The Kolkata project received funding from the Froebel Trust from 2012 until 2017. This chapter begins with excerpts from notes of the Annual Report (2017) of the Parivar Trust with whom the Froebel Trust team worked from 2012 in two phases. It will help readers to see the different cultural contexts and challenges and in the South Africa work and the work in Kolkata. Froebelian approaches to education have risen to the challenge of offering culturally appropriate practice, and in recent years (as the previous chapter highlights), have laid great emphasis on working hard to develop decolonised education practices. In the informal settlement in Soweto the children attended the setting regularly with a stable staff and strong sense of community. The contrast is striking with the Kolkata work. Both projects applied a Froebelian approach, and the two teams shared training days together in the earlier days, when the Kolkata team began their work, but responded to the different situation they needed to work with. The Parivar report (March 2017), written by the Chief Executive Anindita Bannerjee Tanta, outlines the context with clarity, describing the aim of the project to work with street children of all ages, although the Froebel Trust team emphasised the importance of the early childhood education:

Poverty is the prime cause of the street children. Children from well-off families do not need to work, or beg. They live in houses, eat well, go to school, and are likely to be healthy and emotionally secure. Several problems persist in these children: issues of ‘social’ distance – arising out of caste, class and gender differences – deny children equal opportunities.

Poverty dumps a crowd of problems onto a child. Not only do these problems cause suffering, but they also conspire to keep the child poor throughout his/her life.

Most Indian street children work. The work may be restricted to their household chores if it is a girl child. They sacrifice their infancy and childhood as they look after their younger siblings, helping their mother to go to work. They do the cooking, washing, cleaning among other works of their family. Other common job is rag-picking, in which boys and girls as young as six years old sift through garbage in order to collect recyclable material. The children usually rise before dawn and carry their heavy load in a large bag over their shoulder. Rag-pickers can be seen alongside pigs and dogs searching through trash heaps on their hands and knees.
Other common jobs are the collecting of firewood, tending to animals, street vending, dyeing, begging, prostitution and domestic labour. In order to survive, a poor child in India will probably be forced to sacrifice education and training; without skills the child will, as an adult, remain at the bottom of the economic heap.

A lot of effort was given to retain the children in class. At the beginning they did not show any interest to come and learn the lessons. Teachers understood this BUT did not know the methods to teach them in a different way. We were really blessed to have an association of FROEBEL TRUST at this juncture. Sara Holroyd and her team started teaching the teachers how to used innovative methods to retain the interest of these children. The teachers thus started to teach in the play way methods like storytelling, dancing, singing, playing among others. Slowly they began to feel themselves as Parivar Family. They took interest in education and slowly developed a competitive spirit.

The blocks, educational materials used in Froebelian methods helped the teachers to give the children even mathematics classes which seemed the most boring of all subjects. The children used their imaginative power to develop new designs with blocks. The teachers also used their creativity to make more educational tools which were cheap and could be easily used by the Parivar centres.

The team work among children developed through these activities. The children helped each other to do things better. They even tried to be better than each other by using tools to make each other understand problems.

There are also concerns relating to teacher training, the quality of the curriculum, assessment of learning achievements. Though the Froebel Trust has come forward to teach our teachers but it is not enough yet. They need to be trained more as the whole project depends on the teachers and their training.

(Parivar Annual General Report, March 2017)

Another section of the report writes about teaching styles:

They should be taught by play way methods at least in the primary level. Songs and dance are very natural to them and competitions, etc. can help in this regard.

We are fortunate that Froebel Trust has taught our teachers and we follow this teaching style. So in our centre they happily come and learn but when they go to the regular school they do not get this environment—so they drop out the school.

Mathematics: Maths is a very critical subject and children are very natural at it. However the astounding ability to learn the subject by the children is eclipsed by the incompetency of the teachers in turn to result that Maths is regarded as the most hated subject by a minimum of a third of the all children.

We think children should learn through games in the Froebel method. Classes 1–6 should only consist of a variety of games. All exercises should be again to play at home with other kids at neighbourhood areas.

(Parivar Annual General Report, March 2017)

Phase 1

The Kolkata project was initiated by Froebel Trust Trustee and Chair of the Education Committee Professor Maurice Craft and the Trust Chief Executive, Group Captain Laurence Barnes in 2012 as part of the work of the Froebel Trust and following in the footsteps of the Soweto Project, led by Tina Bruce. They had been inspired by the film Slum Dog Millionaire directed by...
Danny Doyle. The aim was to support interested schools in developing Froebelian early childhood practice. Between 2012 and 2016 eight visits were made to Kolkata by the UK based and Froebel trained retired primary school head teacher Sara Holroyd and Jill Leyberg early years leader. A further two visits were made by the team Sara Holroyd trained, namely Felicity Thomas, Thelma Miller, both retired heads of maintained nursery schools and children’s centres. They were accompanied by the translator, Asim Dutta, fluent in Hindi and Bengali, having lived in from Kolkata and Bangladesh, now living in London.

There is a national desire in India to develop early childhood educational provision. The 2009 Indian Education Act and a draft Early Year’s Curriculum document both outline changes to provision which aim to significantly change current practices. The Indian Education Act 2009 ‘secures the right of children to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school’ and the more recent draft early years curriculum includes the following statement:

Children learn through play: Play is central to the child’s well-being and development. Children’s spontaneous play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation, manipulation and problem solving that are essential for constructing knowledge. Play contributes to the development of representational thought.

*(Indian Education Act, 2009: 5)*

However progress in the implementation of these changes is slow and piecemeal. There is significant work to be done in developing teacher training and establishing settings with appropriate resources. These documents do however help to establish common ground and shared aims so that rather than introducing a British curriculum and methodology, the development of early childhood educational practice within the Indian context and more specifically the local context in Kolkata is supported through the use of Froebelian principles. The Parivar staff discussed Tagore with the Phase 1 team, with whose poetry they were familiar.

I have said in a poem of mine that when the child is detached from its mother’s womb it finds its mother in a real relationship whose truth is freedom. Man in his detachment has realised himself in a wider and deeper relationship with the universe. In his moral life he has the sense of his obligation and his freedom at the same time, and this is goodness. In his spiritual life his sense of the union and the will which is free has its culmination in love. The freedom of opportunity he wins for himself in Nature’s region by uniting his power with Nature’s forces. The freedom of social relationship he attains through owning responsibility to his community, thus gaining its collective power for his own welfare. In the freedom of consciousness he realises the sense of his unity, with his unity with his larger being, finding fulfilment in the dedicated life of an ever progressive truth and ever active love.

*(Tagore, 1930: 5)*

Tagore is loved and revered in Kolkata and this quote shows the synchronicity between his thinking and the Froebelian principles of the mother and child relationship, the universe we inhabit and the responsibility of understanding our universe through nature.

Having explored the range of contexts visited within Kolkata which included charity, municipal and Nabadisha schools during two exploratory visits with the Chief Executive of the Froebel Trust with the support of the British Council and the Kolkata Community Police department, the decision was made to work with the Nabadisha schools. These charitable schools, based in local police stations, aim to build links with and support some of the poorest communities, many with high rates of crime. Anindita Bannerjee Tamta was keen to engage with the Froebel
Trust team and it was in one of her seven Nabadisha schools, West Port, that a start was made in September 2013. The Parivar organisation aims to engage with the families providing social, cultural, health and educational support. These aims mirror the Froebelian principle of supporting all aspects of a child’s development within a family and community context.

For the third visit to Kolkata in September 2013, Sara Holroyd and Jill Leyberg began to work at West Port School. This school was chosen to begin the work because it provided the most opportunities for establishing an outdoor play space and the senior police officer in charge agreed to help by building a wall and preparing the ground for a play area and a garden. He also agreed to provide storage space for the resources that the Froebel team were building up. There are more than 50 children on role at West Port although the most attending on any one day during the visit was 28. Their ages range from 2 to 12 years. A number of the older children attend other formal schools at some point during the day before their session from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at West Port. The Parivar Trust also provides regular health checks, visits and outfits for special occasions and a daily snack for the children.

The two teachers have no formal training and are themselves studying at degree level. The plan was to train with the teachers for an hour and a half prior to the children arriving and then observe and teach during the afternoon sessions. The children had little opportunity during their time in school for play. The majority of the time was spent sitting on the floor and the class work was based on written rote learning on slates or on paper with drawing and dancing activities one day a week. The staff’s own educational experiences, and the curriculum they were delivering at West Port, was completely teacher lead, even drawing was directed and formulaic with the same pictures being repeated over and over again.

As Froebel trained teachers Sara and Jill decided that the initial teacher training and class sessions would be based on Froebel’s Gifts, but in a modern form as sets of Community Playthings mini blocks. These provided opportunities for play in a number of ways and at different levels. It also allowed Sara and Jill to illustrate very clearly the range of learning opportunities possible and the links between different areas of learning. During the first training session they shared background information about Froebel’s life and the development of his ideas, principles and practices. Gifts 3, 4, 5, and 6 and sets of mini blocks were introduced. The teachers played with blocks and the team identified the range of skills and concepts evident in their play and model making including Froebel’s ideas for the forms of life, knowledge and beauty.

These same resources were then shared with the children for the last hour of their session. All the children were included in these first sessions and a wide range of responses to the provision was observed. For example, Pooja, 4 years, played with gift 4. She built the blocks into a tower and observed the structure from all around the table. She then wrapped the blocks in the plastic which had been used to keep them clean and dry showing an initial interest in enveloping and containing. During the week Pooja continued to explore these concepts. Additional resources were added to support her interest, including bowls and bags, and she spent time putting the blocks onto bowls and covering them and then placing them on a cupboard under the table.

By comparison the older children built structures showing a clear understanding of symmetry, balance and seriation of height and direction. Discussions with the teachers highlighted how the time spent playing would support the older children in exploring more complex concepts. A further advantage of using the Gifts and blocks was that it enabled opportunities to watch the children playing and observe the processes and outcomes of their work despite the lack of a shared language. Discussion with the teachers revealed the skills, interests, knowledge and learning in the children observed. The support of Asim (the team’s translator) was invaluable in order that further information could be gathered from the older and more confident children and his translations also helped in the sharing of observations and thoughts with the teachers in more
depth. Each day these observations set the agenda for the following day’s training. Discussions helped the staff to see the value of providing time for the children to explore and play with open ended activities and resources and the importance of taking the opportunity to observe the children playing in order to gain knowledge of the children’s interests, stage and level of development.

The teachers quickly recognised that during the block play sessions the children would concentrate for longer periods and that they were very enthusiastic and engaged in their play. The teachers did continue to direct and model ideas and structures for the children and in the training sessions other ways of supporting children’s play were discussed – for example providing encouragement and additional resources, asking questions, providing information, supporting skill development, verbalising observed actions and helping the children to manage disputes.

In June 2014 Sara Holroyd and Jill Leyberg gave a workshop presentation disseminating the work of the Froebel Trust in Kolkata at the International Froebel Society Conference in Canterbury. The following year, in 2014, Sara and Jill were joined in Kolkata by another volunteer teacher, Kate Razzall. In the course of the two and a half years they were involved in training teachers at Parivar in Kolkata. As a result, there have been significant changes in the lives of the children and the teachers. Using a Froebelian approach, with particular reference to his ideas on unity, connectedness and community, they have been able to link into the culture of West Bengal drawing on, for example, the work of Rabindranath Tagore and found shared ideals and values with other organisations with whom they have worked. The work has evolved in response to those with whom the team were working and their circumstances; it takes time to gather local knowledge, build trusting relationships and explore possibilities. A strong foundation had, by 2016, been developed upon which to build and to explore further how a Froebelian approach can be shared with a wider audience in Kolkata with the aim of supporting more children and teachers. For the Froebel Trust there were opportunities to explore and affirm the relevance of Froebel’s principles and practices in different countries, cultures and settings.

Phase 2

Several important developments led to phase 2 of the Froebel Trust’s work in Kolkata. During Phase 1 contact was made with the Modern Academy of Continuing Education (MACE) based in the Modern High School for Girls (MHSG) and it became clear that the Director of this private school, Mrs. Devi Kar, was interested in exploring a possible collaboration with the Froebel Trust.

Anindita Tamta was keen for further support with teacher training for all her teachers with additional advice and support for the new school she was building at Tiljala. Sara and her team had been successful in promoting a day to day Froebelian approach to play and active learning which was having a highly positive impact on children and staff. They did this by role modelling alongside the 17 largely untrained teachers, by providing and demonstrating the Froebelian Gifts and Occupations, Songs and Movement Games, through direct training in Saturday seminars, and by advice, discussion and support to Anindita, who has shown a sustained commitment to the work.

the teachers have changed a lot, they became more enthusiastic and creative. Though most of the Parivar teachers do not have formal teaching training/qualifications. Froebel activities and training have changed their mind set in a positive way; they enjoy the work more and are becoming innovative as they try to do new activities and bring new ideas.

(Anindita Bannerjee Tamta, personal communication with Sara Holroyd, 2016)
The police were happy to continue supporting the project and made improvements to the Sinthi school building following the suggestions of the Froebel team. This was an important element in the success of the Froebel Trust’s work in Kolkata.

In 2016 the Froebel Trust decided to find a sustainable way of supporting Parivar from within Kolkata. An exit strategy was developed. Two of the recent graduates of the Froebel Tutor endorsed Travelling Tutors scheme were very interested in becoming involved in the Kolkata project. Both Felicity Thomas and Thelma Miller are experienced recently retired head teachers of outstanding maintained nursery schools with children’s centres. During their visit in January 2017 they were able to offer further seminar training for Parivar practitioners by Froebel tutors supported by the team’s translator, Asim. Sara Holroyd was happy to provide initial support and guidance prior to the visit. The transition to the new Froebel team was successful and led to useful discussions, advice and support in setting up the new Parivar school at Tiljala which Anindita wanted to become a centre of good Froebelian practice. The teacher here was relatively new but very keen to develop her knowledge and skills.

Felicity and Thelma were able to further develop the relationship with Mrs Devi Kar at MHSG with possible collaboration in early childhood educational practice both at MHSG and with Parivar. This involved providing teacher training sessions at MACE (the MHSG continuing education centre). It was agreed that the Froebel Trust team, on their September visit 2017, would train 6 qualified MACE teachers in Froebelian principles. These Roving Teachers would then visit and support the 20 Parivar teachers when the Froebel Trust withdrew, which it has now done. During this visit it became clear that three days training for the six MACE teachers, intelligent and enthusiastic as they were, was not going to be sufficient to empower them and enable them to successfully support the Parivar teachers day to day in their challenging settings. There is however the suggestion of developing Internet dialogue.

The Froebel Trust’s project has reached over 1,000 children and the way of working with the twenty teachers in the Parivar schools and the teachers in the MACE school can be seen as a successful model of what can be achieved in partnership with who some of the poorest and most vulnerable children.

The following verbal reports given by Parivar teachers at a seminar led by Felicity and Thelma in 2017 show how much their understanding and commitment has grown.

Taltala school

Shubran spoke for her setting. Froebel has brought a new concept into teaching about using all the senses. The children are taking more interest in learning as their senses are engaged. They were previously bored but now they are engaged.

The classroom used to be disrupted because of poor behaviour; not now as the children are keen to learn and show their own interests. They come to school planning what they are going to do. The teachers are following the process of learning with the children as in Sara’s description of the Byriani feast they are engaged with the children and assessing every step. They use water, sand and clay with the children but only water is difficult.

Principle links with Froebel: Following the child’s fascinations. The child is at the centre of their learning. Adults are engaged and give time for the child’s interests to unfold. Freedom with guidance and respect of the child are evident. Uses some occupations.

Salu, 5 years, is paralysed on one side of his body. When he started school he cried all the time. The teacher gave him paper and pens to draw and he has learnt to draw straight lines and making letter shapes. He also likes to play with the blocks. He has made friends and looks
forward to coming to school. Shubran feels really positive about her teaching and happy about the opportunities she gives to the children. She sees the children’s development. She has started to use nature more and sends the children out to find leaves of different colours.

Principle link with Froebel: Learning in nature.

South Port school

Sabana, who spoke for her setting was taught as a child with the ‘chalk and talk’ method. She was scared to go to school and had no interest in learning. Froebel introduced her to active learning. The attendance at South Port is high and the children come to school early as they are so eager to learn. Sabana observes the children and their play and asks questions to make a story. She has started to introduce planting, but it is difficult to maintain over the weekend period; she asked the police to water the plants, but they were too busy. She also uses clay but things dry out very quickly. We talked about how dried clay can easily be reconstituted with water.


Roudiel, 7 years, is very poor; he has never been to school before. He came as a visitor and started to engage with the children. Showed interest in sewing and came to learn about numbers and counting through sewing. He has also learnt about the days of the week and is developing social skills, making friends and showing positive behaviour. He arrives early every day.

North Port school

Tinkori spoke for his setting. Froebel has made teaching life easier because the children’s behaviour is better. Now teachers are engaged with the children doing practical and real activities. At North Port the difficulty is the space as they are in a corridor still.

Principle links with Froebel: Real activities. Adults engaged in children’s learning, observing. Freedom with guidance is developing but lack of space makes this difficult.

Soma, aged 4 years, and Sony, aged 5 years, are siblings. They came to school 6 months ago, crying, not wanting to stay. Tinkori gave them the parquetry to play with and they really enjoyed this, making patterns. They have learnt the alphabet and numbers.

Tiljala School

Nameta spoke for her setting. Initially, only a few children from the street came to this setting. Sara’s training and the Froebel resources has made the school change. Community started talking about it and numbers have increased. Older children go to school. They have learnt their shapes but by playing with the blocks they retain and deepen their understanding.

Principles: Active learning using all their senses in block play. School is now part of the community.

Principle links with Froebel: Respect and Freedom with guidance.

Golu, 9 years old, stopped coming and stopped going to government school. Nameta met her in the street and encouraged her to come and play. She came and started playing with the blocks and shows her creativity by creating great models. She is saying a little now which is an improvement. She is showing interest in more things and wants to learn. She has been back in school for 2 months.
Lenin Sarani School

Kajal spoke for her setting. Students have made a ‘days of the week’ wall chart and enjoy playing with this.

A difficulty is that another NGO has opened a school near Lenin Sarani which is not activity based and the children go to both schools but like the activity based learning at Lenin Sarani. They particularly enjoy the blocks, stick and pea and parquetry. They love the Sari games book with the actions. Kajal showed us the paper folding, sewing and threading with shells that the children had done. The threading has helped with their counting. They also use clay and sand. The children miss Neela. Previously story time had been difficult as the children did not listen; this has now changed by using role play.

Principles linking with Froebel: Active learning and finding active ways to engage the children in listening activities. Child at the centre. Freedom with guidance and respect of the child is strong. Occupations are used extensively to support sensory learning.

Bulti, 9 years, has hearing problems. Bulti doesn’t speak but she goes out in the street and communicates with other children telling them to come to Lenin Sarani. Loves doing the actions with the songs, using action as another communication tool.

Deba, 3 years, came one and a half years ago. Sat and cried and asked for food. Kajal introduced them to Froebel resources and engaged Deba and she really enjoys coming and comes every day.

West Port School

Farnesa spoke for her setting. When children’s behaviour is difficult, Farnesa uses song, she uses songs like Tommy Thumb and will ask disruptive boys to do this song with each other so they get engaged with each other. Sara gave them lots of poems and songs which the children remember and do regularly. The children write names and family names using sand. Very good control.

The difficulty she has experienced is that the children have wanted to make a bridge using the sticks and they have not been successful.


More work needs to be done on reflective practice. This takes time and all adults need to work on this.

Sania, 6 years, was not engaging after one month. She was given paper and then ribbon sticks and she really enjoys dancing and express herself in this way creatively.

Sinthi School

Ruma and Gita spoke for their setting. Have been working on the concept of short and tall. Sara showed how to present concepts as a game so they have been making a train with the shortest at the front and the tallest at the back. They have made shakers using found objects and have been doing paper folding. The children made trees and butterflies and they hung them from the ceiling. The small children draw a lot and all the children enjoy using the blocks. They use the Froebel resources every day. Ruma and Gita are also encouraging the children to plant and then to take care of their plants. They use clay.

Principles linking with Froebel: Active learning, using activities which children relate to and enjoy learning difficult concepts. Using found objects imaginatively and developing ways for the
children to learn in nature. The concept of freedom with guidance and respect for the child’s learning and knowledge are developing. Using Gifts and Occupations.

Papi, 3 years, cries a lot and he is not toilet trained. When he gets engaged with activities he has accidents. Ruma and Gita were finding this difficult. They need to reflect on how to respond as this is still quite natural at this age and should not be considered bad behaviour.

Cossipore School

Radha spoke for her setting. She has enjoyed the Froebel training and the children really enjoy the activities. The children plan and choose what they want to do. They bring found resources from the street to make and play with. They have a sense of community and sharing all they find. They like making musical instruments and the children bring in rice and dal. They are learning about tempo and rhythm. Whatever they make they draw. They have done the story of the three little pigs and made different houses of paper, polystyrene and straws. Learning numbers through songs. They have no difficulties with the Froebel practice.

Principles: Active learning with the child at the centre. Using found objects linking learning to nature. They are developing a community of learners who share their learning. Music and song are used to develop further learning. They use story as a tool for holistic learning. Freedom with guidance and respect for the child’s learning is strong. They use Occupations and the Gifts. Give children time.

Ank, 7 years, has been socially excluded – not engaging and not talking. Slowly he quietly watched the other children and wanted eventually to join in. He is engaging well and accepted and is excelling, doing better than the others. He was not made to join in he was allowed to take his own time.

One Parivar teacher said, at the end of the final visit from the Froebel Trust team, ‘The thing about Mr. Froebel, Ma’am, is that it works’.

It was evident in discussions with the Parivar staff during the Saturday seminars that the project was making a significant difference to their practice as teachers.

Their greater/developing knowledge and understanding of child development, gained through exploring Froebelian principles and practices has given them newfound interest, excitement, engagement and confidence.

In all settings the impact of this is observed in the children’s involvement, concentration, creativity and joy.