

A group of approximately ten diverse individuals, including men and women of various ethnicities, are posed together in a modern, brightly lit interior space. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The setting appears to be a contemporary office or meeting room, with a ceiling featuring recessed lights and several pendant lamps hanging from the ceiling. The background shows large windows with vertical blinds. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

**Nurturing a fledgling community of Froebelian practice in South Africa:  
Reflections from a 2021 pilot online course**

## What was our intention?

- In 2021, a group of early years practitioners in South Africa participated in a Froebel Trust pilot online course. The group included university teacher education lecturers, early Childhood teachers and members of an early childhood non-governmental organisation. Although some had experience and responsibilities for early childhood care and education, most of us had not encountered Froebelian ideas before; we were inspired by the twelve sessions led by Prof Tina Bruce and Dr Stella Louis, with Prof Carole Bloch.
- Our hope was to try and implement what we'd learned on the course, continue communicating, and learning as a group. We knew this would be a challenge; the poverty related demands and stress levels of daily life and teaching can be extreme in South Africa.
- This project offered the first chance for us to come together in person to reflect on the course, share understandings and discuss attempts to use Froebelian pedagogy since 2021.

## What did we do?

- Appreciating the importance of the Froebelian principle that young children learn best from ‘knowledgeable and nurturing educators’
  - 1) we held an intensive workshop to reflect on the course;
  - 2) we did informal interviews with two practitioners who had participated in the course;
  - 3) we introduced the Froebelian principles to a group of practitioners.
- We now share the participants words where possible to illustrate and summarise the key findings and implications of our endeavours.

## 1) Reflective workshop

**' That which follows is always conditioned upon that which goes before'.**

**(Froebel. The Education of Man)**

We discussed our experiences and-or training in early childhood pedagogy and practice by situating ourselves in terms of our own relationships with early childhood pedagogy and practice.

- *"...I don't personally I don't have any experience in ECD [early childhood development]. As much as I was working at a primary school, I was teaching between grade four and seven...What actually drove me to this project is because my children, the oldest is 10 and the youngest is in grade 2. So I wanted to actually get the experience of how I can be able to assist them academically...for me it's about walking the journey with them that was the whole point of joining this..."*

Of the 12 workshop participants, only one had received formal training to teach in early childhood; one other had been trained for Foundation Phase teaching (age 6+). All view early education as hugely important.

- *"I've got absolutely no training in ECD [early childhood development], but I do have a love for it ... I do have experience in in teaching for grade R, you know, developing grade R teachers to teach. I had to kind of through trial and error teach myself to teach them. You know, I had to get the feel. And what I did was, during teaching practice, I used to go and sit in a grade R classroom and see how children learn. I also used to watch my grandchild, who at the time was in grade R, come home and see what she had to do."*
- *"I was trained at the FET phase [grades 10 -12]. It just so happened that my very first post was at Grade 3 and I'm still there...I'm learning how I was raised, I'm learning how my parents perceived children to be and I think it stems from there also, how the child was viewed, the importance of the child. So culture plays a big role in ECD [early childhood development]. "*



## The conditions of work in early childhood is a major concern

**'Let us live for our children; then will their lives bring us joy and peace and we shall ourselves begin to grow in wisdom.'** (Froebel 1885)

- Reflecting on Froebel's law of opposites and unity and connectedness, we discussed our context. The reality is one of significant negative aspects working in early childhood. Apart from poor pay for the mainly female workforce, practitioners at all levels are over worked.
- *"The long hours? Oh, yes. And they do not get a day off. At this particular ECD centre [visited] they work from - it's like eight hours straight. I mean, they also need to look after their own wellness... We are talking about the importance of the children at the centre of the school. But now if the teachers are not looked after, you know, then how is that going to help the child?"*

Which principles seem most important and possible to implement?

- **Principles: Unity and connectedness and Engaging with Nature**
- *“...for me this theme or concept mean that children are part of the real world. They explore. They connect and associate with [the] nature. And it makes them to be fully developed even outside the four walls of their homes, so to be out there in nature. What stood out for me is that they explore and they are exposed to the wonders of the nature. They will be able to understand the rivers, the mountains, the trees the leaves and how they interrelate to human beings.”*
- *“... taking the children outside and seeing them also involved in gardening where they will touch plants, they will feel, they will taste some seeds if you give them and it gives that ownership to see them planting those seeds and they water them everyday and they see them growing -that excitement. The child touch, feels, smell, taste. “*
- *“ Children even get excited for an ant. They do. It’s moving!”*

# How can Froebelian pedagogy be relevant to decolonizing the early childhood curriculum?

Froebelian pedagogical understandings support the educational significance of African indigenous knowledge about the interconnectedness of people with nature and the universe, and related wisdoms.

- *“Recently we were developing the curriculum on play... I raised there: “Let's add nature”. Because it's something that has not been happening within the ECD [early childhood development]. So that part of excursions taking children out, they explore the parks, they go to mountains, they view the trees. It's something that we will be implementing because it's part of the curriculum - and I'm excited about it.”*



The importance of relationships and the value of unity and interconnectedness chimes with African indigenous values

*"...if we think of community in Africa, or there's an African saying that it takes a village to raise a child. Now, if we bring that into the development of a child, in early childhood, the child must be able to understand that they're also full, functional human beings, they're part of the society. As teachers, it becomes important to actually nurture them in a sense that they feel they represent something. They're part of who we are. So I thought of this with the concept of Ubuntu. How do we teach Ubuntu or that community aspect or communion or community for the child to know that they belong or to feel that they belong?"*

**Ubuntu describes a set of closely related Bantu African-origin value systems that emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals with their surrounding societal and physical worlds. "Ubuntu" is sometimes translated as "I am because we are", or "humanity towards others".**

We see the benefits of self-directed learning and also the challenges of balancing freedom with guidance

- **Principle: Autonomous Learners**

- *“Freedom with guidance for me, is actually more about an approach that is emancipatory, really allowing the child to be who they are. Allowing the child to be reflective of themselves and be able to know their role without actually putting them in a box ... but [enabling] the child to be whole as they are, and to know that they've got that sense of agency, as the child. But for the teacher now, to guide the child in that emancipatory perspective means that the teacher must be able to have patience and be reflective of their own practice, as an individual and also as a teacher as well.”*
- *“It is quite life changing for me [learning about the Froebelian approach], you know, because it comes back again, to how I believed things were done then. So it's going to be really challenging for me to think out of the box. And in terms of educating myself to allow the child to direct... but in my classroom...the discipline, it's a mind thing. I don't mind allowing children to go and discover in their own learning capacity... But it always comes back to the discipline, how do I balance it? How do I get parents involved? Yeah, but I do, absolutely see the value in allowing the child to guide their own learning, and I just would love to be the facilitator.”*

Reflecting on  
symbolic play  
enables powerful  
links to our own  
childhoods

**'Children are deeply involved and difficult to distract from their deep learning as they wallow in their play and learning'. (Tina Bruce)**

- **Principle: The central importance of play**
- *"...and it reminds me of my childhood. We were playing this game blindfolding. And you will have to look for someone and you get that person. So, whilst it was my turn to be blindfold and I happened to hit the wall, which was rough casted with [the] cement and I hurt myself on my forehead and it was bleeding. But after that, I did not stop. Hence, it's reminding me of being deeply involved and difficult to distract. Because no matter how my mom was saying, "What are you doing? Why did you do this blindfold thing? Look, now you are hurting you are bleeding", I went back again but this time I said to myself, "I need to be clever, I need to make use of my hands, my feet, so even if I crawl so that I'm sure that whatever I'm grabbing, and trying to find out, I can feel the danger by using my hands my feet". And I think in that one I learned to be strategic. That's where solving a problem because if I did not have a strategy, how am I going to avoid that thing? And get back again and bleed. And ever since I did not because I had the skills."*


We appreciate the importance of observing, supporting and extending children's learning

## Children use first-hand experiences from life. (Tina Bruce)

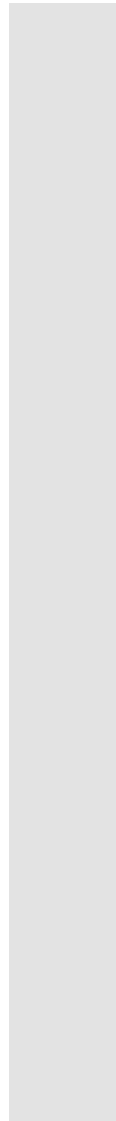
- *'Remember, we've got diverse classrooms. So I'm not familiar with whatever the child does, I can identify maybe where it's coming from what the child brings into the classroom. So what comes from within basically, right, every child is going to do something different. I will observe the child and see what it which I can identify with that individual child. I'll give you an example, I give a child two sticks, and they start started drumming ... So that child has already been exposed to drumming... If I take that, now I've identified further and give the child a hammer, what am I doing? So that is I see it. So instead of preventing the child now, I take that same drumming activity, but now give it more usefulness. So that will be the support'.*

Do you think of Froebelian pedagogy since completing the course?

- *“I do. Because it worries me how when I look at what the students are doing, and it's all worksheets based. I mean, even on my lesson planning, I've actually said that you are not allowed to give photocopied pages that is not creative! The flat surfaces are too abstract”.*
- *“Okay, so I didn't know about Froebel - the theory, but unbeknown to me, I had actually applied a lot of the principles and the ways of doing things in my own teaching practice. And in raising my own children. I just thought I was odd”.*



## What impacts on implementation possibilities?

- Most participants main issue expressed is frustration that the way the curriculum is interpreted in rigid ways. This coupled with excessive work requirements, they feel this leaves little or no space for creating open ended, holistic teaching and learning opportunities.
- 



## What are key insights from the reflections?

- The sense has been reinforced that the online short-course has had a lasting impact on practitioner interest and curiosity about how young children learn.
- The more we delve into Froebelian pedagogy, the more we realize the importance to bring about respect for young children's great learning capabilities and needs.
- The desire to keep nurturing a community of Froebelian practice is alive. We need to practice Froebelian pedagogy 'on the ground' to develop confidence and expertise and for others to observe and learn from and to show its compatibility to African educational principles.
- There are too many demands on early childhood educators at all levels, but we must keep space and time for being inspired and for our own ongoing learning. This is the way that we are best able to serve the children and fight the inequality which exists in provision for young children.

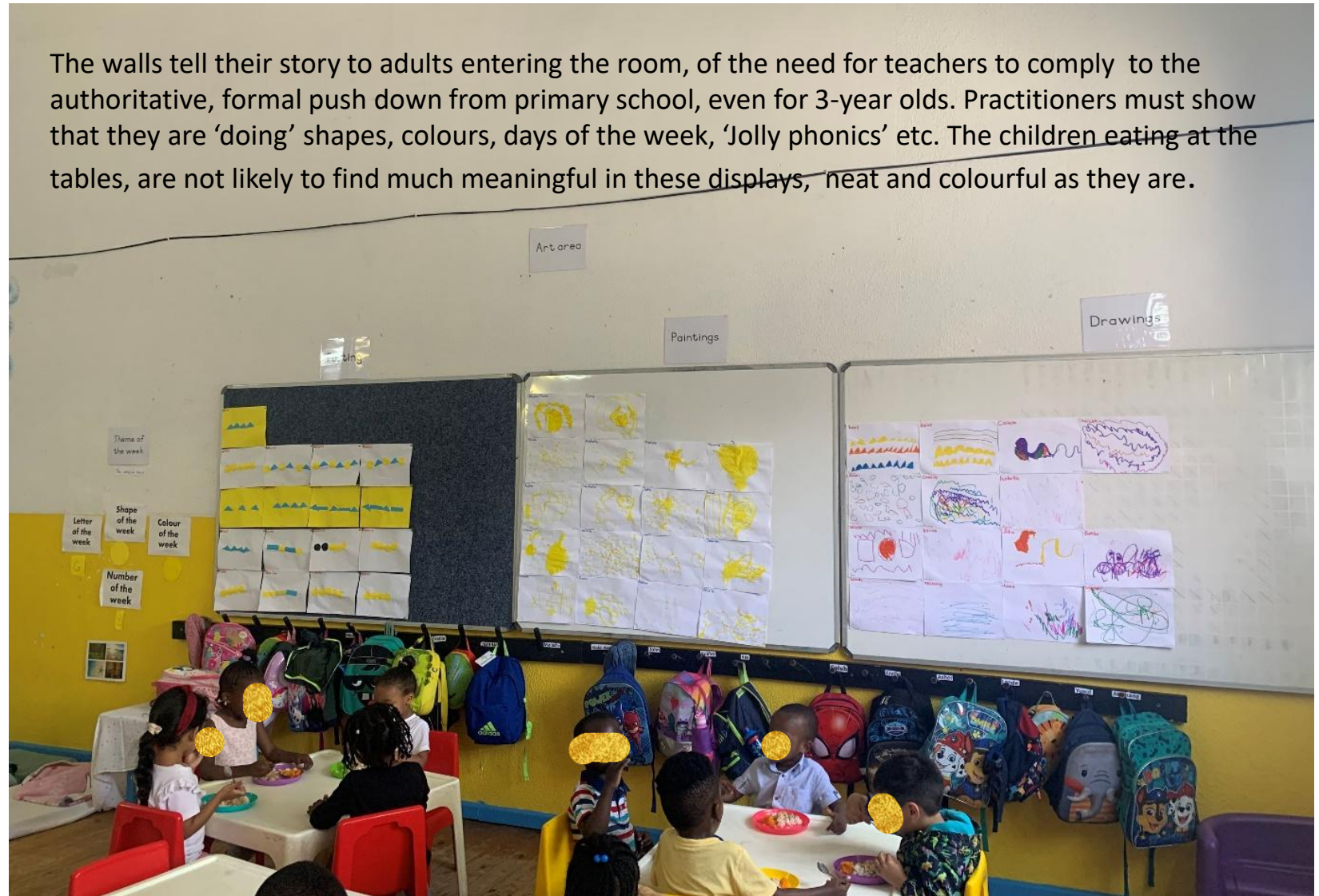
## 2) Informal interviews

- Two practitioners who did the course work in a privately run early childhood centre in Cape Town. Its vision is to offer good quality, affordable education to working families in a caring environment.
- They cater for diverse groups of children, who' parents can afford to pay relatively low, private school fees.
- The practitioners remembered the course with a sense of having been nurtured, and 'seen'. They reminisced how they felt that they were able to speak from their own position of experience, and appreciated the way that everyone's views were valued, from them as practitioners with children to the university lecturers and professors.
- They explained their main challenge: **Being required to follow a very structured and partitioned daily programme. This did not support them in finding opportunities for holistic teaching.**

The structuring of the environment, resources and teachers chosen activities constrain or invite a curriculum based in the interests and concerns of children

Reductionist skills-based thinking about language and literacy (filtering down from policy to the classroom) results in daily programmes that dictate themes and activities to teachers and children.

The walls tell their story to adults entering the room, of the need for teachers to comply to the authoritative, formal push down from primary school, even for 3-year olds. Practitioners must show that they are 'doing' shapes, colours, days of the week, 'Jolly phonics' etc. The children eating at the tables, are not likely to find much meaningful in these displays, neat and colourful as they are.



'I'm having a baby'

**'At this age play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant. It needs to be cherished and encouraged by the parents, for in [their] free choice of play a child reveals the future life of [their] mind...'**

**Froebel in Lilley (1967)**

- Symbolic play emerges where open ended resources are offered. Here the children are being 'pregnant' with sand babies. Outdoor play is generally a time when staff watch out for the children's safety and physical development. But the chance for the children to share their excitement happened because of a discussion during the interview about observation and the symbolic life of the child. When they noticed adults observing them with interest, the children began to share the names and sex of their babies, as well as when they were coming 'out' to meet their families. Here was a chance to discuss curricular links and learning and teaching opportunities from a Froebelian perspective.



## What were the key insights?

*'I wanted to educate people to be free, to think, to take action for themselves'.  
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:41)*

- Teachers recognise the importance of play and children's own stories from being on the course.

Through observing free play, teachers were able to understand more about how and what children were learning.

- Expectations of a rigid daily programme and curriculum demands leaves teachers feeling disempowered and unable to teach holistically though they said they would like to.




### 3) Introducing Froebelian principles to a group of teachers

- Teachers work with diverse groups of 2-3 and 4-5 year olds, who are mainly the children of university students or staff. Though situated on the university campus, it is a privately run centre. We used the principles to scaffold discussions about the kind of daily programme they use to teach.
- The teachers discussed their own understandings of the ‘what, why and how’ of teaching using Froebelian principles.
- This multilingual community faces communication challenges. They must teach through English though many children understand well in isiXhosa and Afrikaans, or other African languages. The staff speak English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans.
- We reflected on children’s first-hand experiences, and building from where children are, and with what they can do. Teachers could begin viewing their language situation in a positive and resourceful rather than negative, deficit light.
- The outdoor space is large and full of potential for creating a working garden. The teachers were surprised and inspired by the depth of educational possibilities in the Froebelian notion of young children engaging with nature in a hands-on practical way and not only playing outside in a space created for them by adults.

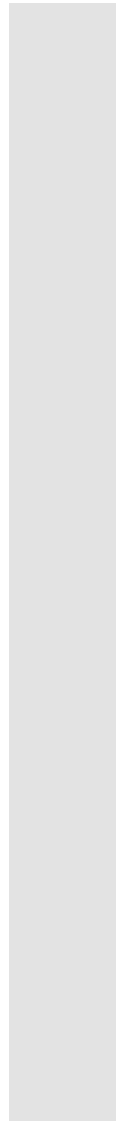


## What were the key insights?

- Froebelian principles are global in nature and help teachers work through and situate their own practice.
- Multilingualism can be an asset and a resource.
- Teachers can enhance their children's learning opportunities by using the outdoors in powerful and affordable ways.



## What is the way forward?

- Where possible we will raise awareness and offer training about the value of Froebelian pedagogy and how young children learn to people holding high levels of authority in early childhood.
  - We will find a way to offer preservice training to early childhood students and continue introducing Froebelian pedagogy to ECD centres in our region.
  - We will continue to connect with the original group and hold regular ‘inspiration sessions’ .
- 

- At university in November 2024, there will be workshops held with 90 foundation phase preservice teacher education students, university lecturers and ECE practitioners to further advocate for the use of Froebelian pedagogy. Three workshops will be held with students, 2 with staff and one with ECE practitioners. The presenters are Carole Bloch and Sara Stanley
- An early childhood development book is being drafted for publication in 2025. In the book is a book chapter emanating from this project. The book chapter is titled: ***Exploring how Froebelian pedagogy can inform culturally relevant education for young children in South Africa.*** The book is going to be an open source book, meaning that it will be freely available on the internet, which means that more ECD [early childhood development] practitioners will have access to our book chapter.

-

- A conference paper presentation will also be done in January 2025 based on the book chapter. The conference is a national conference, hosted by The Education Association of South Africa (EASA), which is a inclusive network of academics, researchers, and practitioners who all prioritize education, particularly education in South Africa.
- It has been an educational and rewarding experience in learning about Froebelian pedagogy and in sharing its value with ECD practitioners and teacher educators. We thank the Froebel Trust for the funding, which made this scholarship of learning and teaching project possible.

National  
conference  
presentation  
on 20 Jan 2025  
Froebelian  
pedagogy in South  
African  
early childhood  
education settings:  
Teacher reflections.

