

CHAPTER 9

OBSERVING AND SHARING PRACTICE

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Observation as a way of looking at and adapting practice in different settings.
- How to create a rich learning environment with sustainable materials.
- The importance of building on the strengths of the community rather than beginning with what is lacking.

Details of the setting

The Froebel Trust project in Soweto, South Africa is well established. The staff at Soweto have embraced the opportunity to develop the physical environment, working together with the Froebel Trust team to create a sustainable learning environment which is culturally appropriate.

The routine of the day

The children arrive at breakfast time, and when they have gathered in the classrooms, brought by parents or relatives, the older children attend an assembly outside. They dance and sing with the staff. The youngest children, between one and two years of age, remain in their classrooms.

The children are provided with breakfast, and then the day of lessons begins. There are about 50 children in each room, with about 30 one year olds. There are now two members of staff with each group of children.

After lunch, also provided by the Social Development Agency feeding programme, the children sleep on the floor of the room, and then go outside to play.

Founding principles

The Soweto project is based on two major approaches which guide the practice both of the Froebel Trust team, and the staff at the nursery.

1. Traditions of the Froebelian approach to education

The team from the Froebel Trust use the Froebelian principles to guide their practice. Friedrich Froebel first expressed these principles in the mid-nineteenth century, but they have been developed over time. A modern presentation of some of the most important principles was developed by Bruce (1987) but this has been updated through a process of continual review in order to reflect current priorities.

This means that instead of being rigid and outdated, the Froebelian principles are constantly adapted through reflective debate and adjustments in practice, and have become a way for practitioners to continue to create learning opportunities for themselves and the children they care for. The Froebelian principles have proven to be invaluable in working in a different cultural context, and have helped the team to avoid imposing their own culture on the setting and to communicate and work with staff appropriately and effectively.

Key Froebelian principles

- Childhood is part of life, and not simply preparation for it.
- The whole child is considered to be important. Health, physical and mental, is emphasised, as well as the importance of feelings, relationships, thinking and spiritual aspects.
- Learning is not compartmentalised, for everything links.
- Intrinsic motivation, resulting in child-initiated and self-directed activity, is valued.
- Self-discipline is emphasised.
- There are especially receptive periods of learning and sequences of development.
- What children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point for children's education.
- There is an inner life of the child, which emerges under favourable conditions, such as pretending and imagining through play.

- The people (both adults and children) with whom the child interacts are of central importance.
- The child's education is seen as an interaction between the child and the environment, including the physical, materials, other people and knowledge itself. (Bruce, 1987: 2014)

2. The Asset Based Community Development approach (ABCD) embedded in Appreciative Inquiry

This approach aims to empower communities through collective reflection, communication, and discovering common ground, energy and caring about each other.

The founding Principal of the crèche and school (the late Pam Mfana) was a respected leader who had worked since 1991 with a deep commitment to her community.

She was clear during initial conversations that her dream was to be able to offer the children in the crèche and school a curriculum similar to that of children in countries such as the USA, the Nordic countries and the UK, which she regarded as being highly desirable. This remarkable woman, Pam Mfana, had recently attended the Community Leadership Development course pioneered by Professor Ian Bruce CBE through seed corn funding from the Joffe Foundation, working with Professor Hanna Nel at the University of Johannesburg.

But would it have been appropriate for the Froebel Trust team to have worked with Pam on what she desired – a UK early childhood curriculum? Imposing and transmitting what works in one culture and inserting it into another very different culture in a different part of the world does not work. It also implies arrogance on the part of those doing the imposing and transmitting.

This is where the ABCD approach, to which Professor Hanna Nel introduced the Froebel Trust team, proved to be invaluable. The Froebelian principles and the ABCD approach were found to chime with each other in very helpful ways. The ABCD approach was developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) (Asset Based Community Development Institute, Illinois). Instead of beginning with a focus on problems, deficits and a lack of resources and training, with external support being central, ABCD emphasises the assets and strengths within the community as the starting point, which does not create a long-term dependency on external support for sustainability. Instead this approach encourages an appreciation and mobilisation of the positive assets and strengths for both individuals and communities. The aim is to uncover concealed gifts through Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001) and to facilitate vision through dream, design, delivery and discovery.

The aims of the project

Pam and her staff were therefore encouraged to identify their strengths. These were the fact that the children will learn several of the 11 official languages of South Africa, including English, by the time they are 6 years of age. Children will usually learn their first language, for example Xosa, Zulu or Sithu, then pick up other languages, and after that begin to learn English. Singing and dancing are a strong part of the traditions of the school. Singing in harmony, in different languages, is not something that the Froebel Trust team could offer.

The Principal wanted the children in her school to be offered a Western type of curriculum (such as the British Nursery School). But the Froebel Trust staff were anxious not to impose an inappropriate curriculum which would not be sustainable, and which would undermine the strengths of the community and culture. There was an interesting discussion. It was evident that the Froebel Trust team were mono-lingual, and they were not a patch on the staff as far as singing and dancing were concerned. To impose a curriculum which did not take account of these strengths would be a great loss to the community.

Through discussions the staff began to feel a sense of pride in their strengths, which had not been something they had felt previously, as far as an early childhood curriculum was concerned.

Design

It takes time and a great deal of discussion and the development of trust in each other to move from a dependency model to an ABCD approach. The emphasis on the part of the Froebel Trust was on offering training in the form of practical work with the staff and children, and constant discussion, reflection and review. Both the Froebel Trust team and the staff at the crèche/school were in a continual state of learning. This is the best kind of training.

Parents and helpers organised by Pam were paid to be in the classrooms so as to release staff members for training when necessary. Staff then played with the materials they would be using with the children and talked about their value. The caretaker would often participate in the training for part of the time.

The materials offered were sustainable, which chimes with the Froebelian approach to early childhood education. Many of them were developed from revisiting the materials used in the early nursery schools at the turn of the nineteenth century in the UK, because they offer children worthwhile educational opportunities at a low cost. Modern-day materials that were low cost were also added.

The only materials that were high cost were those that would be sustainable. Again, looking at the early nursery schools, the use of wooden blocks (Froebel's Gifts), although expensive to buy, can last for half a century if cared for.

The materials offered included:

- Mark making materials:
 - portable individual slate boards and chalk;
 - blackboard paint on the walls.
- Malleable materials:
 - clay;
 - plastic wipeable mats;
 - overalls that could be wiped clean;
 - washing-up bowls to wash hands (there was no running water in the school apart from in the kitchen).



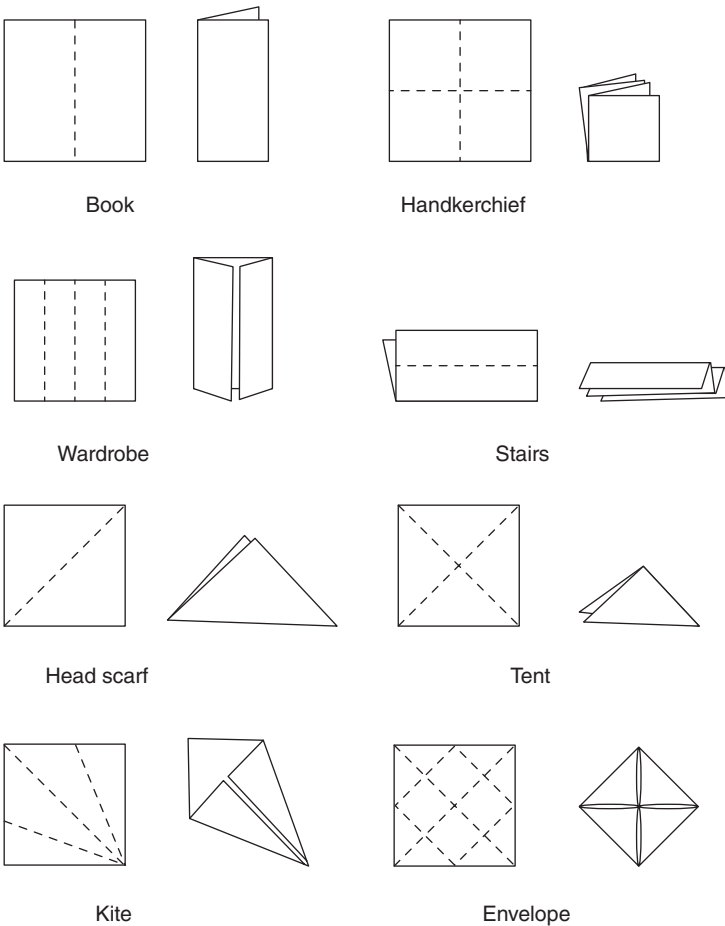
Figure 9.1 Clay

- Soft sphere on a string:
 - these can be made of string and are invaluable for use with babies and toddlers: they are Froebel's first Gift.
- Construction using balance and freestanding materials:
 - wooden blocks to use on the floor; the wooden blocks are also Froebel's Gifts.
- Construction materials with connecting parts that are not free standing:
 - coffee sticks and bluetack lumps (to echo the stick and peas used in the early nursery schools): it was decided not to use food materials as the children are nourished using a kitchen funded by social services.
- Sand:
 - dustpans and brushes;
 - child-height besom brooms (adult size with handles shortened);
 - at first seed boxes of sand were introduced to use on the tables, but the staff found this unacceptable. As children sleep on the floors, it was too gritty even when swept up carefully. After two years staff introduced sand in the garden, placing it in upturned broken plastic

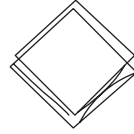
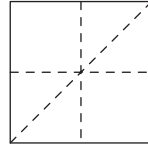
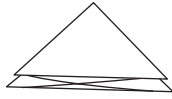
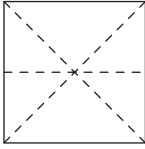
tables, and placing it at the base and underneath two climbing frames that had been donated. This means the sand does not turn to mud when it rains, which it does, heavily. It is under the frame and so protected. The sand in the table frames is located on the verandah, and is used by the one to two year olds.

- Paper folding materials:
 - newspapers were collected and children made aeroplanes with them in the garden: other paper folding possibilities are shown in Figure 9.2 below.

Basic shapes

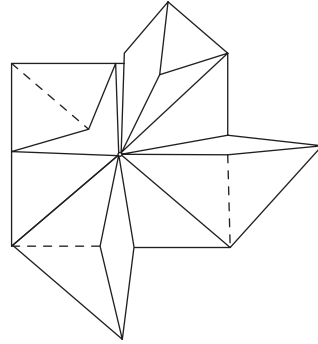
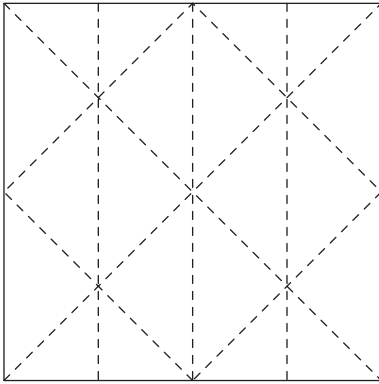


Inspired by Heinrike Schauwecker-Zimmer
 (Source: International Froebel Society Conference, Jena, 2011)

Basic shapes

Paper glider triangle

Inside reverse square



Tablecloth

Figure 9.2 Paper folding

(Source: Heinrike Schauwecker-Zimmer)

- Pin boards, peg boards and tessellation boards:
 - like the paper folding these are some of Froebel's Occupations;
 - children make shapes using elastic bands wrapped round the pins on the board;
 - they insert the pegs into the holes on the peg board;
 - the tessellation boards are made of triangles and diamond shapes;
 - these pieces of equipment will last for many years, providing the pegs are carefully looked after: only the elastic bands will need renewal.

Delivery

The story of the introduction of the sand into the garden, and not into the classroom, illustrates the style of the delivery of the training.

The **aim** was to develop the curriculum in ways which:

- were right for the community;
- would not make them reliant on external funding.

The **design** was to celebrate and extend the strengths of the curriculum that already existed. It was also to introduce materials that were sustainable, and to train the staff in order that they could be empowered to use them in ways that both educated the children to maximum effect and helped them to be reflective practitioners.

The Froebel Trust team each took on different roles: Stella Louis led the training; Georgie McCall led the classroom organisation that was necessary for implementing the training; Tina Bruce supported the team.

For the **delivery**, each day the staff would meet in the garden for training led by Stella. Staff used the materials as a group, working with the member of the Froebel Trust who led the training, and supported by the two other members of the Froebel Trust team. There was a different focus each day. For example, for one session they would play with the blocks, while on another day they would use the clay, or mark make with the slates, construct with the sticks, or make patterns with them. Stories were introduced, attempting to use African stories. The staff would act them out and there would be plenty of discussion.

The staff and training team would then go into a classroom and try things out. As we saw, the sand was rejected for two years. The Froebel Trust team never wished to impose. The training was an offering. How it was taken up or not was not for them to decide.

At first the key member of staff working with the one year olds was not included in the training. It became clear that this was because she did not speak English. It was felt important that she should join, and because the sessions were always very practical, she was able to join in and on occasions to lead. Her storytelling and acting abilities were impressive.

During these training sessions there was a great deal of **observation** of how different members of staff operated. The Froebel Trust team participated with the staff, led by Stella. For example, with the stick and blu tack session, one member of staff made football goalposts, and discovered the importance of the triangle. She did not want to dismantle her model (a feeling which many children experience) and so we moved it onto a board and she showed it to the children. This was at the time of the Football World Cup, so the children were very interested in the model.

This led to further staff discussions about the importance of teaching mathematics so that children could see the relevance of shapes such as triangles, which are extremely useful in engineering and architecture amongst other things. Teaching others begins with our own learning. There is a saying, 'If you only do what you've always done, you will always do what you've always done'. This is not conducive to curriculum development.

Observation allows us to consider our own learning, and practically try out what makes us learn, therefore turning us into reflective practitioners.

Delivering storytelling

At the end of the training session, the three and four year olds and then the five and six year olds (a class of nearly fifty children at a time) were invited to be the audience. The Froebel Trust team wanted the staff to tell the stories and act them out in their first language (Zulu, Xosa or Sithu). This was based on research evidence showing that children learn other languages best if they are able to use their first language. Strength in this enables them to think better, and this in turn helps the child to understand how other languages work. Initially, however, the dream of the children learning English in school over-rode this, and so the story was told in English. The children concentrated hard, and enjoyed the story. But suddenly, one of the staff decided to ask her colleagues to act the story again, this time with her narrating it in Zulu. This time the children whooped with joy at various points in the tale, and called out in anticipation of what would come next.

The discussion between the Froebel Trust team and the staff was buzzing that day. Was the children's excitement because they already knew the story when it was told in Zulu because they had already been told it in English first? Was it because they understood the language that they could engage with it more deeply (Bloch, 2013)? Or should children learn all their lessons in English in school because this was a passport to a well-paid job later on? Did it matter that the staff were telling the story in their third language (Russell, 2010) when they spoke in English, and did this affect the quality of their storytelling?

This discussion has some interesting aspects, which need to be reflected upon. Part of the strength of the curriculum in Soweto has been identified in the singing and dancing, and multi-languages which are taught through a whole group experience. The children stand in rows with the teacher at the front. There is a lot of call and response, repetition and movement with rhythm which helps to say the words. This is also how the children learn English. They chant, and give rote learnt responses.

The adult chants, for example, 'What is this?'

The children reply, 'This is a triangle'.

A child is asked to select the triangle on the wall, saying, 'This is a triangle'.

The adult asks, 'Is he right?'

The children call out as a chant, 'He is right. It is a triangle'.

The Froebel Trust team were anxious not to interfere with this aspect of the curriculum because the power of the group is part of the community feeling, and we did not wish to undermine the cultural traditions and perhaps the very strengths we were hoping to build on through the ABCD approach. However, staff were commenting on the way the children used triangles in their stick and blu tack constructions, their pattern boards and shape boards, as well as in their blockplay. The children were using triangles for a purpose but needed to be given the mathematical term 'triangle'. Only when engaged in the practical work did the formal chanting lesson on the triangle have any meaning or make any sense.

As a result the Froebel Trust team decided to enhance the storytelling, song and music. We expanded the stories and songs so that the children had English songs and stories told in English after they were told in the first language.

Delivering wooden blockplay

As always, the staff were introduced to the blockplay first, before introducing the children to the blocks. This was essential, as they began to see the potential of the materials. They made football goalposts and palaces, and discussed how to make a roof or how to build tall. They considered the need for a flat surface, and how important it was to have enough blocks to make what you wanted to make. They talked about being made to share, when the other person has a completely different idea of what they would like to make. They complained about people taking the very block you wanted to use and not having enough time, and discussed being allowed to experiment and choose what to make. They thought it important to locate the blocks away from people walking through.

Following on from this the staff and the Froebel Trust team went into the classrooms of the older children to observe them being introduced to the blocks, and how they used them. It was important to persuade the staff not to show the children what to do. When they stood back they began to see that the children had ideas, and were keen to experiment. By the third year of our sessions together, there was a new room to be used for blockplay, so that all the blocks and home corner pretend play materials were in the one place.

The blockplay is at a higher level of quality than much of the blockplay in the UK. The children from the three and four year old room and the five and six year old room use this space for their learning as well as their classroom and the verandah onto which the classrooms open.

Observing children at play with the wooden blocks

A group of children playing with the wooden blocks chatted together in their first language, and a building emerged that looked impressive. A child told the practitioner that it was the Carlton Hotel. They then had a party, and danced round it.

Several things of significance were mulled over at the staff discussion:

- One child, a boy of five years, led the play and was very verbal in his first language.
- Another four year old boy was very practical and good at solving any problems that arose as the construction developed.
- He discovered the arch, which is a fundamental and significant marker in blockplay development.
- Staff observed the care children took not to knock the blocks down, and to place each block with this in mind.
- They worked as a team.
- The fact that this was the Carlton Hotel meant they were functioning at a symbolic level in their pretend play.
- The Carlton Hotel is also of deep cultural significance as it is where the ANC (African National Congress) had their first legally permitted meeting after apartheid. Hence the celebration with the party.
- A younger girl of three years old had needed an adult to be with her, alongside, while she made an enclosure with the blocks. She had an idea, but did not have the confidence to work without the comforting presence of an adult next to her.

At Soweto written records are not kept of each child's progress (which is not surprising given the large size of classes, the level of training of the staff and the lack of paper). But staff are now discussing the progress of **individual children**, rather than offering the curriculum with an



Figure 9.3



Figure 9.4



Figure 9.5



Figure 9.6

entirely whole group approach. Observation is the key here. It has helped the staff to plan how to offer the children educationally worthwhile learning experiences. In other words, the observations informed the planning. They also led to staff beginning to reflect on and question their current methods of learning and teaching.

It is one thing to know how you would like to teach children, but it is quite another to put this into effective practice. The Froebel Trust staff worked with the staff of the crèche and school by going into their classrooms immediately following the training sessions with different sustainable materials. But this would not have been enough. It was also necessary to discuss practical problems as they began to emerge, after the first introduction of a material.

Using observations to develop provision

Georgie McCall supported staff in the one year old room, the two and three year old room, and the three and four year old room.

The 'baby' room as it was known, although most children there were walking, was a place where children were not left to cry, and would be changed and fed, but this loving atmosphere took all the energy and

time of the two staff with the thirty or so children. Observations of the room in action, alongside the training sessions, led to the decision that there was little to stimulate the children. They milled about with little to do as a result.

Sustainable materials were introduced, and the children were observed using them. Small empty plastic water bottles were filled with objects so that they became shakers. Some were filled with water and glittery materials to

shake. Pieces of cloth were used to make dens to hide in, cardboard boxes were to sit in, bowls were to be used as play props. The walls were painted with blackboard paint so that the children could mark make on them with chalk.

The children were allowed out onto the verandah to sit in the upturned table and play with the sand. The potties were placed on the verandah so that they could watch. The old shed became a changing room and the children loved this room.

The two rooms for the two and three year olds and the three and four year olds have a connecting door. One room is dark and small and is next to the kitchen. The staff have different styles of working, but over time they have begun to open the door between the rooms, and to set out materials so that the children can move across the two rooms when making their choices of what to do.

As a result of the sessions on storytelling, the staff have developed a system where the smaller classroom is no longer a route through to the kitchen. They wanted the children not to be disturbed.

In each room of the crèche/school, the children have an area for pretend domestic play. They play with tea cups, soft toys and dolls donated by visitors at various times. There are upturned cardboard boxes for tables and beds for dolls. Offcuts of materials are used to make slings to carry the 'babies' on their backs. Staff observe how children imitate adults in their families, preparing food and carrying their babies to the market. Some children simply do as the others do, and some lead the play. They become characters, who prepare meals and interact with the others. Pretend play is a significant marker in a child's learning journey. It is impressive to see how the staff observe and know their children in these respects.

The door to the garden is now open, and the children walk past the organic vegetable garden developed by the caretaker, encouraged by Georgie McCall who has vegetable growing areas for each classroom in the garden of her school in the UK. In the garden the staff have made a home corner fantasy area, as they call it, in a shed. This is particularly popular with the two and three year olds, who are emerging into domestic home play. There is now a large sand pit, made by the caretaker with the enthusiasm of the Principal (Figure 9.7). Again, Georgie was able to give sound advice on drainage, a tarpaulin cover and the safety of the edges, drawing on her experience as a head teacher.



Figure 9.7 Children enjoying the sandpit

Staff development through study visits to the UK

It became clear that the Principal and her staff had become reflective practitioners, eager to dialogue with colleagues working in a different cultural context, but increasingly confident in the way they found it best to practise in their own cultural context.

Over the next three years, different members of staff were funded by the Froebel Trust to spend a week in three London nursery schools/children's centres. This led to a different kind of discussion. Georgie and Stella were travelling tutors working with them in the schools.

They saw luxury in the equipment and the materials (paint, paper, expensive felt pens, pencils, etc.) offered to the children which would not be sustainable on the non-existent budget in their crèche/school. But this was not allowed to get in the way of observing what they found to be common to both cultural contexts.

They saw sand, water play, clay, and recycled materials such as boxes and bottle tops being used.

They felt a sense of pride in realising that their children also experienced construction play through the sticks and Blu Tack.

They were impressed that their children had wooden blocks, and appreciated this in the light of the cost of providing them. They take great care of these expensive items.

They had some of the Froebel Occupations which were not in use in the nurseries they visited (tessellated shape boards; pin boards).

The Principal, on her visit, was impressed with the food children were offered. A nutritionist had developed a menu for Georgie in her school, and this was taken for use. There were several vegetarian days in the menu, which were of high nutrition and cheaper to provide. On returning to Soweto, the Principle was determined to have a better kitchen in her school, and secured funding for this.

There was great interest in the way children with disabilities and special educational needs were educated in the UK. A little girl with Down's Syndrome remained in the 'baby' room despite being three years old in the Soweto setting, because that would be the traditional approach. Georgie shared and explained the practice with the visiting staff. On the next visit of the Froebel Trust team, the little girl was in her correct year group, and fully participant in it. She is now in the mainstream primary school. This is a very good example of, 'If you always do what you've always done you'll always do what you've always done'. Sometimes seeing something done in a different way causes the kind of thinking that brings about a change of practice. This is the value of observing practice in different countries and different types of settings. The Froebel Trust team also had to rethink much of their practice because of their observations of practice in Soweto.

What we have learned

- When children are taught as a whole group, it is difficult to observe individual differences. What stands out is the children who find what they are asked to do easy to achieve, or possible to achieve. Also noticeable are the children who find the tasks challenging or impossible to do. The children in the middle are not so easy to notice.
- But there can be a group feeling and energy when teaching, an atmosphere during a song sung as a mass crowd, or eating a meal together, or dancing en masse, or experiencing storytelling. The adult leading these events will need to focus on keeping the show going. But this is where the other staff can play an important role by observing in more detail how different children are responding. Teaching as performance and transmission is very different from teaching as an observer who tunes into the detail of a child's response, and is informed by it to know what to do next – observe, support, extend (Bruce, 1987).
- When children have choices about what they do, they show us their strengths. They become more autonomous. Autonomy is about feeling in control (Dweck, 2000) of your learning. It also means knowing what you can manage without help, and knowing how to get help of the right kind, in the right way and at the right time when you don't know what to do, or you reach an impasse in your learning (Matthews, 2003).
- This has important implications for observation which informs planning. The way the room and the garden are set up will have an influence on a child's ability to learn maximally. The presentation of material provision is crucial here. The learning environment needs constant maintaining. Equipment is precious, and cannot be damaged, lost or wasted. Children will help if they are trained to do so and taught to take responsibility for keeping their room attractive to be in. The way that adults work with children is central to the way that children learn. Adults who join children, encourage them to have ideas and 'have a go' will be in a better position to observe each child's learning than those who constantly show children what to do. It is also very enjoyable to work with children in this way. Their creativity never ceases to amaze adults who take the time to engage with them.
- Staff who have themselves experienced use of the materials they provide for the children will have a good understanding of the challenges of a medium. They will be able to recognise as they observe children using the material how far along the learning journey a child is, connecting this to their own learning journeys. This is sharing the learning in the best sense.
- Training is the key to good education. The staff in Soweto are hungry for this, and their work with the Froebel Trust team has led to them being accepted onto courses with UNISA and the University of Johannesburg. One of the staff was asked to give a lesson on shape. She borrowed clay, shape pin boards, slates, sticks and Blu Tack. She asked the children to look around the classroom and identify the shapes, such as square windows or

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a rectangular door. They were then invited to make the shapes with the materials she had borrowed. Her tutor was pleased with the practical nature of the mathematics lesson, and commented on how much the children had enjoyed their learning. The staff in this crèche/school have begun to see the value of carefully prepared material provision and the powerful opportunities for teaching of the highest quality that good observation and planning bring.

- It is not easy to create a rich learning environment with virtually no budget and then sustain it without a reliance and dependency on outside help. Pam Mfana and her staff have kept going across the years with stamina, commitment, a love of children and a determination for them to have a good education.
- As Nelson Mandela said, 'A movement without a vision is a movement without moral foundation' (1993).

Reflections on this chapter

- Look at the garden and the indoor space where you are working. How sustainable are the materials you use? If carefully looked after, will they last for half a century? Do you have the kind of sustainable materials outlined in this chapter? How many of the observations you make, which inform your planning, are taken in the garden or out of doors?
- How easy would it be to equip your setting with no budget? Would you be able to use non-cost materials and still offer the children a good quality education?
- Do you value training? Do you agree with the message in this chapter, and in this book, that the way practitioners are trained to work with other people's children is an essential part of providing quality of education? What will you do as a result of reading this book to develop your observational skills, so that you will make more and more informed plans to help children in their learning?



Further reading

- Bloch, C. (2012) The magic and power of stories and play, *Literacy Issues*, 4 December, pp 1–2.
- Bloch, C. (2013) Enabling effective literacy learning in multilingual South African early childhood classrooms, PRAESA Occasional Papers No. 16.
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