5 Froebel's Gifts: Building Blocks to Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Education

Resource for Teachers and Parents

Overview

What's common among many of the leading architects of the 20th century? They attended Montessori Schools and learned by playing with and exploring Froebel's Gifts.

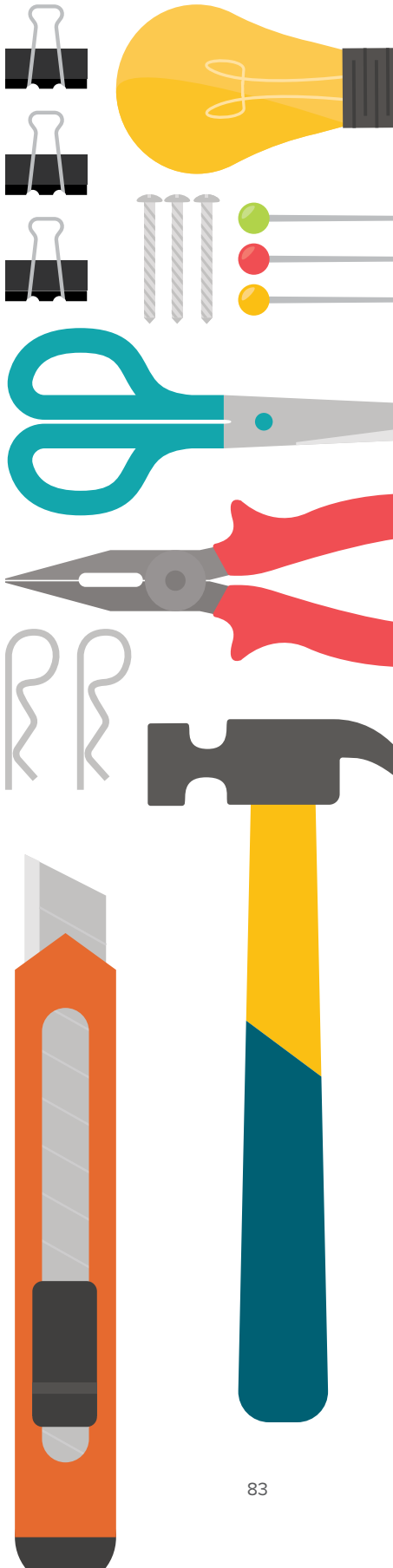
"'The maplewood blocks are all in my fingers to this day,' said Frank Lloyd Wright when he was 88 years old. The architect was referring to the elaborate set of children's building blocks designed in 1830 by the German educator Friedrich Froebel, the originator of the kindergarten system. He was among the first educators to recognize that play is the work of the child." (**http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/13/style/the-froebel-gift-takes-form-again.html**)

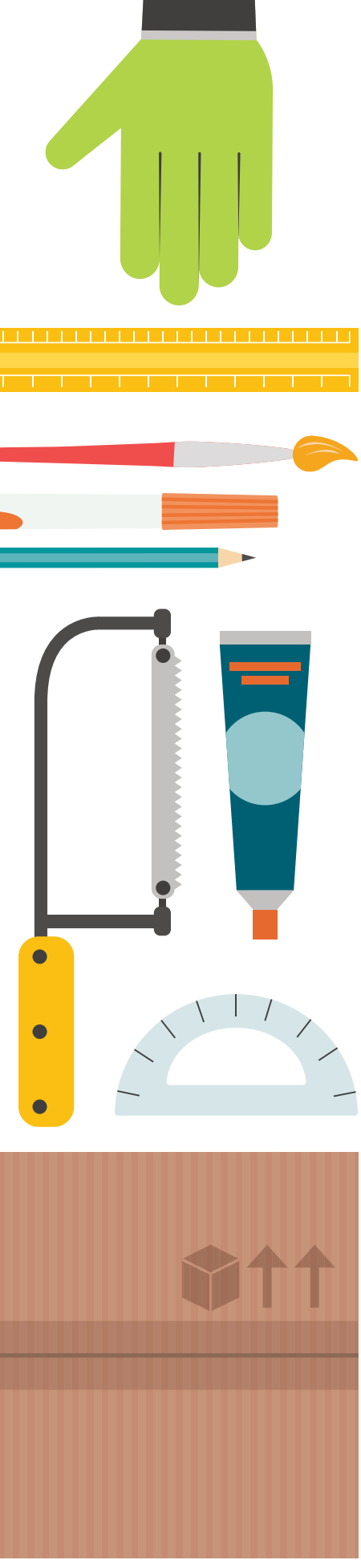
Froebel's Gifts had all but disappeared from schools until 1982 when they were discovered on display at the Frank Lloyd Wright Institute in Oak Park, Illinois. The gifts consist of a set of wooden blocks and a variety of materials such as yarn and Origami that he called vocations. The gifts and vocations were "designed to stimulate all five senses (which are considered the doors to the child's inner world) while aiding understanding and language through discussion and song... The ultimate idea is that all things—art (beauty), science (knowledge) and nature (the physical world)—are fundamentally related and interconnected." (Bultman, 2000, p. 4)

You can download a copy of The Republic of Childhood: Froebel's Gifts from **http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31097/31097-h/31097-h.htm**.

Froebel believed that when children play with blocks, they begin to think and imagine in concrete and tangible ways. It helps them to understand that one's thoughts can be actionable, and a provocation to reactions in others. It helps children to read, see, and negotiate their worlds.

"'The design of the Gifts reflects the way Froebel thought children learned, from the large object to the parts of the object,' said Leslie R. Williams, a professor of early-childhood education at Columbia University's Teachers College. 'They help children look into things instead of at things.'" (**http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/13/style/the-froebel-gift-takes-form-again.html**)





Design Rationale

Janine Fraser, a primary educator and current President of the British Columbia Primary Teachers Association, sees value in introducing Froebel's Gifts to students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. She explains, the gifts can be used to:

- stimulate imagination and creativity
- contribute to self-confidence and a feeling of accomplishment
- develop a sense of responsibility for block care and clean-up
- explore pre-number skills such as size, shape, matching and classification
- foster critical thinking and problem solving that is inherent in block play
- develop visual discrimination which is a pre-reading skill
- learn concepts of inside/outside, open/closed
- develop language and vocabulary through discussion and description
- develop fine motor skills
- refine eye/hand coordination

The booklet *The Republic of Childhood: Froebel's Gifts* describes Froebel's approach to slowly and thoughtfully introduce each of the multiple gifts to children. Rarely did he create a discovery corner or centre and just let the children play with all gifts at once. Froebel believed there was a rhythm/flow to the introductions and a sequence that supported individual learning. Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner integrated Froebel's blocks and concepts into their work with children.

Froebel's Gifts can be purchased or made (**http://www.froebelweb.org/gifts/obtain.html**). The following list is numbered by sequence of introduction to children (Bultman, p. 28).

Gifts (To be used and always returned in their original form)

1. Yarn balls
2. Wood solids
3. Wood cubes
4. Wood rectangles
5. Subdivided 3" cube (cubes & prisms)
6. Subdivided 3" cube (columns, rectangles & caps)
7. Parquetry tiles
8. Sticks & rings
9. Beads
10. Peas & sticks

Occupations (Materials are modified and remain in their new form)

11. Perforating (pricking)
12. Embroidery (sewing)
13. Drawing
14. Cutting paper
15. Weaving paper (braiding)
16. Painting
17. Intertwining paper
18. Origami
19. Box construction
20. Modeling clay

Problem Scenario

Working with pre-school and primary teachers in your community and school, determine ways to integrate Froebel's Gifts into your learning environments. Remember, Froebel is considered to be the inventor of kindergarten. He believed "Children come into the world with their own inner structure, just as an acorn holds the structure of an oak tree. 'It is the destiny and life-work of all things to unfold their essence.' ...Parents and educators act as 'gardeners.' Creating a fertile environment that encourages each child to blossom into his/her full potential," (Bultman, p. 3). Froebel believed as the gardeners, it is our responsibility to introduce each gift and occupation and tend carefully to each child's learning.

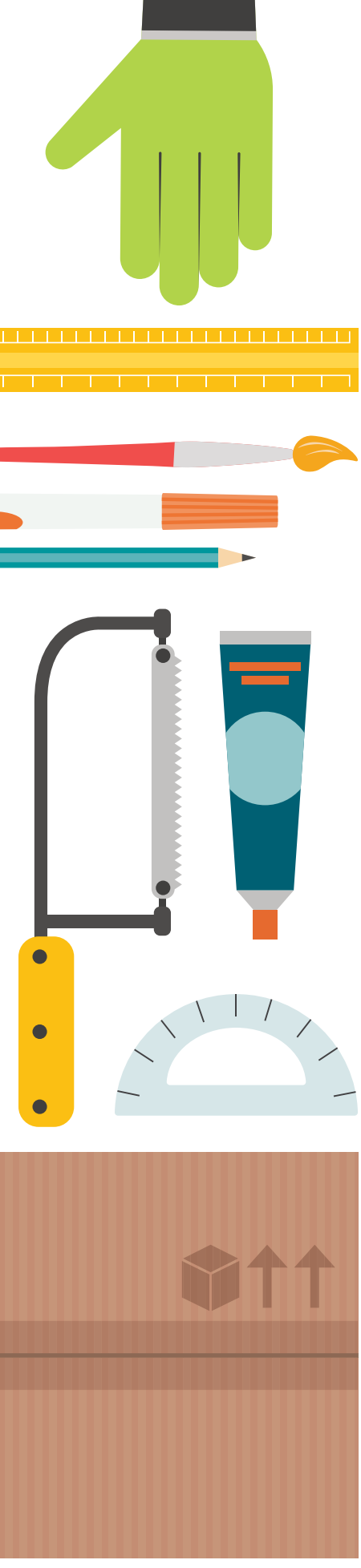
Success Determinants

Success will be determined by:

- ❒ Ways in which you can position Froebel's Gifts within your curricular intent
- ❒ Ways in which you can position Froebel's Gifts within the BC ADST curriculum
- ❒ Consider ways to involve the local makerspace or local makers in the creation of the gifts (**http://www.froebelweb.org/gifts/obtain.html**)

Paramenters

- ❒ Think beyond creating a centre where the gifts are merely available for the children to play with.



Resources

Ballweg, J. (2012). *Inquiry in the Block Area* available from *Math at Play*.

Bultman, S. (2000). *The Froebel Gifts: The building gifts* 2–6. Grand Rapids, MI: Uncle Goose Toys.

Early Childhood Today Editorial Staff (2016). *Pioneers In Our Field: Friedrich Froebel—Founder of the First Kindergarten*. The first installment in Early Childhood Today's series on the Roots of Early Childhood Education, available from **https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/pioneers-our-field-friedrich-froebel-founder-first-kindergarten/**.

Patet, Pradnya (2016). *Empowering mathematical minds through play*, available from **http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/empowering-mathematical-minds**.

Wiggin, K. & Smith, N. (1985). *The Republic of Childhood: Froebel's Gifts* from **http://www.gutenberg.org/files/%2031097/31097-h/31097-h.htm**.