

Diversity in Unity: Developing an anti-racist framework within Froebelian pedagogy

Shaddai Tembo & Simon Bateson, November 2023

Context

Following the murder of George Floyd in the US in 2020, and the subsequent upswell of the Black Lives Matter movement in both US and international communities, we – as researchers and practitioners – felt the urgent need to consider how race and racism are being meaningfully addressed in early childhood contexts. Specifically, we wanted to consider whether Froebelian environments and practices might offer a unique example and provide affordances for anti-racist care and education, led by and within children's play. Finally, we anticipated augmenting current resources with new tools which might further support Early Learning and Childcare practitioners, particularly within the Froebelian community, to go deeper in their reflexive and relational responses to racism and its ancillaries. As we conclude this stage of the research funded by The Froebel Trust, that work has begun and we offer two first stage resources through The Froebel Trust and other channels: namely, a reflexive guide for practitioners to support decolonial play (due autumn 2024), and [video](#) outlining the learning journey we have been on both academically and in practice.

Stages of research

Our research comprised four stages:

1. The tensions of collaboration across our own racialised experience as researcher-practitioners;
2. A literature review of policy supporting anti-racism in early childhood in England and Scotland;
3. A review of wider literature supporting anti-racism in early childhood alongside reflections on Froebelian affordances for further intervention;
4. An ethnographic research project within Froebelian nurseries in England and Scotland.

We have presented this work at various conferences including EECERA, ECQI, The International Froebel Conference and BERA. In October 2023 the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference awarded us the SIG Best Presentation, Early Childhood Education and Care for this work.

Multimedia resources

Video – [Shaddai and Simon in conversation about the project](#)

Detailed summary of the stages of research

1. Collaboration

First, and prior to this grant, we felt it essential to consider our own racialised and racializing experiences as Black and white practitioner-researchers coming to work together. This began a process of rigorous, honest dialogue about our experience of power, privilege, racism and difference. It surfaced things that we (and particularly Simon) would pay attention to in our work together, so as to avoid or minimise placing the burden of sensitivity to race privilege onto Shaddai. In doing so, we recognise the long history of people of colour doing the work for white people, and the non-performativity of many white people's attempts to engage in anti-racist work.

We also explored our theoretical commonalities, and quickly found shared influences in the work of Bakhtin and Deleuze. These writers foreground the moving, constellating, entangling, changing and relational underpinnings of existence – in which what is *in between* “individual” experience, identity and knowledge is of primary importance, rather than what seems fixed on one side or another. As a result, in our first journal articles and subsequent research in nurseries, we moved toward shared ways of knowing (epistemology) which placed the highest values on what we could not pin down; on questions which remained, grew and shape-shifted, rather than those which allowed themselves to be easily answered. In doing so, we marked two things: firstly, an ethical resistance to the kinds of narrow, static interpretations and definitions of history, experience and identity which have so often formed the basis of racism – *this, not that; me, not them*. Secondly, we sought to identify ourselves and our research methodology, at the outset, with the positively *decolonial* habits we are both highly familiar with in young children's play and worldviews (without idealising them): namely, the porous boundaries between self and other, between the real and imagined, between the “good” and “bad”, that children are actively entangling and entangled with. We continuously seek in our work, then, to attune to the liminal and fluid nature of childhood, even as it comes into playful or traumatised dialogue with adulted separations and rationalisations.

At the same time, we remain conscious that privilege and trauma can be continuously reconstellated – and our openness to continuous potentiality, in ourselves and in children, could not be an excuse to waive responsibility where we or others continue to perpetuate race privilege.

Further reading: You can read more about these initial stages of our journey in The International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education [here](#), or to view our presentation on this stage of the research at the [European Congress of Qualitative Enquiry](#).

2. Policy review

The second stage of our research – soon to be published (you will find details below in due course) – was an inquiry into the policy affordances in England and Scotland for anti-racist practice in early childhood. We specifically sought policy which takes account of that very precursive territory of “becoming” which we describe above as the arena of reality for young children. In short, we found little in the policy landscape which supported practice or professional curiosity around children’s susceptibility to racialisation through play.

In England, sadly, we noted that artificial culture wars being stoked up to polarise political allegiances has led to a steady rowing back on affordances for anti-racist practice in statutory guidance. In Scotland, meanwhile, whilst “coloniality” (the central focus of our study) is mentioned in national guidance for primary educators, it remains largely undeveloped. Moreover at the time of writing there is nothing in the way of specialist guidance for early years educators – although we are now aware that Scotdec (the national development education association) has been commissioned to create a resource for the sector in 2023-24. In both countries, what attention there is (and as indicated it is thankfully growing in Scotland) nonetheless focuses narrowly on explicit behavioural acts (both present and historical) of interpersonal prejudice and discrimination. While clearly salient, we express concern about the extent to which such a focus misses the ways in which discrimination is first enabled by broader affective/relational norms and values (informed by assemblages of culture and power) that can be attuned to in young children’s play. By focussing only on isolated racist acts and “institutionalised” racism, we argue that educators are – in effect – too often trying to close the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Instead, it is fundamental that practitioners working in (and beyond) the early years have frameworks and skills to see the coloniality *and* decoloniality in children’s play and affective relationships (as well as in our own adult modelling and structures). This, we believe, will support much more effective early intervention – as well as elaboration on the strategies children themselves are employing to embrace diversity. As outlined below, we would turn to the work of Jones and Okun and Friedrich Froebel to supply these frameworks.

Further reading: You can read more about our policy review in the [Journal of Early Childhood Research](#).

3. Froebelian and other affordances

The third stage of our research – again, soon to be published (you will find details below in due course) – saw us review literature in three potentially transformational areas. First, we considered the general writing on anti-racism in early childhood. Secondly, we addressed a possible framework for our research through the work of Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun on cultures of white supremacy. Thirdly, we reviewed the potentially unique affordances of Froebelian pedagogies and environments to surface, and respond to, fledgling colonialities and decolonialities in young children’s imaginaries and affective encounters in play.

On the general literature: while there is a reasonable body of important writing on anti-racism and childhood, we found that it – like the policy it has informed – focuses narrowly on explicit experiences of racial thinking and discrimination, rather than the broader precursive territory that we have become sensitised to via other readings. As such they favour the kind of didactic interventionism suited to older age school children. Importantly, though, books like Chris Gainé’s *We’re All White Thanks* (2005) and Derman-Sparks et al’s *What If All The Kids Are White* argue how racialised ways of being can be witnessed, entrenched and challenged in communities where opportunities for direct racism against a known other is limited. This work matters because it signals how racism is prefigured. They also clearly remind us how race is also materially noticed by children as young as three months of age. However, they do not consider how race-awareness intersects with the innate potentiality, plasticity and liminality of early childhood experience. The work of Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo, meanwhile, is significant in honing in on affective encounters which produce race and coloniality in formal early childhood spaces. Yet their focus remains predominantly on adult-child interactions or explicit discussions about race between children. Once again, we want, rather, to emphasise – with Alanen and Mayall (2001) – that children are continually engaged in creating new worlds entangled with but also beyond adult, linguistic and rules-based interactions. We *must* as practitioners, focus our insight and understanding here if we want to understand children’s real lives *and* remain committed to their agency and autonomy: core ethical and productive tenets of our own early years practices.

We finally turned then to Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, whose work on the unspoken, less visible, yet nonetheless felt, territory of white supremacy – the sea we swim in, so to speak – outlines a number of *characteristics* (rather than offences) that show up in everyday encounters to disconnect individuals from the whole. Thus ultimately enabling racism. They write:

One of the purposes of listing [white supremacist] characteristics is to point out how [communities] that unconsciously use [them] as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our [communities], while saying we want to be anti-racist and multicultural, really only allow “others” to belong if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms.

(Jones and Okun, 2001)

Specifically, Jones and Okun articulate the historical construction of an insider culture (denoted materially but also figuratively as “whiteness”) through the following (constructed) *characteristics*, collectively manifested:

- Perfectionism
- Urgency
- Defensiveness
- Individualism
- Accumulation (quantity over quality)
- Worship of the (reified) written word
- Objectivity/rationalism (distinct from body/emotion)
- Singularity (there is one right/best way)
- Paternalism (decision-making for others)
- Either/or (black and white) thinking
- Power hoarding (power as scarce)
- Fear of open conflict / the right to comfort

Roberts-Holmes and Moss’s (2021) writing on the neo-liberal basis of early childhood education ably demonstrates the institutionalisation of these colonial habits in early childhood today. They illustrate the predominant language and systems built since the 1980s to configure children around discourses of:

‘outcomes’ and ‘quality’, ‘testing’ and ‘assessment’, ‘interventions’ and ‘programmes’, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘best practice’, ‘investment’ and ‘human capital’, ‘preparation’ and ‘readiness’, ‘markets and marketing’... with its corollary of ‘the logic of competition between students, teachers, schools and writ large between nations’ (Ball, 2017, page 23)”

(Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021, page20-32).

Practically, meanwhile – in spite of widespread loyalty to the idea of the “child as innocent” (Robinson, 2013) – many of our practitioner colleagues readily acknowledged to us privately that each of the characteristics identified by Jones and Okun are at times evident – “in play” – among young children and even babies, as well as between practitioners, and between practitioners and children. For example, children might seek an adult’s “ruling” as soon as different sets of needs come into conflict (singularity) – or an adult may impose it. Others may be preoccupied with hoarding all the pieces of a wooden train track – busily undoing the work of others (accumulation) – or adults may instruct such consolidation (“they need to stay together”). Still others may become worried or angry if someone else’s sand castle does not exactly copy the pictures they see in picture books (perfectionism) – and adults may tacitly reinforce these concerns (“Shouldn’t a castle have a drawbridge?”).

Such episodic observations intersect with a small body of literature which ably shows how “young children, just like older children, can build up and maintain asymmetrical [power] relations during play by jointly co-constructing status positions through their use of language, body space and objects” (Cederborg, 2021, page 612). Crucially, however, Jones and Okun also offer a list of what they call “the antidotes” – *decolonial* habits which resist atomising individuals and instead promote “unity in diversity” (to borrow from the writing of Friedrich Froebel). These are:

- Mistakes and different approaches are valued/incorporated
- Slow, deferred gratification, process, attunement
- Fears named/opened out, creative vulnerability
- Emphasis on collective/collaboration
- Sharing and creating resources, process over product
- Non-verbal valued, words played with
- Embraces diverse perspectives, comfort with feelings
- Different methods/approaches co-exist
- Recognising our limitations and refusing authority over others
- Both/and – different needs/play/ideas allowed to overlap
- Power actively distributed, open leadership
- Quality of experience, impact
- Staying with tension, creativity

(For a habit-by-habit comparison of colonial vs. decolonial traits, please see the table on page 12 of this document).

Once again, we know anecdotally and from experience that young children can embody these modalities. Children enjoying anti-authoritarianism and poly-vocality during delighted, carnivalesque dislodgings of traditional songs and nursery rhymes, which might see daddies instead of babies going “wah wah wah” in the “Wheels On The Bus”. The generous, quasi-ritualistic circulation of objects of power (a toy or tool endowed by the collective with special significance and authority within an act of play, where individualistic propertarian logics are unsettled - “it’s ours” not “it’s mine”). The ability to ask (both verbally and non-verbally) powerful questions and refuse easy answers, but instead stay highly attuned to experience and change: to the sensations of wind moving across their bodies, or the continuous flow of assemblages of blocks, dinosaurs and fabrics as collaborative creations flow and evolve.

At this stage, we began to discern clear overlaps with the work of Friedrich Froebel, as well as affordances for extending awareness of young children’s colonial and decolonial habits among contemporary practitioners who are informed by a Froebelian outlook. In our forthcoming article (details below in due course), we outline several key alignments – but we will mention just two here.

First, we identify Froebel’s pronounced commitment to free flow play, which is unmatched in other (European) educational traditions. This has the potential to give children the space and

time to surface, under the adult gaze, their colonial and decolonial habits in ways not circumscribed by adult control or prematurely moral and didactic redirection. In pure, free-flow play, as Froebel understood, children “develop and integrate all their abilities... [through] creative self-activity and spontaneous self-instruction...” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967, page 92). They unite all aspects of their experience, their understandings of the world, their relational and creative powers and their (endless) embodied questions. More importantly, they do so with a fluidity of being which is (in pure Froebelian environments) unprescribed and therefore in a constant process of experimentation, change and fascination with difference.

Of course, not every child has equal capacity for “pure play”. Perhaps they labour under anxiety, produced for some by intergenerational trauma including that precipitated by racial injustice. Minoritised children, or those arriving with cultural backgrounds that differ from what is dominant within the setting, may not, instinctively, feel as free as children who more easily align within assemblages of whiteness. There are, of course, no fixed causalities here, but if Froebelians champion free play they have an obligation to attend to these differences and scaffold equal access to it. Taking that on board, we may have in Froebelian nurseries an unrivalled environment in which to allow colonial and decolonial affects to surface, to be noticed, allowed to breathe (with due care for others, but trusting children’s capacity for some measure of social and emotional risk), and then, where appropriate, to intervene in highly attuned ways. Conversely, as Froebel also reminds us, we may have the opportunity to learn strategies of transformation from our children, to follow their leadership, when we step back and allow it to occur.

As Froebelian Tina Bruce (Bruce et al, 2017, page 13) elucidates:

In play there is no necessity to conform or bow to the pressures of external rules, outcomes, target or adult-led ideas. Rules in play, can be broken, created, changed and challenged. This enables children to face life, deal with and face situations, work out alternatives, change how things are done and cope with their future.

Secondly, we considered the importance of Froebel’s “Unitarianism”. His writing demands practices which support and are highly observant of the human, post-human, political and ecological entanglements of children’s lives. From the Gifts onwards, he extols children’s capacity to learn through and contain difference instinctively: the sphere from the block, and so on. As Froebel’s own practice developed to attune more and more to the natural world, he increasingly makes way for open-endedness, diversity and plurality as the critical provocation for children’s learning. In turn he asks both adults and children to focus keenly on attuning to the differences among them, not as fixed entities, but as spurs to relationship, agency, community and the making of new ways of seeing and doing through embodied dialogue.

In Scotland, there is – crucially – a growing opportunity to key into these two primary affordances as Froebel is explicitly named and echoed throughout *Realising the Ambition*, the new national guidance for early childhood practice. The door, so to speak, is open. At the same time, however, this pivotal change in policy and its understanding of children and childhood

has years to go to become the practiced norm in a culture previously (and still) in thrall to developmentalism and safeguarding. England, therefore, while it does not have such coherent policy support, is home to a no-less-significant number of outliers informed explicitly or implicitly by Froebelian ideals. At the same time, in our research, we point out that the Froebelian movement remains not entirely immune to charges of laissez-faires, colour or difference-neutralising idealisations of children, just as much as mainstream ELC persists in tokenistic multiculturalism. Taken out of context, individual passages of Froebel's work which idealise children's self-discovery risk propping this up. We feel compelled, as we move closer to the creation of resources which support sharpened Froebelian commitments to decolonial play practices, to bring this to light. To remind ourselves and others that "freedom with guidance" requires us to strike that perfect balance – between not rushing in to "direct, determine or interfere" (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967, page 51) and at the same time protecting and putting children "in the way of finding the answers", albeit ones that we may not yet have ourselves.

Further reading: You can read more about our literature review in the [Journal of Early Childhood Research](#).

4. Our ethnographic research

The final stage of our research, supported by The Froebel Trust, was to test out these theories in practice. A link to our forthcoming journal article detailing the research in full will be published below in due course. We invited two Froebelian nurseries in England and Scotland to take part in ethnographic observation of children's free play using Jones and Okun's colonial and decolonial habits. In doing so, we were explicit that these were not hard and fast coding tools, but interpretative provocations, and we were interested in their subjective experience of using them as well as the ways they did not work. Above all, it was an opportunity to consider first-hand data about children's affective play encounters refracted through the practitioner gaze. We did this with a view to supporting practitioners more widely in the future to use similar frameworks, all the while taking account of the nuances of their experience and our own interpretations.

We chose to use ethnography by proxy as both a practical and ethical commitment to the primacy of practitioner knowledge and professional judgement. They, not we, know best the children they are observing, and they, not we, have the embedded, situational knowledge and relationships to respond. The ethics of our research was considered and approved by The Froebel Trust's educational committee. It considered and took measures to address:

- Confidentiality of settings and participants and protection of their data
- Child protection, including measures under the Equalities Act 2010
- Children's rights: notably the right to be included (with parental consent) or not, including the right to withdraw verbally or non-verbally from the research; **and** the right to have their play interpreted through a strengths-based rather than a deficit lens.

- A non-interventionist methodology: children would not be asked to do anything out of the ordinary or provoked in any way to consider or respond to questions about race, outside the normal interventions of the setting;
- Practitioner wellbeing: in our individual and group conversations with practitioners we assured and modelled a “safe space” for courageous conversations, free of judgement.

Specifically, we wrote to parents considering consent:

We do not intend to analyse children’s expressions or play choices through negative or scarcity lenses - nor will we personalise any shortcomings. We recognize that we are all on a long-term learning journey of growth and change in relation to racial equality. We hope that this research will provide much to celebrate and build on as well as be (non-judgementally) reflective about.

The research itself had four phases. First, an initial questionnaire for volunteering practitioners, exploring their understandings and experiences of race, racism, its intersections with early childhood and any insight into affordances for anti-racist practices in Froebelian pedagogies. Second, an introductory online meeting in which we outlined Jones and Okun’s framework, the methodology and our joint ethical responsibilities. Third, the observations themselves, which practitioners recorded in unstructured ways, using Jones and Okun’s framework to a greater or lesser extent. And finally a focus group reflecting on the observations themselves as well as their broader experiences of conducting them.

Key findings

We distilled our writing around two observational vignettes which together reflected the wider patterns as captured by practitioners and interpreted by us. One, from a racially diverse, inner city nursery, observed children in a seemingly heightened state of interplaying colonial habits and decolonial resistance. Here, two children assimilated a third as the baddie in their play and seemed, at face value, to make a game of excluding her, while a fourth provided a conscious counterpoint – audibly questioning how the third child was being identified and excluded, and inviting her to play with him. The tensions were clear and present – and stayed right on the surface. The difference between the children’s needs, power, status, agency and reactions was palpable. In the second vignette, from an all-white, rural nursery, three children play in a seemingly harmonious way at making hot chocolate from mud and water. One momentarily slips into “paternalistic” and “perfectionist” habits (Jones and Okun), but there is an underlying assumption of coherence between the children – and as a result any differences in view, control and desire among them slip back below the surface. Neither observation remained unexamined. The practitioners in both instances delved deeply to consider what was at stake for the children, but in the moment both chose to stand back and not intervene.

In both observations, we clearly see children playing and replaying with affects of control, urgency, hoarding, black and white thinking – all precursive to an emergent capacity for future *Black and white* thinking. We also heard (and saw deeply for ourselves) the interpretative

dilemmas for practitioners – in which at one moment an action which seems colonial can on a second look seem the opposite, or both/and colonial and decolonial at the same time. By rendering another child as the baddie in their imaginative world, are children simultaneously playing at including as well as excluding? Or conversely, by trying to make things right – to make friends feel better – children simultaneously avoiding conflict in ways which obfuscate difference?

Our analysis, paradoxically, favoured *more* intervention when these tensions stay below the surface. Where the tensions sit on the surface, skilled Froebelians may feel assured in standing back and letting them play out with appropriate leeway for emotional and physical risk – short of significant harm. In doing so, they allow children agency to gauge how their actions are impacting on each other dialogically and make adjustments or repair relationships based on intrinsic motivations, ethics and insight, as clearly seen in other observations during the research – rather than in shallow response to adult directives. Conversely where coloniality dips below the surface in children’s supposedly harmonious play, we recognise a danger that children do not gain insight into it. Knowing how the colonial and decolonial can sit alongside each other it is both essential to amplify and celebrate the decolonial, but also to bring attention to the colonial, if and when attention to it is not naturally experienced.

We wonder if there are opportunities, were this second vignette to be repeated, for practitioners to *trouble* the play? To bring to the surface that which never quite finds its target. Could the adult, perhaps, introduce or signal a greater diversity of resources or of imaginative possibilities – possibly troubling the either/or singularity of the perfect and totemic hot chocolate? Might they productively wonder with children (within the imaginative frame of play) about the roles they are inhabiting? Could they playfully bring into focus the children’s different values and approaches to the task – or delve further into the children’s interest in hot chocolate itself and the presumably diverse stories behind their real-world experiences of it?

This reading is echoed by Derman-Sparks et al. (2011, page 62), who argue that practitioners everywhere but especially in white majority settings have a duty to:

Develop authentic identities based on personal interests, family history, culture and [children’s] interconnections, rather than on White superiority [i.e. the presumed commonality and normativity of experience]... Overemphasising the differences between groups and, conversely, ignoring the differences *within* groups, is one way that racism polarises people.

This interpretation was echoed in our focus group by one practitioner:

Interview: Are there new opportunities for everyday practice springing from this exploration?

Practitioner 1: It hasn't just come from what we've observed, but just being part of this project has opened up lots of conversations where we're looking more in depth at our practice – not only how are we teaching children about diversity and inclusion, but are we challenging them...

Yet as we see from another practitioner reflection, the tensions remain on both sides.

Interviewer: I'm curious, how did you feel about your role... it looks like a very pure observation – you didn't intervene in what was happening...

Practitioner 2: And generally I try not to in my practice, I try and ... you know, I wonder if I might have stepped in before if I hadn't tried to record so meticulously what they were saying – might I have posed a wondering question – but in some ways it was actually quite good not to, and just see how it developed – and I think actually in all the cases there was some kind of resolution, either by the original antagonists or by others.

Interviewer: So it sounds like actually letting things play out revealed stuff that was quite helpful in the relationships?

Practitioner 2: Not always, you know I think that's the trouble with colonialism, people don't always see what they're doing – it's so ingrained, unless there's an intervention then potentially these behaviours will just keep repeating and repeating and repeating.

It is these tensions, this trouble, to borrow from Donna Haraway (2016), that Froebel invites us to stay with. Not to answer the questions, but to live them. Our hope, in offering a new reflexive practice guide for practitioners, (pending autumn 2024), is to help practitioners do just that.

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Further reading: You can read more about our ethnographic research in the Journal of Early Childhood Research, which is awaiting publication.

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Table 1 Our rendering of Jones and Okun's (2001) colonialities and decolonialities, for practitioners

Coloniality	De-coloniality/other??
Perfectionism (mistakes/mess feared/resisted)	Mistakes and different approaches valued/incorporated
Urgency (Now! Now! Now! Pushing ahead)	Slow, deferred gratification, process, attunement
Defensiveness (unnecessarily resisting relationships/new ideas)	Fears named/opened out, creative vulnerability
Individualism/competition	Emphasis on collective/collaboration
Accumulation (quantity over quality)	Sharing and creating resources, process over product
Correct words (at expense of communication)	Non-verbal valued, words played with
Logic rules (experience/emotions marginalised)	Embraces diverse perspectives, comfort with feelings
Singularity (there is one right/best way)	Different methods/approaches co-exist
Paternalism (I'm in charge)	Recognising our limitations and refusing authority over others
Either/or thinking (Not that, this!)	Both/and – different needs/play/ideas allowed to overlap
Power hoarding (alliances, materials, knowledge)	Power actively distributed, open leadership
Progress as "bigger/more"	Quality of experience, impact
Fear of open conflict / need for resolution	Staying with tension, creativity