animals (*The Blue Tit’s Nest*). They also accorded with Froebelian principles in relation to the importance of

experiential learning. The content was transmitted through activities which were certainly playful, although not play in the full sense of the word. Children were freed from desks and encouraged to explore through physical movement. They plays made connections between areas of learning, offering links between the subject matter and song, story, movement and arts and crafts, for example in the making of props.

The particular contribution of the plays to a Froebelian education was that this was a form of storytelling which raised the status of the child and found a space for his or her own power of making meaning. Performance is always more than script and, although the texts were written by adult playwrights, children had the power to make a contribution to the final production. The use of anthropomorphism and fairy, for example, occasionally caused jarring notes in the texts, as discussed particularly with reference to *The Vegetable Pie* and *The Naughty Crows*. However, children could interpret these scripts in a variety of ways and express those interpretations through gesture and tone of voice. Through offering children this agency, the plays provided them with meaningful and worthwhile experiences as they learned about the natural world and other subjects in the curriculum. This was an important contribution to the movement for progressive education which was so significant in the early twentieth century and which still influences our thinking about education today.

References

- Adkins, Ella. (1935). The Choice of Plays for Young Children. *Child Life, New Series 12*, 189-190.
- Blount, Margaret. (1974). *Animal Land*. London: Hutchinson and Co.
- Bolton, Gavin. (1998). *Acting in Classroom Drama: A Critical Analysis*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Boughton, Margaret. (1911). Introduction. In Margaret Boughton, *Easy Games for Little Players: A Collection of Dramatized Nursery Rhymes* (pp. vi-viii). London: Charles and Dible.
- Board of Education. (1937). *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers*. London: HMSO.
- Chalke, R.D. (1912). *A Synthesis of Froebel and Herbart*. London: W.B.Clive University Tutorial Press.
- Child Life. (1892). Review: Nursery Comedies: Twelve Tiny Plays for Children. Mrs Hugh Bell. *II* (3), 48.
- Child Life. (1911). Review: Easy Games for Little Players: A Collection of Dramatized Nursery Rhymes. Margaret Boughton. *XIII* (68). 254.
- Child Life. (1926). Review: Three Mother Story Plays. Evelyn Townend. *XXVIII* (136), 28.
- Child Life. (1928). Books for School Plays (Section in Reviews and Notices). *145*, 140-142.
- Child Life. (1935). Review: Jill's Magic Island and Other Stories. Ernest A. Jelf. *New Series 5*, 59.
- Child Life. (1935). Review: Macmillan's Novel Series of School Plays for Infants. Kate Lay. *New Series 10*, 155.

- Child Life. (1938). Review: Ring up the Curtain (Books I, II, III). D.G.Gardner, *Child Life IV* (3), 45.
- Cook, Henry Caldwell. (1917). *The Play Way: An Essay in Educational Methods*. London: William Heinemann.
- Cosslett, Tess. (2006). *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Darvell, Maude L. and Tuffley, Grace M. (1925). Preface. In Maude L. Darvell, and Grace M. Tuffley, *Plays in Rhyme for Little Ones* (p. 4). London: Evans Brothers.
- Densham, D. (1918-1919). *Student Work*. FA/9.5. Froebel Archive for Childhood Studies. University of Roehampton. London.
- Dodd, C.I. (1911). *Nature Studies and Fairy Tales: Part One*. London: Thomas Nelson and Son.
- English, Douglas. (1910). *A Book of Talking Beasts: Bunny Rabbit, Squirrel, Toad and "Those Sort of People"*. London: Eveleigh Nash.
- Finlay-Johnson, Harriet. (1912). *The Dramatic Method of Teaching*. London: James Nisbet.
- Froebel, Friedrich. (1844). *Mutter- und Kose-Lieder: Dichtung und Bilder zur Pflege des Kindheitelbens*. Blankenburg bei Rudolstadt: Die Anstalt zur Pflege des Beschäftigungstriebes der Kindheit und Jugend.
- Froebel, Friedrich. (1887). *The Education of Man*. (W.N.Hailmann, Trans.). London: D. Appleton.
- Froebel, Friedrich. (1888). *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel*, (2nd ed.) (Emilie Michaelis and H. Keatley Moore, Trans.). London: Swan Sonnenschein.
- Gregory Kohlstedt, Sally. (2010). *Teaching Children Science: Hands-On Nature Study in North America, 1890-1930*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Haworth, Freda M. (1936). The Teaching of Nature Study in Infant and Junior Schools. *Child Life, New Series II* (6), 82-85.
- Hines, Maude. (2004). "He Made Us Very Much Like the Flowers": Human/Nature in Nineteenth Century Anglo-American Children's Literature. In Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd (Ed.). *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (pp. 16-30). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Hoare, Thomas W. (1907). *The "Look-about-you" Nature Study Books: Number One*. London and Edinburgh: T.C. and E.C.Jack.
- Hornbrook, David. (1998). *Education and the Dramatic Art* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Howlett, John. (2013). *Progressive Education: A Critical Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Isaacs, Susan. (1930). *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jelf, Ernest Arthur. (1931). Writing Plays for Children. *Child Life*, XXXIV (153), 14-17.
- Keene, Melanie. (2015). *Science in Wonderland: The Scientific Fairy Tales of Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kready, Laura F. (1916). *A Study of Fairy Tales*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Liebschner, Joachim. (1992). *A Child's Work: Freedom and Guidance in Froebel's Educational Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press.
- Lutts, Ralph H. (2001). *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science and Sentiment*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.

Nikolajeva, Maria. (2005). *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: The Scarecrow Press.

Plaisted, Laura L. (1910). *The Early Education of Children*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Selleck, R.J.W. (1972). *English Primary Education and the Progressives 1914-1918*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Slight, J.P. (1952) "Froebel and the English Primary School of Today". In Evelyn Lawrence (Ed.). *Friedrich Froebel and English Education* (pp. 34-94). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Vallance, Rosalind. (1935) Psychological Values in Dramatic Work for Young Children. *Child Life, New Series* I (12), 181-182.

Woodham-Smith, P. (1952) "History of the Froebel Movement in England". In Evelyn Lawrence (Ed.). *Friedrich Froebel and English Education* (pp. 24-94). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Children's plays

Belton, Bee and Howell, Hamilton. (1932). Sixes and Sevens: A Game to Play in the Number Lesson. In P.B.Ballard (Ed.), *Plays for Acting in the Infant School* (pp.41-43). London: Pitman.

Boughton, Margaret. (1911). Little Ida's Flowers. In Margaret Boughton, *Easy Games for Little Players: A Collection of Dramatized Nursery Rhymes* (pp. 13-14). London: Charles and Dible.

Boughton, Margaret. (1911). The Birds of Killingworth. In Margaret Boughton, *Easy Games for Little Players: A Collection of Dramatized Nursery Rhymes* (p. 33). London: Charles and Dible.

Buchheim, E. S. (1905). *Short German Plays: Second Series*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Chambers, Eleanor I. (1915). *Phonic Plays for Infants and Juniors: A Guide to the Systematic Teaching of English*. London: Blackie and Son.

Compton, Viola and Anderton, Jean (1917). *History by the Dramatic Method: Historical Plays for Children: Teachers' Book One*. London: James Nisbet.

Darvell, Maude L, and Tuffley, Grace M. (1925). How the Trees Lost their Leaves. In Maude L. Darvell and Grace M. Tuffley, *Plays in Rhyme for Little Ones* (pp.48-53). London: Evans Brothers.

Greenfield, M. (1928). The Naughty Crows. In Editor Unknown, *The Third Book of School Plays: Plays for the Younger Ones* (p.14). London: Evans Brothers.

Jelf, E.A. (1934). The Blue Tit's Nest. In E.A. Jelf, *Jill's Magic Island and Other Stories* (p.145-167). London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Lay, Kate. (1935). *The Vegetable Garden*. London: McMillan.

Ross, Patience Adrian. (1928). Rock Cakes. In Editor Unknown, *The Third Book of School Plays: Plays for the Younger Ones* (pp.17-18). London: Evans Brothers.