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Our image of the child

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Abstract

Our image of the child influences our view of children, our relationship with, and expectations of them. An image of the child as unique, self-assured, capable, secure, loving, joyful, competent, the protagonist of their own learning and discovery, sets the parameters of engagement with children. The adult's role in promoting and consolidating this image begins with adults who intentionally build and models respectful relationships. Thus bullying, power over behaviours, are unacceptable and discouraged. One research question was examined in this online study: Is an adults' positive image of the child aligned with an authoritative paradigm of teaching and learning? Findings from this study form part of a larger study examining the adults' role in building young children's social capacity. Findings are intended to fill the gap in the research literature by identifying the positive image of the child with authoritatively teaching young children social behaviour. Participants in this study are staff and parents of the Indooroopilly Montessori Children's Centre, Brisbane, Australia. A total of 25 participants responded to an online survey: 7 staff (Female = 7, Male = 0) and 18 parents (Females = 17, Males = 1). Respondents recorded their image of the child as a lifelong learner, active, curious, capable and confident individual. Findings identified children as lifelong learners in supportive relationships with trustworthy adults. Findings further identified that adults teach in ways that enable children to develop a positive sense of identity, by fostering wellbeing and connectedness with others in the social world. This teaching is based on secure, respectful, responsive, and reciprocal relationships between adults and children, and is enacted within teaching and learning environments that promote justice, beneficence, and peace.

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1. Introduction**1.1. Our image of the child**

We live in an era where children are no longer perceived as miniature adults, expected to learn what adults decide to teach them. Certain practices are condoned, others are not. Natural curiosity and initiative are no longer ignored but encouraged; some may go as far as to say, expected. Children learn by being actively involved in the natural process of learning. As they grow and mature, children develop skills and competencies that facilitate this learning process. As they engage with learning they explore, experiment, make sense of new experiences, master new skills and build upon and from their understanding and appreciation of the world around them.

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Children are the ‘bearer and constructors of their own intelligences’, expressing their leanings in a variety of ways, a process Reggio educators refer to as ‘the hundred languages’ (Rinaldi, 2006). Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development is ever present, ensuring learning is designed to reach a developmental level that is just above the child’s current developmental level.

The role of the adult in this environment is to design, manage and lead needs satisfying environments where children yearn to learn. Within this environment adults intentionally support child-initiated learning, within mutually respectful relationship-based experiences. Firm love, firmly set in security, trust, and influence is the paradigm the adult operates from. This love is patient and kind, yet firm in its expectations. This love is trusting, respectful, and always hopeful. It believes in the child. It is not afraid to set the child on the right path and to correct social mistakes (Carter & McArdle, 2009).

So much of this is about language and how adults express what they want. When adults want children to do something they have a choice in the language they use, and this language reflects their paradigm – authoritarian, permissive, authoritative. Authoritarian behaviours, including nagging, lecturing, begging, blaming, shaming, and put downs destroy relationships and cultivate a climate of negativity, alienation, mistrust, and co-dependency. Whilst the permissive paradigm has too few expectations, inconsistently expected with extreme leniency one minute and rigid expectations the next minute, the same outcomes occur. Adult bullying behaviours contribute to the downward spiral of self doubt, disempowerment, low trust. The carrot (reward) and stick (punishment and fear) mentality rules, with children being treated like things to be controlled, blamed, and managed (Carter, 2008). The true worth, uniqueness, and positive image of the child is lost.

Adults who consistently interact thoughtfully and courteously with children are most likely to nurture secure, confident, capable, joyful, and competent individuals (Rinaldi, 2006). These adults operating from the base of trust and trustworthiness and the power of influence, are sensitive to their role in the child’s shaping of a positive sense of self. They operate from a paradigm of teaching and guidance, with an emphasis on mutual respect. They view the child as the protagonist of their own learning. They identify children as loving, responsible, and secure, and who acknowledge their role as the adult is to honour and respect their uniqueness. To support children learn social behaviours, these adults intentionally adopt the role of social coaches, not boss managers (McArdle, 2002; Carter, 2008). They understand and appreciate that every person is in some respects, like all others, like some others, like no other.

2. Structure of the study

2.1. Research question

One research question was reported in this study: Is an adults’ positive image of the child aligned with an authoritative paradigm of teaching and learning? Findings form part of a larger study examining the adults’ role in building young children’s social capacity. Findings are intended to fill the gap in the research literature by identifying the positive image of the child with teaching social behaviour.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 25 participants responded to the larger survey, 7 staff (Female = 7, Male = 0), 18 parents (Females = 17, Males = 1). 6 of the 7 staff respondents were full time employees. Parent respondents have, had children attending the early years service where the survey was conducted on an average of 2.36 years. Staff respondents have an average of 8.71 years of experience in early childhood education; all have an early childhood qualification, the minimum level being a diploma in Early Childhood

3.2. Measures

A thorough search of the literature was unable to reveal a self-report survey that contained all the items of interest in the larger 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. In this study findings specific to part 1 and 3 of the survey will be reported – demographics and role of the teacher.

3.3. Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained by the relevant authority before the project commenced. The online measure remained live for two weeks and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Questions were based on a literature review of the development of the image of the child and young children's social behaviour. 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 to staff and parents requesting their participation in the study.

3.4. Data analysis

Participants recorded their perceptions of the image of the child and the authoritative paradigm when teaching young children social behaviour. 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

Respondents were asked their views on the image of the child and paradigm they align themselves with when teaching young children social behaviour. Respondents checked the qualities, which were applicable to them and were allowed multiple responses. Image of the child responses are summarized in Figure 1 and paradigm responses are recorded in Table 1.

The graphic representation in Figure 1 summarizes parents and staff perceptions on their image of the child. Qualities including lifelong learner, optimistic, capable, active, secure, confident, and curious were consistent across parents and staff.



Figure 1: Summary of parents and staff views on the image of the child

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 mastery. This paradigm is based on a positive image of the child – confident 'I can' thinker, self-directed and highly capable learner.

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	Punishment and reward encourages appropriate behaviour.	32.00	68.00
10	Behaviour is learnt, so behaviour can be taught.	4.00	96.00
11	The adult needs to set the behaviour boundaries with / children.	0.00	100.00
12	Children need to be punished when they misbehave.	72.00	28.00
13	Children need limited choices because too many choices can be detrimental.	16.00	84.00
14	As children develop their social knowledge and handle more choices, they are given more.	0.00	100.00
15	Children are learning to regulate their emotions need adult support.	0.00	100.00
16	The child's self worth is important when responding to misbehavior.	0.00	100.00
17	Extrinsic rewards (e.g., gold stars) are essential to motivate children to behave appropriately.	88.00	12.00

Respondents indicated the role of adults in social teaching and aligned this role within the authoritative paradigm. Staff and parents checked multiple responses applicable to their beliefs. Results summarized in Table 2 affirm the authoritative mind-set of teaching rather than dictating social behaviours to children.

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

Teaching is about:	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Explaining	100	86
Directing	61	43
Modeling	100	100
Demonstrating	100	100
Discussing	94	100
Observing	100	100
Empowering	94	86
Problem Solving	100	100
Monitoring	83	71

Table 3 provides additional evidence supportive of the adult operating from an authoritative paradigm when guiding young children towards developing social mastery. This guidance is based on a teaching and learning paradigm where children are perceived as competent and capable, thinking rather than feelings driven.

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

Role of an Adult	Parent (%)	Staff (%)
Listen	100	100
Support	100	100
Accept	83	100
Threaten	0	0
Empower	94	86
Respect	89	100
Encourage	100	100
Collaborate	83	86
Correct	94	43
Teach	100	100

5. Discussion

One research question was reported in this study: Is an adults' positive image of the child aligned with an authoritative paradigm of teaching and learning? Findings form part of a larger study examining the adults' role in building young children's social capacity.

Respondents agree that social behaviours are not innate, and children need to be taught required behaviours. This teaching needs to be intentional, communicated in a manner that is respectful of the positive image of the child. The adult's role is to honour this image; to guide and to coach children as they develop and apply their social knowledge and understanding. Adults achieve this by purposely teaching young children how to make wise behaviour choices and how to evaluate the consequences of these choices.

Findings affirm that adults teach in ways that enable children to develop a positive sense of wellbeing and connectedness with others in their social world. This teaching is based on secure, respectful, responsive, and reciprocal relationships between adults and children. Children develop a strong sense of identity as they progress as lifelong learners in supportive relationships with adults.

Rote learning based on fear and blame has no part in this teaching approach (Gartrell, 2004). Pessimistic, helpless, uninspired, and dependent images of children also have no place. They are replaced with positive constructive images of children: motivated, capable, curious, secure, confident, and excited to learn.

Findings indicate that parents and adults are in agreement that young children are active learners, engaging in meaningful social learning experiences. The authoritative paradigm cultivates respectful relationships that sustain a positive image of the child. As respondents specified, the adults' role is one of encourager, teacher, supporter and collaborator, guiding young children as they learn correct ways of being in secure relationship with others. It is the adults' response to children as they grow and develop their social capacity that builds or destroys this positive image. When children feel liked and genuinely cared for, valued, and included, they begin to work with one another and with staff. Adults who are respectful influence children with relationship, not just position.

Findings further confirm that adults develop relationships with children that are emotionally predictable and stable, based on an authoritative not an authoritarian mindset. Respondents further specify that adults need to set clear limits and consequences for misbehaviour rather than punish children's social mistakes. Children's curiosity and persistence are supported by adults who structure teaching experiences, support learning attempts, and adjust the difficulty levels of social instruction for children.

6. Limitations and future directions

A limitation of this study is the small sample size. Future research would be useful if larger representative samples could be obtained. Expanding the data collection instrument beyond the self-report instrument to include focus groups would add depth to the current findings. Examining children's positive self image through the attachment theory lens (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008) would add a further dimension to the findings of this study.

7. Final word

The findings presented above do much to advance our knowledge of the teaching and learning paradigm validating the positive image of the child. Evidence was provided that suggest the importance of adults valuing the authoritative paradigm, intentionally creating, managing and leading an environment that honours the positive image of the child. This environment, based on the foundational principles of firm love, reflects the ethical practices of respect, justice, beneficence, solidarity, and compassion (Carter & McArdle, 2009). Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and children (Malaguzzi, 1997, p. 117)

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