

A TRUE CALLING

We talk to early years consultant, author and travelling tutor **Dr Stella Louis** about her work with the Froebel Trust, experiencing racism and receiving a lifetime achievement award.

Q How did you get into early years education?

A I'm from a large family – I have six sisters and two brothers, so there were always young people around the house. After doing a youth training scheme at a local primary school aged 16, I realised working with children was something I was good at.

I trained as a nursery nurse and then got into teaching adults, working for the Lambeth Employment Training Scheme. That was the best job because I felt a real connection to the young people I was working with. Then I worked for the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University), where I specialised in working with parents.

Q You now lead a team of travelling tutors for the Froebel Trust. How did you get involved with them?

A In 2010, I was working in Peckham as an early years consultant for Southwark Council and I was encountering many challenging practices. I called Professor Tina Bruce for advice because she had been so supportive when I was doing my master's degree.

She told me about the work she was doing with the Froebel Trust in South Africa. I did 18 months of intense Froebelian training before Tina and I travelled to work in a township in Soweto, teaching the Froebelian approach to educators out there. When I went back home, rather

than it being my nightmare, Peckham became my inspiration, and it enabled me to face challenges I didn't know I could.

Q What was going to South Africa like?

A It was wonderful. Tina had told the team she was bringing someone with her, and they just assumed I'd be white. They would look at me, saying: "You black!" It was really powerful. South Africa is one of the most unequal places I have ever been. The work we're doing upskilling and educating and funding staff to be trained as Reception class teachers is really important. I think it's something I will do until I die; it's become part of who I am.

Q Explain the Froebel approach and what it means to you.

A It's an approach to working with children that values and builds on what children know, their families and their experiences of the outside world. The Froebelian approach is not just something I do in my work, it's part of who I am as a human being.

Q You also deliver courses in equality, race and unconscious bias. Is this something you have experienced in your career? What can the childcare sector do to address this?

A Yes, there are a few incidences that stand out. For the first I went to tribunal and won, because I didn't want this woman to treat other people the same way she treated me. It was an important fight. I have also experienced institutionalised racism in other parts of the education sector, including discrimination from people who would claim to be unbiased and inclusive.

ABOUT THE FROEBEL TRUST

The Froebel Trust funds research into children's learning from birth to 8 years old.

The charity's work is based on the principles of Friedrich Froebel, the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education. The Froebel Trust believes in the importance of play, learning through nature, practical hands-on learning and nurturing a child's connection to their community. Find out more at froebel.org.uk



The sector needs to acknowledge that institutionalised racism does exist – there are policies, practices and structures that make it difficult for people of colour to progress.

Q You won lifetime achievement and trainer of the year at last year's Nursery World awards. How did that feel?

A Bittersweet. My dad died in August, and he knew I was going to receive the lifetime achievement award. One of the last things he said to us as a family was "Life is strange" – and the day after I read my dad's eulogy celebrating his life, I accepted this award. It felt quite profound. It was truly wonderful to get the recognition, but I feel sad my dad wasn't there to see it.

Q Your first book was Understanding Schemas in Young Children. Why are schemas so important?


A Schemas are biological, we are born with them, and they



are an essential part of a child's development.

But they shouldn't be talked about in isolation. It's not just about spotting schemas – we should be using them to help us provide the right kind of intervention and support to aid a child's development. [See page 13 for our cover feature on schemas.]

Q What advice do you have for those joining the sector?

A Learn how to observe. You can't teach if you don't observe, regardless of the curriculum. Get to know your families, understand their cultural practices and where they're from. And if you build on what your children know and can do, through your observation, everything else will come. 

FAST FACTS

Q What's your proudest moment?

A I have just finished writing a book with my beautiful daughter Hannah Betteridge, called Let's Talk About Race in Early Years, out later this year. It gave me such joy to work together.

Q How do you spend your spare time?

A I like wallowing in my own company – writing, gardening, and spending time in nature.

Q Describe yourself in three words.

A Passionate. Empathetic. Froebelian.

Q What impact has the Froebel Trust had on you?

A Significant. It's the only organisation I have worked for that hasn't been threatened by me or my ability. They have recognised and celebrated it.