

By Rujeko Moyo, ECD blogger who's passionate about nurturing a reading culture in the African child



March the 16th and 17th, 2017, saw the Observatory River Club Conference Centre abuzz with a conglomerate of over 180 individuals from various sectors and regions across South Africa –policy makers, government departments, universities and other tertiary institutions, donors and funders, non-profit and profit making organisations, libraries, schools, Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers, ECD consultants, ECD resource providers, ECD teachers and practitioners – all assembled together for one purpose: To deliberate on how best to effectively facilitate quality learning for South Africa’s early learners.

Bearing in mind that it is widely acknowledged that investing in early childhood development provides greater returns to society than any other form of human capital investment (James et al, 2010), it is no wonder that pivotal organisations such as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), The Froebel Trust and The Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD), partnered together with PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) over these **ground-breaking** two days, to effectively and practically address the question, **“What will we do with the children on Monday?”**

This two-day convene was well organised, very practical and very relevant to South Africa’s current ECD environment. Five workshops were running concurrently during each workshop-scheduled interval; this resulted in every attendee having the opportunity to attend all five workshops over the two-day period. The five workshops deliberated on the following areas in Early Childhood Education:

1. Storytelling and Story play (*facilitated by Sara Stanley and Nolubabalo Mbotshwa*)
2. Gifts and Occupations: Exploring mathematics (*facilitated by Tina Bruce, Xoliswa Ndhove, Magdeline Mdladla*)
3. Emergent Writing (*facilitated by Carole Bloch*)
4. Nature (*facilitated by Georgie McCall and Peter Hadebe*)
5. Observing Children and Schemas (*facilitated by Stella Louis and Mandisa Nakani*)

In between these workshops were feedback sessions and as well as key speeches by the following conference delegates: Andre Viviers (UNICEF), Mmatsetshweu Ruby Motaung (DHET), Tina Bruce (The Froebel Trust), Karin Murriss (University of Capetown) and Carole Bloch (PRAESA)

Listening, watching and participating in the conference brought a renewed consciousness to the organic nature of early learning. As one moved from one workshop to another it became more and more apparent that we are in sore need of a paradigm shift in our approach to Early Childhood

Education (ECE) in South Africa; a paradigm shift at policy levels, institutional levels, practitioner levels, caregiver levels and at a general societal level. We need to be **reconditioned** in our current “perceptions of” and “approaches to” early childhood education.

Tina Bruce, in her keynote address, “10 Transglobal Principles of Early Childhood Education” re-conscientised all present back to the natural, simple basics of childhood development and how these basics are so integral to a child’s learning. She reminded us that “The best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them what they need as children” (Principle 1) and that “What Children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point of a child’s education”(Principle 7). Both principles affirmed the importance of **play** in a child’s life –that play is not just an expected “past-time” in a child’s life but an absolutely vital part of early childhood development that can be maximised upon to enable quality early learning; and how it is equally important for practitioners, caregivers and anyone else involved with children to be fully acquainted with the various ways in which children play. Added to these, was Principle 3, “Subjects such as mathematics and art cannot be separated; young children learn in an integrated way and not in neat, tidy compartments” which further unravelled the multifaceted process through which children learn as they play; how, for instance when moulding clay or play dough, a child is learning art and mathematics, developing fine motor skills, and possibly developing language and social interaction skills, all at the same time. She then went on to draw our attention to the basic truth that, “Children are whole people who have feelings, ideas and relationships with others, and who need to be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually healthy” (Principle 2); shedding light on the essentiality of acknowledging and engaging all these inherent-from-birth-factors in the approach taken to facilitate early learning. Refreshing to hear as well, was that “Children learn best when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices and respected as autonomous learners” (Principle 4), an attribute we very often see displayed among children. Children want to be given room to navigate their own path, to discover for themselves, to figure out things for themselves, to succeed by themselves...and the approach taken to educate them needs to encourage this kind of autonomy. Adding to this was the valuable principle that, “Self-discipline is emphasised. Indeed this is the only kind of discipline worth having...” (Principle 5). This brought back consciousness to the fact that a child values the work they do when they find it enjoyable, engaging and intrinsically satisfying. These intrinsic rewards are far more validating and effective for generating long term self-discipline and self-motivation in a child, than reward systems which often yield short term results. These mentioned nuggets and all the rest of the 10 principles shared by Tina, were a gentle re-awakening, to the organical nature of quality early learning; an element that is too often stifled and sucked out of our current methodical, restrictive, instructive and results-oriented approach to early learning.

Creative juices flowed and imaginations were unbridled during the Storytelling workshop facilitated by Sarah and Nolubabalo! After an engaging reading aloud of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” we participated in an enjoyable exercise in phonics, letters and sounds as we figured out some missing details in a post-story letter written by the monster to the three goats. This “extension to the story”, demonstrated clearly on a flipchart, was a refreshing and contextualised approach to phonics and sounds development; effective and loads of fun for any child! We were then divided into two groups; one which brain stormed on how the monster’s home (under the bridge) might have looked like and the other, on the goats’ home (beyond the bridge). No answer was wrong and every one’s view counted; a conducive environment for imaginations to run wild! We then stepped into the homes we had envisioned via storyplay. It was amazing to see the collaborated creativity that thrived as each group physically created the homes they had envisioned from the affordable and natural materials provided. The storytelling-storyplay workshop was a refreshing display of an embodied, contextualised and effective approach to early literacy development.

Then there was Stella and Mandisa! On “Observing Children and Schemas”. This workshop ignited the mother/parent/caregiver component in each and every attendee. We were all taken down memory lane to the repetitive behaviours we encountered (or are encountering) with our own children and intrigued to hear how importantly they contribute to a child’s early development. Listening to Stella brought consciousness to the need for a “stepped-back” approach to early learning; an approach where we often step-back, observe, “listen”, “allow” and gently guide children as they discover and learn through their unique schemas.

Moving on to Georgie and Peter’s workshop on “Nature” was wake-up call to an element of early learning that we so need to bring back into our current techno-crazed and screen-dominated 21st century environment. Children are hardly spending time outdoors in their homes and when they get to school, they are confined indoors three quarters of the time! Georgie gently drew us into the myriad opportunities for early learning inherent in nature; how colour, geometry, texture, numbers, language, physics, space...can all be learnt through elements of nature such as: insects, plants, flowers, soil, rain and many others. Peter also took us through a number of displayed outdoor activities (made from recycled and natural materials) which contextualise and embody early learning. These included simple-to-do activities like: making a sun dial, a rain gauge, an insect bug hotel and a flower press. An unrestrictive, nature-filled and liberating approach to early learning – clearly emanated from this Nature workshop –needs to be incorporated more into South Africa’s current early learning environments.

Experiencing Tina, Xoliswa and Magdeline’s approach to early mathematics in the workshop “Gifts and Occupations” was not only pleasantly enlightening but very “relatable to” and “relevant for” the majority ECD sector in South Africa which is often challenged in the area of resources. It was encouraging to realise how quality early learning is attainable by even the poorest of communities; given a bit of resourcefulness, innovativeness and creativity. Several materials –natural, recycled and affordable –were beautifully displayed throughout the room; demonstrating the various means and ways in which children can develop an early awareness of mathematical principles (such as geometry, time, physics, space and numbers) through activities with solids, clay, water, paper and parquetry; as well as through engaging in activities like: cooking and baking, drawing and painting, weaving, threading and sewing, stick laying, paper pricking, peg boarding and pin boarding. Dance and song, elements that are integral to South African culture, were also highlighted as vehicles through which children can develop their mathematical language and knowledge of numbers, shapes, space, time and size. Participating in the “Gifts and Occupations” workshop *again* brought about a renewed consciousness to the need for South Africa’s current early learning system to be more accommodating of an organic and embodied early learning approach to mathematics.

Then finally arriving at the workshop on “Emergent writing” by Carole Bloch, brought much insight on how language (and consequently literacy) development is closely linked to the emotional make-up of a child. It was helpful to realise how important it is for children to associate stories, reading and writing with positive feelings; and how the creation of this positive emotional-literary bank provides an effective foundation for early and ongoing literacy development. Perspective was gained on the value of telling and reading stories to children well before they can even read or write by themselves; how this provides a rich reservoir from which a child can reference and draw upon when they eventually start to learn to read and write. Equally enlightening was the concept of affording children opportunities to tell their own stories and to transcribe these stories for them, well before they have learnt to read and write for themselves; how affording a child this opportunity has tremendous impact on a child’s desire and ability to learn to read and write. Principle 5 of Tina Bruce’s keynote address, clearly comes into play through this transcribing concept; a child is

motivated and self-disciplined to learn to read and write because of the intrinsic value they associate with the process. One could then not help but go on to ponder the early literacy-plight of many a disadvantaged South African child who not only has a next to non-existent literary bank to draw upon when they start learning to read and write but also has little opportunity to fill up this bank when “formal” literacy development has begun. Another area that sore needs addressing in South Africa’s approach to early childhood literacy – both in homes and at schools.

Indeed the question “What will we do with the children on Monday?” rang true among attendees as the conference drew to a close. There was a consensual settling realisation –among all stakeholders present –for the need to pause in our current approach to early childhood education; to pause and then to rewind. To re-wind back to a place where we step aside from the “driver’s seat” and come alongside the children we teach; where we take the time to observe and appreciate who they are and how they learn; where we fine tune ourselves to tune in to the children we teach, to listen to not only what they say and do not say but to what they do and do not do; and then –having understood them –to gently guide them and equip them to effectively navigate their paths of learning and holistic development. Only in this way –however long it may take –would South Africa become a worthy custodian of her children, on matters of early (and consequently “life-long”) learning.

*“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children” –
Tata Mandela*