



## Early childhood learning receives boost in townships

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EARLY Childhood Development centres in townships east of Pretoria have been given a much-needed boost in their efforts to develop the minds of young children coming through their doors with the introduction of "sensory gardens".

The pilot project, initiated by the University of Pretoria's Mamelodi Campus and funded by the US and the SA Higher Education Network provides preschool teachers from centres in townships with training on sensory gardens.

For a period of five weeks every Tuesday, teachers from centres in Mamelodi, Bronkhorstspuit and Eersterust were introduced to sensory gardens and how to initiate them at their schools.

Through the project, the teachers were taught how to start small-scale sensory gardens to include features, surfaces, objects and plants to stimulate the senses of touch, sight, scent, taste and hearing at their centres.

During the training sessions, the teachers received ideas on how they could use their gardens as outdoor classrooms to teach their learners basic lessons about the importance of water, seeds and other science-based and nature-related concepts.

They also attended an online training session by Dr Kate Kurkul from Merrimack College in the US, who provided notes on the value of sensory gardens and taught them (the teachers) how to ask learners the right leading questions.

Dr Martina Jordaan, the project leader and head of Community Engagement Research and Postgraduate Students at the Mamelodi Campus, said such gardens helped to improve the health, mood and cognition of those who visited them and provide space for physical activity.

Jordaan added that gardening and plant care helped children develop gross and fine motor skills, with spending time outdoors, breathing fresh air and being exposed to sunlight being good for their overall physical health.

Jordaan said that the group of teachers who attended the pilot project were enthusiastic and responsive to new ideas, so much so that they were keeping in contact via an active WhatsApp group, which she also used to pass on new ideas that could be easily and appropriately implemented.

