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# Folding Froebel with Deleuze: Rethinking the significance of imitation in early childhood

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## Abstract

The paper brings Froebel's philosophy into conversation with that of Deleuze. We focus on *the fold* and on *self-activity* as key concepts that hold a special place in the monist philosophies of both thinkers. One point at which their (very different) ontologies coincide is their conceptualization of a cosmos in which everything is ultimately in relation. The philosophical convergences of such different thinkers in different eras are mapped in relation to the influences of a shared lineage with some earlier hermetic and romantic strains of thought. Both Froebel and Deleuze conceive of subjectivity as a relation of dynamic folding and unfolding of inner life and external world. The fold, as the operation that brings outside and inside together in a unitary system, counters the dualisms that still tend to structure thought: for instance, ideal/material, intelligible/sensible, nature/culture, individual/social.

Reading Deleuze with Froebel helps to draw out some theoretical underpinnings of Froebel's holism, by bringing movement, matter and the senses back into focus and rethinking the relation between children and their environment in learning and development. We discuss some empirical examples of what this might look like from a current research project, focusing on imitation as one example of the fold between the inner life and the outer worlds of young children. In particular, we are interested in exploring how Froebel's conception of imitation as a dynamic and metamorphic act of self-transformation might share some affinities with the concept of becoming developed by Deleuze and Guattari.

## Keywords

Deleuze, Froebel, becoming, imitation, monism, unfolding, self-activity

## Introduction

*It is the destiny and life-work of all things to unfold their essence.*

--F. Froebel, *The Education of Man* (1890, p. 2)

In this article we bring Froebel into an encounter with Deleuze in order to draw out

some aspects of Froebel's thought that are perhaps under-recognized in contemporary thinking about how children learn and develop, and pursue some implications for pedagogy in the early years. We focus the encounter around two concepts that were of interest to both Froebel and Deleuze: namely the *fold* (or *unfolding*) and *self-activity*. These concepts

hold a special place in the philosophies of both thinkers, who, despite their manifold differences, conceive of the cosmos as a totality<sup>1</sup> in which all is ultimately in relation. Wasmuth (2020, p. 65) writes of Froebel's philosophy: "In the whole of reality, in the cosmos, everything is related to everything, and every being (Seiende) unfolds itself as itself in this context." Both thinkers are influenced in this respect by Leibniz's monism, whereby, as Froebel's commentator Susan Blow (Froebel, 1895, p. 33) notes, "each soul is a monad, which by its self-activity repeats for itself the universe." The fold, as the operation that brings outside and inside together in a unitary system, acts as a "counter-figure and a counter-concept" (Seppi, 2016) to the dualisms that still tend to structure thought: for instance, ideal/material, intelligible/sensible, nature/culture, individual/social.

Both Froebel and Deleuze (1993) conceive of subjectivity as a relation of dynamic folding and unfolding of inner life and external world. Unfolding and self-activity are in fact implicated in one another, as Froebel's succinct statement quoted at the beginning of this article indicates: "*It is the destiny and life-work of all things to unfold their essence*" (Froebel, 1890, p. 2; emphasis added). Unfolding is self-activity. For both Froebel and Deleuze, (un)folding and self-activity presuppose an immanent ontology of becoming and emergence *from within*: that is, the processes that produce life unfold from within life itself.

In bringing Deleuze to bear on Froebel, we want to avoid forcing Froebel's work into anachronistic conformity with the latest trends in early childhood research or pedagogy, and we do not wish to underestimate the profound

differences in their world views. Nevertheless, we detect some broader resonances between Froebel's thought and the recent 'ontological turn' in the social sciences, arts and humanities, which has been influential in early childhood research (Lenz-Taguchi, 2012; Olsson, 2009; MacLure, 2016; Otterstad, 2016). Deleuzian philosophy has been part of this ontological turn, together with other theories including the New Materialisms (Barad, 2007; Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012) and post-humanism (Haraway, 2016; Braidotti, 2013). These orientations share some fundamental assumptions that can, again, be glimpsed in Froebel's writing. They all present immanent ontologies of process, relationality, self-organization and becoming. Mind and matter are seen as inextricably entangled. They are infused with concepts from science, maths and technology. They see humans as developing in dynamic and unfolding relation with their environments.

The link between Froebel and Deleuze has a specific inflection however, in that they share a certain intellectual heritage, as we outline below. Both were interested in the materialist strain of German idealism advanced by Novalis and contemporaries. Both, according to their commentators, were also interested in hermeticism and the occult forces of nature, via scholars including Boehme. It could be argued that both Deleuze and Froebel belong to a "meandering line" or "erratic strand of thought" in Western philosophy identified by Elizabeth Grosz (2017, p. 263-4) that addresses what she terms "the *incorporeal*," and defines as "the immanence of the ideal in the material and the material in ideality" (p. 5)

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<sup>1</sup> For Deleuze, the cosmos is however an *open* totality whose boundaries are formed only by the movements of the forces that comprise it.

In the latter part of the article, we mobilize the encounter of Deleuze and Froebel to revitalize understandings of imitation as a dynamic force in children's development. The discussion unfolds from some data examples of young children engaging in what might be thought of as imitation, taken from an ethnographic study funded by the Froebel Trust.<sup>2</sup> The project is using Froebelian concepts, including unfolding, to develop a materially-informed pedagogy that is attentive to 2-year-olds' sensory and affective ways of knowing and becoming.

We read imitation as an instance of self-activity, where the inner life of the child and the outer world of matter, or nature, are in-folded and mutually elaborated. Extending the analysis via Deleuze's concept of the Event, as both material and incorporeal or virtual, we suggest that these child imitations are creative and immersive replays of events, rather than mere replications. We conclude by exploring some implications for a pedagogy that would respect the integrity of children's imitative events rather than breaking their 'spell'.

### Tracing Froebel's unitary life principles

In exploring the philosophical context that influenced and inspired Froebel, we are more interested in mobilizing some specific aspects of his unitary pedagogy, than either (re)visioning, or smoothing out, the many contradictory aspects of his overall project. It is noteworthy that some of Froebel's influences (Boehme, Schelling, and Novalis) share some common ancestry with Deleuze's formative interest in esoteric thought and metaphysics (Bonta, 2010; Ramey, 2012; Ramey and

Whistler, 2014; Biareishyk, 2019). While Froebel's unitary system encompasses an idealist rationalism (Brehony, 2009), simultaneously there is a strong occultist, immanent, and monist strand in his writings. Both spirit and nature (the "internal" and the "external") are animated by "an all-pervading, energetic, living, self-conscious and hence eternal Unity (Froebel, 1890, p. 2). For Froebel, according to Blow, "all living objects participate in one great life" (1985, p. 32). This monism has most usually been associated with his pantheism (Hilton, 2001) and it is an aspect that has been either generally overlooked (with the notable exception of Blow, 1895) or explicitly ejected from successive interpretations over time. The diminishment of this monist philosophy is also associated with the rise of empirical and positivist epistemological approaches (Brehony, 1997, 2009; Nawrotzki, 2006) that have resulted in interpretations of Froebel's thinking being over-washed with subsequent dominant dualist modes of thought. These context/time-inflected readings of Froebel, in turn, have formed new accommodations and allegiances associated with the increasing influence of evolutionary theory and psychology that were to become ascendent after Froebel. In the English context, the extent to which Froebel's philosophy was considered revisionist became so extreme that adherents of his methods were often in name only as they disavowed so many of his core principles (Nawrotzki, 2006).

Our starting point for developing a fine-grained understanding of Froebel's concept of unfolding was his key text, *The Education of Man*, where the term unfolding appears frequently. He uses the term as a principle of human growth and understanding. Unfolding, as

<sup>2</sup> Details: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/research-library/listening-2-investigating-sensory-motor-learning-in-two-year-olds>

noted above, is presented as a self-organizing principle that takes place through *self-activity*. On first reading of this text, it is easy to concur with Stanley Hall, the famous American father of child psychology, that much of the text seems impenetrable, contradictory- a “weird and bizarre [...] metaphysical ferment [...] concocted of various ingredients: theosophic mysticism, foregleams of evolution” and a “passionate enthusiasm for nature just as the great scientific movement was dawning” (Hall in Brehony, 2009, p. 593). The derision that 20<sup>th</sup> century empiricists such as Hall, Wallas and Dewey level at Froebel’s work take aim at its mystical, romantic and symbolic “Schellingesque factors” (Dewey, 2001, p. 42). In agreement with Susan Blow (herself so often criticized by the progressive educationalists for the seriousness with which she approached these aspects of Froebel’s thought), we have attempted to follow her exhortation that “only the student who has insight into the ideas which ruled Froebel’s mind can justly weigh his work” (1895, p. 18).

Biographic and textual approaches to Froebel such as those of Wasmuth (2020), and Liebschner (2001) are helpful in beginning to trace Froebel’s pedagogical concepts in relation to his life and times. They offer insights into the importance and centrality of his ultimate unitary principle, the law of the sphere, according to which all things are in connection. The spherical law mediates the inner and the outer and determines the reciprocal importance of the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts. Both Wasmuth (2020) and Liebschner (2001) contextualize Froebel in relation to the intellectual atmosphere of the time, referring to the strand of German idealism of the so-called Jena School as Froebel’s key influence. While both cast doubt on how closely Froebel read such work, it is clear from a variety of sources that there were particular books that Froebel

held especially close to his heart, and these are referred to in his extensive correspondence. These specific references to literature from his collected writings include Schelling’s *Naturephilosophie* (Brehony 2010, Lilley, 1967, p. 9), Novalis’ collected works (Lilley, 1967, p. 16), and Boehme’s *Aurora* (Lilley, 1967, p. 17). While the intellectual milieu of romantic philosophy is often referred to as influencing Froebel’s thinking, it is rarely given serious attention in terms of its specific implications for his pedagogy (with some exceptions, for example Blow, 1895; Lilley, 1967; Strauch-Nelson, 2012). In response, we answer Kevin Brehony’s (2010) call to pay greater attention to the more mystical, hermetic and occult concepts that are evident (amongst many others) in Froebel’s writing.

In highlighting Novalis, Schelling and Boehme as significant influences on Froebel, we are opening up a lineage that connects with that of Deleuze, who cites these thinkers among the many influences on his work. We detect one of Grosz’s ‘meandering lines’ therefore, running through Froebel and Deleuze via these romantic and esoteric precursors, in their shared materialist understanding of Nature or the “outer” world as expressive of “inner” or abstract cosmic forces. This is reflected in their common interest in mineralogy, crystals and mathematics, as well as plants, as part of a geo-cosmic philosophical conception of all life in the universe.

This line that connects Froebel and Deleuze via these precursors informs our analysis of research data concerning children’s imitations below, where we connect Froebel’s vision of life as the folding of “outer” world and “inner” spirit, with Deleuze’s theory of the Event, which posits worldly events as actualizations of virtual or cosmic forces on an immanent plane.

This interpretation stands in sharp contrast to modern psychological accounts of Froebelian philosophy, where the imitative is closely coupled with mental imagery and the cognitive.

### **The Listening-2 project**

Alongside these retrospective readings of Froebel and Deleuze, we have also put these concepts to work in thinking about some particular pieces of data that were generated as part of the Listening-2 project. Building on a prior and well-established research relationship, this was a year-long research project located in a 2-year-old classroom in an inner-city Nursery School and Children's Centre. Prior to the Listening-2 project, Christina had conducted a slow-research ethnography over three years in the same 2-year-old classroom (MacLure, 2016).

Building on this prior research, parents, staff and children were invited to take films where children were engaged in everyday domestic or play activities. We had a specific interest in the potential of creating slow-motion video, as a tactic for attending more closely to the sensory-motor aspects of children play encounters. Project data was collected via Go-pro cameras which could film at slow speeds and in high definition. These were available for loan by parents to take home, however parents often preferred to use their mobile phones. An iterative consent process was used in order to ensure that only film clips that were consented for were contributed to the final project archive. Sadly, the project was interrupted mid-way through by the Covid pandemic, meaning that face-to-face contact with families and the school community had to be paused. From November 2019 until March 2020 (when visits were suspended because of social distancing restrictions in response to Covid-19), Christina

spent one afternoon/morning every week in the same classroom as a participant, and she would often write down notes at the end of these sessions. She also spent one afternoon/morning situated in the Nursery corridor where she was able to download film clips to the project computer, as well as chat to parents, and exchange or view film clips with them as they dropped off their children.

In this article we work with just three research vignettes where children seem to be engaging in imitative activity. One of the vignettes consists of a short field note written by Christina at the end of a session when she was in the classroom, and the other two are text translations of short film clips taken on parents' phones outside the school context. In both cases, although the film was taken at the usual speed, Christina slowed the films down and (re)viewed them with parents on the project computer, snatching a quick conversation about them in the corridor. Christina subsequently translated the un-folding activity into words while watching them repeatedly in slow motion.

It is worth pointing out that when transcribing the film, Christina found words to be completely insufficient to capture the sheer complexity of these moments. In spite of this, the process of transcription did have the effect of bringing the event to life in new ways. As a former nursery teacher, Christina is well-versed in making child observations; however the effect of trying to capture what was unfolding on the slow-motion film suddenly considerably complicated this process. Both the luxury of time (something in short supply in the daily work of an early years practitioner) and the focus on attempting to describe the children's bodies *as they moved* made this very different from habitual observations of play events. It became apparent how inadequate transcription was in

terms of capturing the temporal, affective and motive complexity of self-activity. Furthermore, an unexpected effect of Christina's repeated close watching of these events was to set off memories of herself as a young child acting in adult ways. We discuss below the significance of such embodied memories, as connections to past events.

### Three vignettes

#### Vignette 1:

(play moment observed by Christina at the end of the day)

*I am in the home corner, and J approaches me, and then announces aloud "I'm an ice cube going in a micro-wave." He then places himself on a chair; at the same time as closing his eyes, he lets all tension from his muscles so that his body becomes entirely floppy. He holds this melted position in the chair for about 30 seconds and his body is held the chair that he is now slumped into.*

#### Vignette 2:

(play event recorded on phone by M's Mum in the local library)

*M has climbed up onto one of the chairs placed at a computer station. She sits sideways on the chair and leans across the table to the keyboard, so her fingertips are able to busily tap with both hand on the keyboard. The contact of her fingers as each hand comes down to meet the keys makes distinct clattering sounds for each hand. Her eyes are focused on a computer mouse that is balanced on the side of the keyboard, and then her body turns towards the mouse and her right hand reaches for it. She says "hello" before her hand has brought the mouse to be placed against her ear. Some more utterances are made as her other hands*

*taps the keyboard some more, while with the other hand the mouse is placed back down, as M is saying goodbye. She repeats this sequence of picking up the mouse and placing it to her ear, saying "hello" and "goodbye" a few times. She looks up and then becomes aware that she is being filmed. She looks at the camera/Mum with a self-conscious smile and turns her head away. The spell is broken.*

#### Vignette 3:

(play event filmed by H's mum on her phone in a home corner set up at the edge of a noisy soft play space)

*Watching the clip attentively I am aware how loud the noise is from the soft-play space: sounds of children moving and calling, the sounds from the soft-play area seem to contrast with the silence of H who plays with an inner intensity in this play kitchen area. H, by contrast to the frenzy of movement and sound taking place behind her, is both solitary and immersed in what feels like a parallel universe. She places a plastic saucepan in a wooden micro-wave, closes the door and carefully presses a series of buttons painted on the side. She then seems to be searching for something, her hand hovering as she moves along the length of the work surface and hovers over various items as if about to pick them up, but her hand hesitates, and she moves on as if she has not found what it is that she seeks. At one point she looks at the camera, but she is inside of her play and her eyes quickly pass over the camera as she moves towards a different work surface. Here she picks up a plate and a bowl in each hand, and returns to the main work surface, again, her eyes encounter the camera, but without any registering in her motion. She places her items on the worktop, rearranges a plate and re-replaces it on the cooker hob. She*

*selects another plate to cover the vacant cooker hob next to the one she has already placed on the cooker top. She returns to the microwave, pulls out the saucepan and then moves it to the sink where she carefully holds it under the taps, and then sets it down on the far table, but runs back to turn off the tap. H's Mum addresses her. H does not appear to respond and is deep inside her actions. H's Mum rephrases her words as a question (I can't make it out as this is spoken in Arabic which I do not speak). H continues arranging and placing plates as if she has not heard her mother. When we discussed the clip afterwards H's mother described H as being in a state of being "head over heels."*

### **Imitation as becoming**

“Only children can know things by transmuting themselves into them, by knowing and being at the same time. Children turn into animals, plants, stones and toys. ‘Now I'm this or that,’ - the child uses this affirmation and thereby internalizes what he says.”  
(Leal, 121)

Instead of conceiving of imitation as “a static, isolated process which merely repeats itself in different forms” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967 p. 57), Froebel restates the imitative as a dynamic and metamorphic act of self-transformation. This process is one of absorption, where the “diversity of the outer world” is absorbed and given expression internally (Froebel in Lilley, p. 61). Closely linked with this life-seeking conception of imitation is an understanding of observation where the child's “whole being” is “an appropriating eye” (ibid) that devours the external difference that it encounters. This is not a separated eye that stores static representations, but a sensing organ drawing in

the world and transforming the body to become something new.

“Every object challenges the human being to recognize it in its nature and its relationships. So [the human] has his senses, the tools with which he meets this challenge and assimilates the world outside him” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967, p. 81)

When Blow explains the part played by actions in Froebel's book about action rhymes, she explains that to apprehend a deed, one must repeat the deed:

“The dramatic impulse, the tendency to pretend one is someone else, contains this pleasure of mimicry as one of its elements. Another element seems to be a peculiar sense of power in stretching one's personality to as to include that of a strange person. In young children this instinct knows no bounds” (James in Blow, 1895, p. 28)

In all three of these vignettes, and the accompanying moments of becoming other that unfold, we recognize this call to life that both Lilley and Blow are drawing out from Froebel's writing; an intensity of feeling, pleasure, and absorption. Returning to J's moment of becoming an ice cube: there is a threshold that he crosses the moment that he closes his eyes and when his muscles let go, and he has become melted ice. He ushers forth a new self as he lets go of control of his muscles; the change of muscle tone marks a qualitative shift of J's being, as it is expanded to include the being of melted ice. In becoming other than himself, one could perhaps say that J has become “new self from within” and that he “he creates himself by reproducing his environment within himself”



(Blow, 1895, p. 29). This recalls the power (invoked in one of the poems by Novalis that Froebel held dear), of giving oneself over to an undivided attention directed at another. In so doing, Novalis talks of “miraculous” new perceptions arising, and “from the point where he has transfixed the impression, they spread in all directions with a living mobility and carry his self with them” (Novalis, 2005, p. 75). As a microwaved ice cube, J’s body has not only the plastic elasticity of melted ice itself, but even if he were to transform himself into stone, this liquidity of body would similarly have been set in motion in order to conjure rock-like hardness.

The accounts above of imitation as transmutation (Leal, 2005) and transfixing (Novalis, 2020) resonate with the concept of *becoming-animal* developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which they describe as a kind of contagion. They identify a range of becomings - including becoming-animal and becoming-child - that they describe in terms of folding or “creative involution.”

“It is as though, independent of the evolution carrying them toward adulthood, there were room in the child for other becomings ... that are not regressions but creative involutions” (p. 273)

Involutions are compositions of speeds, gestures and affects, in which determinate forms are dissolved. Writing of the child who imitates a horse, they write that a new “assemblage” is formed that is “neither Hans's nor the horse's, but that of the becoming-horse of Hans”? (1988, pp. 257-8).

When M taps at the typewriter keyboard, it is at the moment when she sees the

camera that she is returned to a state of self-consciousness. In this instance we are made aware of the threshold she has crossed, because its spell is broken. Released from her trance, she crosses back, into herself. Nevertheless, she returns to herself as a slightly different M whose body has been through a process of qualitative change, even if only for such a small moment in time. This moment of spell-breaking recalls Christina’s own ‘pretending’ moments when she was a child. In one that comes to her mind, she is older than M (maybe 8 or 9) and able to write; she is also seated at a desk, having carefully collected a pile of blank paper forms, that lie in front of her. With the speed of a fluent adult writer, she fills out the dotted lines on self-addressed forms one by one with neat zigzag lines; her hand taking on the efficient movements of a more practiced writer. The completed forms would then be placed on another “finished” pile. Christina was also reminded of the feeling of being jolted back into her body again when her mother’s presence could be felt watching, and instantly a feeling of foolishness supplanted her self-sense of being a competent adult writer. When we pause to think about M’s typewriting and Christina’s form filling, in both these cases we are struck at how the becoming-other that is taking place is a becoming-adult. In both, children are transformed into busy adult bodies where the speed of the writing, as well as M’s perfunctory hello and goodbye of the phone call, are the practiced techniques of an adult body.

In H’s studied kitchen performance, the spell is strong throughout the duration of the clip; even her mother’s words to her do not sever the thread. Froebel talks in positive terms of this state, invoking it as a kind of “divine action” that drives the child’s self-action. It is in this pantheistic understanding of the divine that Smith sees the influence of Boehme on Froebel’s

understanding of the notion of ‘becoming’, where we are always both with and like the world, in our eternal state of becoming (Smith, 1983, p. 308). Froebel urges caution when children are in this state of absorption, warning adults to take care in such situations, and to resist determining, directing or interrupting. He notes that when a child appears unresponsive, they may “really be steadily intent on a line of thought such as claims his full attention” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967, p. 51). Where imitation is aligned with copying, Froebel speaks disparagingly of a “dead approach” (ibid, p. 58). Lilley reads Froebel’s educational project as a quest for the “art of living” (ibid, p. 44). This is one that is always seeking the intensification and transformation of experience, and where “there is no creative process unless one’s knowledge and insight are advanced and one’s life intensified” (ibid, p. 43).

Deleuze helps us understand these child imitations as immersive re-playings of *events*, rather than as replications of discrete objects, persons or actions, observed as it were, only from the outside. The latter would be, in Froebel’s terms “dead imitation or mere copying [rather than] living, spontaneous self-activity” (Froebel, 1890, p. 18). For Deleuze (2004), events are double-sided, having on the one hand an incorporeal or virtual dimension, and on the other a material one. “Pure” events are impersonal and eternal, existing as virtual potentials, waiting to be actualized in specific events. Pure events, writes Deleuze, are complex compositions of infinitives - to green, to sleep, to love, etc. They lack determinate subjects, objects or tenses, until they become actualized in bodies and states of affairs. From such a perspective, one could say that J taps into the abstract forces that come together in the virtual event of “ice-cube-melting” and expresses its inner,

indefinable “sense.” And, as noted above, J is himself changed “from within.”

It is also noticeable that imitation as actualization of the event goes far beyond ‘seeing and doing’, and beyond perception in its conventional sense. As is evidenced in the complexity of the events replayed by M and H, imitation involves modes of perception that register in the muscles and in the viscera. Massumi writes that the event mobilizes both *proprioception*, as “the sensibility proper to the muscles and ligaments”, and *interoception*, defined as “visceral sensibility” (2002, p. 59). Massumi writes that, taken together, these comprise “synaesthetic sensibility... the medium where inputs from all five senses meet... and become flesh together, tense and quivering” (ibid, p.62). It is perhaps this haptic vision or bodily investment in the event that lends the children’s performances the character of ‘trance’ or ‘spell’, invoked above.

The actor, writes Deleuze (2004), “actualizes the event”. In Massumi’s (2002, p. 64) paraphrase: “The activity of the actor is less to imitate a character in a script than to mimic in the flesh the incorporeality of the event”. Blow’s account of children’s imitations resonates here: “The child who imitates an alien deed has formed an ideal, and energises to realise it” (1895, p. 33). It is interesting that, for both Deleuze and Blow/Froebel, this is a fundamentally *moral* issue: namely, how to express the eternal in one’s everyday decisions and actions.

According to Deleuze, we do not, however, simply ‘choose’ events; rather, they select us, though we must be open to the summons: “To the extent that events are actualized in us, they wait for us and invite us in” (2004, p. 169). Or, as Massumi puts it, bodies

‘incur’ the pure event; “it occurs to them” (2002, p. 58). To be caught up in the event is indeed therefore a kind of trance or spell: the child is inextricably a part of the event that they are unfolding (or ‘willing’ in Deleuzian terminology), and which occupies their body. This helps to explain why adult interventions, or attempts to recruit children to ‘their’ events, often either miss the mark, or seem to ‘break the spell’. The event of imitation that the child is caught up in resists adult redirection. Or perhaps adults have simply forgotten how to submit themselves to the abstract forces that are assembling in a child’s unfolding event, whereas we often see young children apparently opening an event onto the participation of others (see Løkken, 2000). At any rate, the risk of adults killing the spontaneity of children’s self-activity is one that preoccupied Froebel.

“The child loves all the things that enter his small horizon and extend his little world. To him, the least thing is a new discovery, but it must not come dead into the little world, nor lie dead therein, lest this obscure the small horizon and crush the little world” (Froebel, 1890, p. 73).

### Implications

In this final section, we offer three key areas where the emerging theoretical discussions and research findings raised in this article might have significance. Firstly, we propose that if we are interested in reigniting the holistic approach that lies at the heart of Froebel’s educational philosophy, it would be productive to return to some of the more overlooked theoretical influences on Froebel’s thought, namely here, the legacy of the particular romantic poets/philosophers from the Jena circle whose writings were so dear to Froebel’s heart.

Secondly, we argue that by paying attention to Froebel’s capacious and productive approach to children’s development as self-activity, some of the deficit discourses of the child that have taken such a hold in our current post-industrial, neo-liberal political landscape could be resisted, in favour of a Froebelian pedagogy of attunement to the child’s interests and emerging capacities.

Finally, we consider how reframing children’s imitative play as having significance beyond the representational and symbolic might open up imitation up as a more vibrant and vital mode of coming to know one-self in the world, in relation to others, both human and non-human. By paying more attention to the sympathetic magic wielded children as they imitate others, we wonder if this could encourage us as adults who care for children to take up a greater experimental attitude in our engagements with young children. As Froebel suggests, perhaps we could, indeed, learn from our children (Froebel, 1890, p. 89).

When we started to write this paper, our original intention was to explore Froebel’s twin concepts of unfoldment and self-activity, alongside Deleuze’s usages of these terms. This was in recognition that both writers share a conception of subjectivity as a complex, always emerging relation of dynamic folding and unfolding of inner life and external world. We were also aware that both had a vision of a cosmos in which everything is ultimately in relation, and that in this respect both thinkers were influenced by a monist, rather than a dualist philosophy. As we looked more closely at Froebel’s original writings, however, we found ourselves unexpectedly compelled to start to read some specific writings that he lovingly refers to in the copious letters he wrote to his friends and supporters. So far, we have only dipped into some of these texts. However, in

those that we have read so far, for example, *The Novices of Sais*, by Novalis, we have found new ways to tap into a Froebel that are less filtered by late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific positivism and subsequent psychologically inflected translations and interpretations of his writing and pedagogy. While Froebel is commonly described as a rationalist (Brehony, 2009) and as a figure steeped in Kantian metaphysics of reason, less attention is given to the aspects of his thinking that stubbornly contradict and resist this transcendental position. His love for the ideas and poetics of the Jena circle Romantics (of whom we have only mentioned a few) reflect an interesting and unexplored shared kindred spirit. This minor poetic and philosophical movement that “turned into a revolt against rationalism and stressed sentiment rather than reason” (Watts, 2021, p. 5), was one that was quickly subsumed by dominant dualist and positivist scientific modes of thought.

We argue that the affective and wild force bequeathed by this small group of post-Kantian romantics, who were in turn influenced by earlier hermetic and monist thinking, deserves more attention. Furthermore, our unexpected discovery that some of the key figures from this lineage were also early influences on Deleuze’s work leaves us interested in the question of whether there are provocative connections to be made between recent neo-materialist and ontological scholarship in early childhood research, and a resurgence in framing Froebelian practice as a challenge to the ever-narrowing policy focus on progression and outcomes. We wonder if Deleuze’s de-centering of “man/child” within a more immanent ontology with its dynamics of trans-individuation could allow us to follow this wilder and vitalist strain of Froebel’s thought with its attendant occultist, mystical, and

unitarian tendencies. Novalis defines romanticism as an approach to the world that endows “the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious aspect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite” (Stone, 2008, p. 150). We note how this also resonates with Deleuze’s position in relation to Kantian metaphysics.

“Where Kant imposes the discipline of pure reason, Deleuze insists on the indiscipline of reason—a reason that is no longer pure, but mutates and contaminates itself in adventure.” (Ramey and Whistler, 2014, p. 7)

We speculate that further primary text research into some writers who influenced the more esoteric aspects of Froebel’s writing, while read alongside Deleuze’s concept of the virtual, might help us gain some insight into what Froebel means when he talks about premonition, intuition, and surmise – concepts that we did not have the scope to explore in this article. Liebschner notes that Froebel’s concepts of the surmise and presentiment are some of his least understood, but ones which now most deserve our attention (2001, p. 142). These are forces resistant to interpretation and meaning, but nevertheless, forces that shape and condition our thought. Perhaps, even more radically, they could help us to reframe what we conceive of as thought, one that accounts for a “bodily logic of potentiality through affect, rather than imagining that all learning to take place through conscious thinking” (Olsson, 2009, p. 48).

Connectedly, we also propose that more theoretical and research attention could be given to the divergences in the significance of imitation in early childhood as this is conceived by Piaget and Froebel. Liebschner notes that

“Froebel’s concept of imitation was much wider than the mere notion of copying and included the ideas of re-structuring and re-creation” (2001, p. 43). This differs from Piaget’s hylomorphism (James, 2020, online) that regards imitation as based on a “mental image” that is “disassociated from any external action in favor of the internal sketches of actions” (Liebschner, 2001, p. 85). Key for Piaget is “symbolic decentration” (James, 2020, online), where the mental image is internalized, separated, and then assimilated. Working with the immanent line of Froebel’s thought, however, rather than being abstracted, and separated from the object, the symbolic is expressed *as* and *through* form.

Reviving the unitarian, monist strains of Froebel’s thought could also reverberate in a micro-political dimension, one expanding on a contemporary revolutionary Froebelian tool-box (McNair and Powell, 2020; McNair et al, 2021), which could be put to work as part of a creatively non-compliant pedagogy in neoliberal times. Mozère forcefully points to the generative power of Deleuze’s immanent virtualities as a posture that we need to keep in mind in order to enable us to provide an “empty space and time” (2012, p. 60), a milieu allowing for emergence and self-activity. This counters the tendency to overwrite the child and is more able to reconceive of the child as a figure of potential rather than as one of lack. It might be that Froebel’s belief in *life itself* could help us to challenge the deadening aspects of progress-oriented linear narratives of child development that underpin the direction of policy, largely originating in the US and UK, that are now prevailing globally. This form of “prophetic pedagogy” (a term coined by Loris Malaguzzi) – is one that “knows everything beforehand, knows everything that will happen, does not have any uncertainty”; and one that cleaves to an “Anglo-Saxon testology” – with “its

rush to categorise” (in Moss and Cameron, 2020, p. 3).

Finally, we suggest that there are implications for early years practice arising from our analysis of the data that we have discussed, of children involved in a form of self-activity where they are also imitating something or someone. When, as researchers, we reflected on the immersive quality of H’s kitchen play, and the intensity of expression of a child’s body that had absorbed speeds and habits of an adult body, it turned our attention to the capacities of children in relation to those of adults. Christina was struck by a vision of her past-self as a nursery schoolteacher, taking up the role of being the playmate of a child in the home-corner. For example, she might ask a child if she could have a cup of tea; or in another scenario if a child was packing up a bag and placing a doll in a buggy, she might ask them if they could buy her some carrots from the shops. Reflecting on this in light of the data vignettes that we watched in slow motion, as well as reading them through the prism of both Deleuze and Froebel’s immanent philosophy, it became apparent how comparatively far off the mark her adult set-pieces are. These adult performances are hollow if set alongside the self-activity of H as she is fully swept up in the act of cooking in the small corner of the soft play center. In these instances, children’s abilities to become-adult feel infused with life, and they make us wonder if adults are perhaps almost incapable of becoming-child. Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari (1988), this impossibility is tied up with questions of the imperial power of adults over children. Becoming-adult is a movement in the direction of becoming majoritarian, whereas becoming-child, would be to undo oneself as grown-up (don’t be childish, don’t be silly). While we accept there are real lines of hierarchy that we cannot disregard or fully overcome, there may be

things we can learn from the immersion of children in the events they unfold. Perhaps it was an empathic immersion in the child data events that sparked the “transport” of Christina to imitative events in her own past. As Deleuze (2004) insists, there is something untimely and ineffable ‘inside’ events, that resists representation in conventional ways, but nevertheless affects bodies and sets meaning in motion. He called this *sense*.

Possibly the closest that adults in general get to becoming-child is when they take part in pantomime or play the part of clown. The discipline of mime is perhaps a practice that deserves more attention and one that could be thought of as a productive part of a repertoire of early years pedagogic practice. “Deleuze indicates that it is the mime that gives us the clearest image of what to do. The mime does not imitate a specific gesture (walking, climbing, eating) as performed by someone in particular, but selectively presents Walking, Climbing, Eating as if they were a pure, “incorporeal” medium in which the body operates. What the mime does, effectively, is allow the mind to focus” (Ramey and Whistler, 2014, p. 26). Acknowledging the importance of the felt-sense of bodies could oblige us rethink the thrust of the way that we train the early years workforce, a training that is very much focused on learning psychologically-oriented child development theory. In addition to attending more closely to the histories that have shaped this body of knowledge, and the knowledge traditions that have been excluded, we might also ask if there is a place for more embodied disciplines when we are trained as early years practitioners. Subjects such as dance and theatre skills, which sideline language in order to foster the shared dynamism of bodies and affect, might be taken alongside theoretical learning. These different bodies or sources of knowledge may offer us ways to resist

the deadening effect of an early education system that always knows already where a child is heading.

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