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Setting children up for social mastery: Building young children's social capacity - looking through a teaching and learning lens

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Abstract

There is much debate in the literature and in the world of teachers and parents as to the most effective way of building young children's social capacity: laissez faire, authoritarian or authoritative. This study reports on the authoritative approach, the teaching and learning paradigm. Based on choice theory, this approach maintains that social behaviours are not intuitive. Children need to be intentionally taught and tutored in the performance of social behaviours. Behaviour expectations are realistic and consistent, children are supported as they learn new behaviours, and mistakes are viewed as opportunities for teaching and learning. The adults' role is non-coercive and non-judgemental, placing ownership of behaviour with the child. Participants in this preliminary study report their perceptions of an authoritative paradigm of behaviour teaching and learning. A total of 25 participants responded to the online survey, 7 staff (Female = 7, Male = 0) and 18 parents (Females = 17, Males = 1). The comparison between responses from staff and parents is tested with an independent sample t-test. The results indicate no significant differences in the views of the role of adults in building children's social capacity between parents and staff, $t(23)=1.8$, $p>.05$. However, results of an independent sample t-test comparing parents and staff show that parents ($M=3.17$) and staff ($M=2.14$) do differ significantly in their opinions of punishment and rewards in building young children's social competence, $t(23)=3.02$, $p<.00$.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Setting Children Up for Social Mastery: Building Young Children's Social Capacity - Looking through a Teaching and Learning Lens

The staff and parents of Indooroopilly Montessori Children's House (IMCH) have worked with the author over a seven year period, creating and sustaining an authoritative paradigm for teaching young children social behaviour. This paradigm is influenced by the philosophy of Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) and is informed by the social systems, processes and practices of Choice theory (Glasser, 2000). The writings of theorists and practitioners have influenced the sense of place that IMCH has become: an ecological place, where adults intentionally teach young

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children social behaviour (Vygotsky, 1978; Walker& Walker, 1991; Bernard, 1994;McArdle, 2002; McGinnis& Goldstein, 2003; Carter 2008; McArdle&Carter, 2009).

Choice theory is a way of understanding why and how individuals behave the way they do. It is an internal control psychology, a pro-relationship theory of human behaviour. According to this theory, a socially responsible person chooses behaviours that will satisfy his/her basic needs - survival, connectedness, recognition, freedom, and enjoyment - but allow others to satisfy their basic needs. A socially responsible person does not choose behaviours that violate another's rights. According to Dr William Glasser, author of Choice theory, social behaviours need to be intentionally taught.

Adults working from an authoritative paradigm adopt the role of lead manager, creating and designing needs satisfying environments where children learn to live together peaceably and productively (McArdle, 2002). Within such environments, individual differences including learning styles, temperaments, personalities, and acquisition rates, are valued and responded to. Each child's behaviour is monitored and when inappropriate behaviour occurs, as it invariably will, it is addressed with compassion, thoughtfulness, and patience. Adults refrain from criticizing, intimidating, blaming and shaming children when they misbehave. They acknowledge social mistakes, and structure their learning and teaching accordingly.

Behaviour teaching and learning is planned. Consequences are regarded as major teachers of learning behaviour. Consequences follow chosen behaviours and are related to need fulfilment (Glasser, 2000). Behaviours are taught and learned specifically in the location where they are intended to be used. Direct teaching, modelling and opportunities to create new behaviours form the framework for behaviour teaching and learning (McArdle& Carter, 2009). Behaviour teaching takes the mystery out of behaviour mastery by explicitly teaching expected behaviours. A shared understanding is developed with children and adults regarding the meaning of the behaviours and accompanying consequences.

This authoritative paradigm acknowledges children as natural learners, competent beings actively engaged in their own learning. The adult's role is to design, lead and manage needs satisfying environments, with relevant, responsive and respectful instructional processes that enable and empower children to develop their social capacity. Responsibility for behaviour rests with the child with the adults' wisely linking teaching behaviour with social consequences.

This behaviour teaching process, outlined in Figure 1, is a shift from autocratic and permissive thinking to an authoritative paradigm (McArdle, 2002; Carter, 2008). Instruction is given in a manner that appeals to the child's prior knowledge and experience, needs, and learning style. Behaviours are taught in a strategic step-by-step fashion, beginning with simple steps. Adults increase the level of complexity as the child becomes more proficient. Behaviours are modelled by an adult and are supplemented with verbal and pictorial descriptions. Instruction is embedded in the meaningful activities and contexts that occur throughout the child's day. Scaffolding in the form of social coaching in living peacefully together occurs on an ongoing basis. Social mistakes provide opportunities for many lessons on how to do things differently.

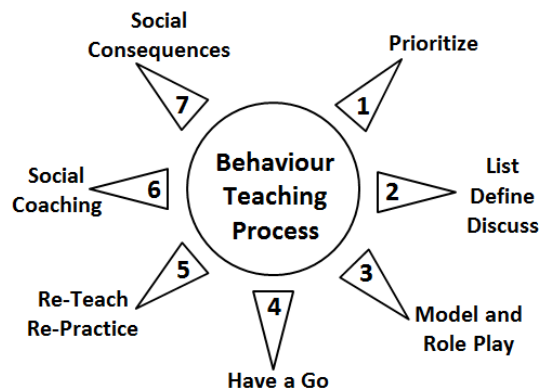


Figure1. Mindfields behaviour teaching stages

2. Structure of the study

2.1. Research questions

Participants in this preliminary study report their perceptions of the authoritative paradigm of behaviour teaching and learning. Findings are intended to fill the gap in the research literature by identifying an authoritative approach to teaching young children social behaviour.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 25 participants responded to the online survey, 7 staff (Female = 7, Male = 0) and 18 parents (Females = 17, Males = 1). Of the 7 staff respondents, 6 were full time employees. Staff respondents have been employed at IMCH on average 4.14 years and have an average of 8.71 years of early childhood education experience. The minimum qualification for staff respondents is a diploma in Early Childhood. Parent respondents have, had children attending IMCH on average 2.36 years. The mean number of children for parents is 1.67.

3.2. Measures

A thorough search of the literature was unable to reveal a self-report online survey that contained all the items of interest in this preliminary study. Therefore, the existing literature on young children's social development guided the development of an anonymous survey instrument. The item pool included a total of 31 questions, separated into 4 parts: demographic, paradigm, role of teacher, and social mistakes.

3.3. Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained by the relevant authority before the project commenced. The online measure remained live for one week and took respondents approximately 20 minutes to complete. Questions were based on an extensive literature review of the development of young children's social behaviour and the existing Guided Choices social teaching program. The online measure was pilot tested for format, clarity, length, and ease of administration. Participants were recruited to the study via an email forwarded, by the centre's Director, inviting their anonymous participation in the online study.

3.4. Data analysis

Participants recorded their perceptions of the authoritative approach to social behaviour teaching and learning. Statistical analysis was conducted using the SPSS program to discern response patterns, validity and reliability of the data. This, alongside a comprehensive literature review based on the themes, formed the basis of these findings.

4. Results

The comparison between responses from staff and parents for the paradigm for teaching social behaviour was tested with an independent sample t-test. Findings indicate a high percentage of respondents have similar views of the authoritative paradigm as the basis for social behaviour teaching and learning. The results show no significant differences between staff and parents, $t(23)=1.8, p>.05$.

A summary of responses to paradigm questions summarized in Table 1, shows a high percentage of respondents have similar views on an authoritative paradigm being the basis for building children's social capacity.

Table 1: Percentage of paradigm responses

	Question	No (%)	Yes (%)
1	Children are taught how to socially behave.	0.00	100.00
2	Children's social mistakes provide opportunities for teaching and learning.	0.00	100.00
3	Children are learning how to behave and mistakes in behaviour are part of this learning.	0.00	100.00
4	Internal control is more important than external control.	12.00	88.00
5	Behaviour is chosen.	12.00	88.00
6	Behaviour is imposed by authority figures.	72.00	28.00
7	Individuals are responsible for their own behaviours.	4.00	96.00
8	Social rules are essential.	0.00	100.00
9	Children learn nothing from their social mistakes.	0.00	100.00
10	Punishment and reward encourages appropriate behaviour.	32.00	68.00
11	Behaviour is learnt, so behaviour can be taught.	4.00	96.00
12	All children mature at the same rate and require identical social support.	0.00	100.00
13	Social teaching needs to be explicit and taught step by step.	32.00	68.00
14	The adult needs to set the behaviour boundaries with / children.	0.00	100.00
15	Children need limited choices because too many choices can be detrimental.	16.00	84.00
16	As children develop their social knowledge and handle more choices, they are given more.	0.00	100.00
17	Children are learning to regulate their emotions need adult support.	0.00	100.00
18	Choice theory teaches that we choose what we do and we are responsible for our choices.	0.00	100.00
19	The child's self worth is important when responding to misbehavior.	0.00	100.00

Respondents were asked about the role of an adult in social teaching and learning – teaching or telling children how to behave. Staff and parents checked the boxes applicable to them. They were allowed multiple responses. Results summarized in Table 2 indicate a consensus that teaching social behaviour includes explaining, demonstrating, and discussing the behaviours as opposed to blaming, complaining, and nagging. Parents and staff were generally agreeable on the same points.

Table 2: Summary of parents and staff views about teaching and learning

Teaching is ...	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Explaining	100	86
Talking	67	57
Showing	94	100
Directing	61	43
Modeling	100	100
Criticizing	6	0
Instructing	78	71
Demonstrating	100	100
Blaming	0	0
Discussing	94	100
Nagging	0	0
Observing	100	100
Lecturing	11	0
Empowering	94	86
Problem Solving	100	100
Complaining	0	0
Memorizing	28	0
Monitoring	83	71
Celebrating	94	100

The adults' role in social teaching was recorded with staff and parents checking the boxes applicable to them. Respondents were allowed multiple responses. Findings summarized in Table 3 indicate that respondents locate themselves in the authoritative, not the permissive or authoritarian paradigm: listening, supporting, encouraging, and teaching. Respondents further clarified their understanding of respectful relationships and these responses summarized in Table 4, are aligned with the authoritative paradigm. Table 5 outlines respondents' views of punishment and timeout.

Table 3: Summary of parents and staff views of the role of an adult

Role of Adult	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Humiliate	0	0
Listen	100	100
Lecture	6	0
Support	100	100
Judge	0	0
Accept	83	100
Threaten	0	0
Empower	94	86
Scream	0	0
Respect	89	100
Argue	0	0
Encourage	100	100
Put Down	0	0
Collaborate	83	86
Criticize	0	0
Correct	94	43
Teach	100	100

Table 4: Summary of parents and staff views on respectful relationships

Respectful relationships involve	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Nagging	0	0
Caring	89	100
Criticizing	0	0
Blaming	0	0
Listening	100	100
Supporting	100	100
Complaining	0	0
Contributing	94	100
Encouraging	94	100
Punishing	0	0
Guiding	94	100
Rewarding People to Control Them	17	0
Trusting	94	100

Table 5: Summary of parents and staff views on punishment and time out

Punishment	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Punishment damages relationships	89	100
Punishment strengthens relationships	33	0
Punishment focus on learning in a better way	39	0
Punishment focus on fault and guilt	61	100
Punishment means that the adult is responsible for children's behaviour	50	71
Punishment means children are responsible for own behaviour	61	29
Time out is about punishing children	11	86
Time out is about teaching and learning	89	29

Summaries of means and individual comparisons are displayed in Table 6 and 7. When comparing parents ($M=3.17$) and staff ($M=2.14$), learning from social mistakes are viewed differently. Results of an independent sample t-test show that parents ($M=3.17$) and staff ($M=2.14$) differ significantly in their opinions towards how punishment and rewards are essential in building social capacity, $t(23)=3.02$, $p<.00$.

Table 6: Summary of means

		N	Mean
Punishment and rewards are essential for building children's social capacity	Parent	18	3.17
	Staff	7	2.14
Consequences are important in behaviour change	Parent	18	4.72
	Staff	7	4.14
Love is conditional on good behaviour	Parent	18	1.22
	Staff	7	2.86
It is more important to tell children how to behave than to teach them how to behave	Parent	18	2
	Staff	7	1.71
Relationships are based on trust and respect	Parent	18	5
	Staff	7	5
Blaming students for misbehaviour is the correct action	Parent	18	1.39
	Staff	7	1.29
External control environments destroy child-adult relationships and Choice theory environments connect teachers, children and parents	Parent	18	3.89
	Staff	7	4.29
The environment is an important teacher of social behaviour.	Parent	18	4.39
	Staff	7	5

Table 7: Summary from the comparison of means after an independent t-test

	t	df	Sig
Punishment and rewards are essential for building children's social capacity	3.02	23.00	0.00*
Consequences are important in behaviour change	1.21	7.07	0.27
Love is conditional on good behaviour	-2.04	7.03	0.08
It is more important to tell children how to behave than to teach them how to behave	0.67	23.00	0.51
Relationships are based on trust and respect*			
Blaming students for misbehaviour is the correct action	0.47	23.00	0.65
External control environments destroy child-adult relationships and Choice theory environments connect teachers, children and parents	-0.98	23.00	0.34
The environment is an important teacher of social behaviour.	-3.72	17.00	0.00*

5. Discussion

Findings from this preliminary study indicate that staff and parents at IMCH have similar perceptions of social behaviour teaching and learning. Responses are aligned with the IMCH's mission statement that prioritizes fostering a community of learners within a trusting, nurturing and respectful environment. Respondents agree that deep learning teaching practices and processes are necessary for building young children's social capacities. Children need to be taught and supported as they grow and develop their social understanding, skills and competence. Rote learning directed toward memorization and reproduction is not emphasized.

Parents and staff differed on their view of the role of rewarding and punishing children when social mistakes occur. From the staff perspective, social mistakes signal points for teaching and learning, not blaming and criticizing. Empowerment rather than disempowerment was promoted more by staff than parents, as was internal motivation compared with punishment and rewards.

Findings indicate that adults do less 'for' and 'to' children, and more 'with' them, so they can learn to do things on their own. The goal is to intentionally teach social behaviour so children do not become compliant, dutifully and mindlessly following adults' directions. It is to teach children to make responsible choices about how to behave. This approach to teaching social behaviour is located in the authoritative paradigm of respect, empowerment, support, and influence. Adults are non-coercive and non-judgemental, teaching and guiding children to develop responsibility for their own behaviour.

6. Limitations and future directions

A limitation of this study is the small sample size. Future research would be useful if larger representative samples were obtained and studied on a longitudinal basis within the current context and when children transition to formal school contexts. Modifying the data collection instrument - (1) beyond dichotomous categorical variables, and (2) to include observational data and forum groups - would add depth to the current findings. It would be important in future research to examine paradigm development and generational, cultural, and early years education philosophical differences aligned with the authoritative paradigm.

As the teaching and learning paradigm is a relatively new phenomenon in the social development research, future studies exploring the place where children and adults learn this paradigm are needed. Identifying the depth of this learning may inform the effectiveness and sustainability of this paradigm. Further research into the views of the child would contribute an additional layer of authenticity to this research. The role of professional identity in the teaching and learning of social behaviour provides a further starting point in future studies, as does parents and teachers concurrently adopting the social learning and teaching paradigm.

7. Final word

The findings presented above begin to advance our knowledge of building young children's social capacity through the teaching and learning paradigm. Evidence suggests the importance of adults valuing the authoritative paradigm, intentionally teaching and guiding the development of young children's social behaviours. This paradigm reflects the ethical practices of respect, justice, beneficence, and compassion.

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