

Images of the child - an historical overview

by Jean Rockel

This article has been developed from a presentation given at Infantastic, and is about the influences on infant toddler care and education in New Zealand over the past century. The presentation was illustrated by a series of photographic images. A historical overview such as this provides the context for bringing a range of 'pictures' together to help early childhood teachers construct their approach to their profession. Each image is part of the larger historical picture. Putting these parts together into such a historical frame provides a broader perspective. The pictorial tapestry provides a backdrop as the context for early childhood education is established.

Before we can see and hear a child's story as teachers we need to consider our own story. The image that we hold of a child will be constructed by who we are. In order to look at the future, we need to examine differing discourses from the past that may impact upon our image of the child.

When considering issues in early childhood education, educators like to look to ideas from outside the country for inspiration. Perhaps it is the tall-poppy syndrome - our ideas are not seen to be as impressive as those are from overseas? Yet, New Zealanders have a reputation for being innovators: a bit of No.8 wire and we can do anything - part of our pioneering spirit!

However, it is also true that in learning from others whether at home or abroad we begin to know more about ourselves. For example, learning about the origins of an early childhood education philosophy in Reggio Emilia, in Italy, has helped me to investigate the origins of early childhood education here in New Zealand. The philosophy from Reggio Emilia invites us to look at the image that we hold of the child - is it an image of a 'needy' child, or one that sees the child as competent, rich in resources, and with a powerful sense of direction (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998)?

Unravelling Images

As educators, we help children construct meaning through our own understanding of the world. The relationships that children experience with us will contain a reflection of the images that we hold. "Children

construct their images of themselves and the society in relation to how they themselves are perceived." (Nyland, 1999, p.14.)

When I refer to the development of early education, it is also inclusive of care. I suggest that the care discourse is entwined with our understanding of education and this also needs to be unpicked with regard to New Zealand's history of social change. It is as if I am unpicking the tapestry so I can see how it was stitched together.

Reciprocal relationships and identity formation

Children gain an image of themselves, and who they are, mirrored in the ongoing relationship between themselves and another (Rata, 2001). The images that we construct of the child are influenced by historical, social, cultural and ideological views (that is, to do with doctrines and beliefs - political or otherwise) that have been either consciously or subconsciously created.

Our understanding of the child, therefore, becomes socially constructed, as our understanding of childhood itself is socially constructed (Cannella, 1997). We see a child through a variety of lenses, many of which we may be unaware, that reflect our personal values and beliefs. These views will have an influence upon our interactions with the children in an early childhood centre and have an effect on them in terms of their identity formation (Lally, 1995).

The emerging picture

What I want to offer in this presentation is for us to think about the New Zealand context and to reflect on our own views of the child. This a valuable and useful process in order to recognise the cultural influences upon our thinking.

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How we see the child can dictate how we establish a relationship. For example, if we take off a child's cardigan roughly, seeing the child as an object to be manipulated, we can convey disrespect that undervalues the child. To take a cardigan off a child carefully and respectfully, asking the child if they can help with this process, will convey the message that the child is respected and valued for themselves not because they are having to conform to what we tell them must happen. By involving an infant in what is happening, respect is shown for the infant, rather than treating the infant like a passive object that has things 'done to' them.

As educators, we consider many doctrines, such as ideas on development; ideas that have come from disciplines such as psychology, biology, sociology and philosophy. The boundaries between these bodies of knowledge have become more elastic now. They stretch and overlap as connections are made between them, while still focusing on human development.

There are also new research findings from neuroscience. The ideas here have begun to impact on other issues in education, such as hothousing (a term used to convey the impression of forcing growth). Educators need to resist pressure in a consumer-based society to use an overly enriched gadget-driven environment of commercial and mass-produced

products in the guise of accelerating a child's development. Instead educators ought to engage in the more human experiences of talking, singing, playing and dancing with babies that are recognised as invaluable for brain development (Mahon & Rockel, 2001).

Teachers with infants and toddlers are examining the commonalities of human experience but through culturally specific lens. We all bring multiple views of the child, gained through many pathways: through our own unique biography, and the values and beliefs we live by in our own communities and in society. There are other influences, however, that result from economic and political decisions that have not always been within our control.

Economic issues have changed the face of the labour market and the involvement of women in paid employment. This has opened the door more widely to education and care outside the home. Political decisions influence our roles as educators. Who is an educator - someone paid to look after children, or someone with a professional qualification? I challenge us to consider what is our image of the teacher? This is the other side of the coin!

A person who has responsibility for infants and toddlers in a centre has been called many things (language is very revealing):

- caregiver
- early childhood worker
- supervisor
- director
- manager, and more recently
- the person responsible.

The concept of caregiver, seems to imply care is given one way and is not reciprocal. Where is play and learning

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in regard to the term 'worker'? The term 'supervisor' has the air of surveillance; and 'director' and 'manager' would appear to be more at home in the business world, than part of the education sector. The term 'person responsible' does not really indicate to the public whether this is a teacher/educator or not. Parents may, of course, assume that the 'person responsible' is indeed a qualified teacher. In other sectors of education that person is called a teacher.

A qualified teacher whether with infants and toddlers or not, is a teacher - it doesn't depend on the shoe size of the learner. There are just different requirements for teachers of infants to those with older children. Early experiences reinforce particular pathways in the brain of an infant, therefore it is important to provide learning experiences at this stage that acknowledge a child's understandings, a developing sense of self confidence, and empathy for others. This creates a strong foundation for future learning, hence the significance to such things as early literacy and learning dispositions. Learning how to read when the child is at school (along with other skills) will be easier if the desire to learn was established in infancy. Helping children learn is my view of a teacher. Furthermore, teachers are learners too in this process.

Selected themes

The following perspectives emerged as I began to scrutinise my own views of the child. The images that I have selected are indicative of several main themes in the history of early childhood education in New Zealand.

In the early 20th century in New Zealand the main concern was infant mortality. Many babies did not survive past the first 12 months. A sense of moral and social order lead to the development of early education

services with an emphasis on health and welfare (May, 1997). The various elements of social control influenced how the child was required to conform to societal rules in order to progress safely to adulthood. It was later in the century that there emerged a changed attitude towards children themselves having rights in a fairer society. In the 1980s, many children were viewed as 'endangered' due to widening health, economic, and educational gaps (May, 2000). May discusses how children's academic abilities increasingly became measured against international benchmarks. The emergence of the competitive global market began to drive policy and set standards.

May draws attention to the increasing scrutiny of the lives of children and families in the twentieth century and the subsequent explanations provided by developmental psychology. She cites the comments from Rose (May, 2000, p.5) regarding the "gaze of the psychologist" and how the child and childhood became the focus of attention in an attempt to protect children and to ensure 'normal' development. As May states, "the gaze has been broader than psychological" (2000, p.7). She includes the rationales for state interest in new perceptions of childhood and education that were cloaked in ways that were politically acceptable at the time. These rationales included: inculcating moral attitudes, health practices, producing well-adjusted citizens, rights for women and children as well as Indigenous rights and needs of minority groups, and investing in early childhood for

economic benefits as part of a global economy.

The image of the child that we hold may come from such a gaze as we too seek to create a picture of 'normal' childhood. We can ask whose gaze of normality influences our own and how did that gaze come about? For example, Truby King (whose ideas were behind the New Zealand Plunket Society) held a particular gaze by looking at the healthy child in terms of the health of the nation (May, 1997). The focus on healthy babies providing healthy soldiers in adulthood was seen in the advertisements around this period that echo this concept.



Images from the 20th and 21st centuries

The photographs I showed at *Infantastic* cannot be reproduced here. Instead a description is provided. I will outline the perspective that I obtained from looking at the photographs.

A photograph of Mother Aubert, and the other nuns at the Home of Compassion at Island Bay, in 1908, with a large group of babies in bassinets outdoors, demonstrates the charitable gaze. There had been concerns over

baby farming scandals and little regard had been given to women and babies who had been abandoned by society. In 1903 Mother Aubert had established a creche for the children of unmarried mothers and others who needed care for their children. This ran on charity. The state's views were along the lines that concealment of illegitimate births could cover up the consequences of vice (May, 2000). Mother Aubert had the courage to challenge these views and provide assistance for mothers and babies in ways that avoided the perpetuation of such moralistic attitudes. This was the first successful creche in New Zealand.

A photograph of a baby competition in 1914 shows how society regarded the importance of the married mother and her baby in contrast to society's view of unmarried mothers and their babies. In the photograph the contrast is drawn between the formality of Victorian clothing worn by the Pākehā mothers and the less restrictive and comfortable clothing worn by a Māori mother. Nevertheless, the pride shown by the mothers in their babies outweighs the pressures illustrated by the stiff, tight clothing that they wore (perhaps indicative of the role of women in colonial times). The Māori baby who was dressed in a feathered cloak won the contest. The image of natural beauty may have won over the judges. A married woman's role was clearly viewed as bringing up healthy children to be part of society's future heritage and the baby competition appeared to be a way of enhancing a married mother's role in this.

A photograph of a nurse heavily gowned with a masked face holding a newborn typifies the 1940's. This indicates a medicalised gaze that illustrates the state's medical view of birth. Nurses over-protected newborns with extremely sterile conditions, and separated them from their mothers,

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despite the strong desire for mothers to handle their own babies at birth. This emphasis on hygiene had stemmed from a widespread fear of infection originating from the flu epidemic and unsanitary conditions in many homes. The view was that mothers could bring the risk of disease into hospital. Later they were to discover that hospitals too could contribute their own risks. This was before principles of hygiene were established, and new drugs became available, along with state-housing initiatives (Kedgley, 1996).

The logos of the Plunket Society's health care movement used the words 'To help the mothers and save the babies.' Truby King, and also the Māori leader, Maui Pomare, used this slogan as both Māori and Pākehā were concerned about the survival rates of infants. Although a supporter of breastfeeding, Truby King believed in a regulated and imposed sense of order. The Plunket symbol shifted from one showing a baby at the breast, to a nurse providing guidance. Mothers were viewed as needing to be taught - mother no longer knew best. Does this legacy of Truby King's ideas with regard to an emphasis on health and regularity still permeate our thinking today? Do we still over-regulate? Do we still rigidly



focus on keeping infants safe and healthy, rather than take this as a given and part of our everyday practice and incorporate a more holistic view of the infant?

A photograph illustrating gender stereotypes from the 1950s shows the girl playing house and the boy driving a toy car. At the time, this view perpetuated societal beliefs. This image reflects stereotyped roles, with full-time mothering viewed as socialising children into well-adjusted citizens. Women going back to the home after the war made a clear differentiation of where everyone was to fit in society.

A photograph from the cover of the school journal in 1964 showed 'Washday at the Pa'. This article in the school journal illustrated the economic poverty of Māori in a rural setting. On washday, best clothes were not worn; it was an occasion for play as well as work. Yet these captured images became a stereotyped image of Māori, rather than simply portraying a slice of rural life, which had been the intention of the photographer. In this context of disadvantage, the Māori child came to be viewed more and more as a poverty statistic fixed at a particular historical moment.

A photograph from the mid-1980s shows a counter-image of the Māori infant as a competent language learner, showing cultural prowess while attending Kohanga Reo.

A photograph showing dad playfully carrying his child on his shoulders while playing at the beach also illustrates the liberation gaze. Education became the basis for liberation for women, men, indigenous rights, and minority groups. Working women, and dads who were becoming more involved with their children, went along with campaigns in early childhood education for a better deal for children and families (May, 2000).



Patrick Faapol 2 years of age

A photograph from the mid-1990s of a New Zealand born Samoan toddler attending a childcare centre illustrates a particular economic gaze that has shaped constructions of childhood. This child sits astride a plastic ride-on toy, with designer clothing and cap; he seems confident in himself, we can imagine him being sure of who he is and what he can do. During this era an early childhood curriculum was developed that acknowledged a bicultural nation and the strengths of children and families within their own culture. At the same time, a national curricula across the education sector had set learning outcomes and essential skills as preparation for an enterprise society (May, 2000). Education, like our toddler, was linked to global economic agendas.

When we look upon the child we do so with the privilege of one who can gaze. Our assumptions, biases and social aspirations impact on what we 'see'. But does the child view the world in that way? The viewpoint of the person gazing is often insufficient and perhaps inaccurate for the world that the child is entering. In a world of global, economic intentions, what images of identity and individuality can we encourage through early childhood education?

Putting ourselves in the picture

Often, as educators, we put our ideas under the magnifying glass of critical

analysis in terms of examining identity. These ideas may reveal as much about the person who is doing the observing as the child who is observed. We have a tendency to connect culture and identity with ideas that are like single snapshots - sepia-like in quality; faded, limited ideas (the dancing, smiling, Pacific maiden, for example). But what of the modern child - global, assured, more appreciative of diversity than any generation before? For this child experiences do not occur as if they were in a frozen frame, but are more like a movie - dynamic and ever-changing. Their world is a process of shaping and weaving in new ideas. We are on the cusp of understanding many ways of knowing. These are informed by Māori and Pacific peoples and many others, who could take us into a renaissance of how to realise what early childhood education in New Zealand can be (Airini, 2002).

The unknown potential of children in the 21st century is exciting. An example of this is suggested when we see a child of 22 months confidently opening a file on the computer, creating an onscreen picture with the manipulation of the mouse, and selecting and clicking on an icon in order to save the picture for later. If this is achieved at 22 months what will be happening at 22 years of age. Do we underestimate the child by viewing the infant in a particular way?

Conclusion

We can bring all our collaborative understandings into play and perhaps because of that we can redefine what it is to belong. We have our aspirations and voices for what education is about in this country. There will be core elements regarding well-being, and other elements such as early literacy and expressive ways of communicating ideas. However, as educators how we bring that into play in our teaching is unique to ourselves because of the images we hold of children.

The most important understandings that I have gained about children have come from children themselves. If we can be open to learning more from children, I believe we will see them as

the protagonists, actors in their own right. They can weave their own picture.

The examination of images of children leads us to similarly examining our images of teachers. What image of the teacher do we choose for ourselves? Are we, like the children we teach, actors in our own society? Does this enhanced awareness and reflection lead to ongoing professional development and an involvement in advocacy issues?

Perhaps teaching and learning with infants and toddlers is like falling in love: the unconditional love that Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as every child needing someone who's nuts about them. Let's go nuts about infants and toddlers. We can learn from them and hold onto that image, and not see the vulnerable, fragile, needy, and endangered being, but an image of the rich, powerful and competent child.

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