

Seeing through the looking glass, past developmental milestones and into the view of infants & toddlers as life long learners

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Two lovely things have happened in our family. Hawaiki has started Kindergarten and Pipiana is asserting herself and imposing her wishes and desire for independence onto her family in the most effective toddler way. I think Hawaiki has been learning about 'jogging on the spot' at Kindergarten. Here's why...

Pipiana was having a enormous meltdown about her immediate desires not being met. As she lay on the floor kicking and screaming her mum picked her up. With her arm around Pipiana's middle, Louise carried her to the couch for a calming cuddle. All observed by Hawaiki. He later reported to his dad: "You know my little sister, Pipiana, she is strong, and she can jog on the spot."

Well that got me to thinking. I wonder at 3-year-old Hawaiki's infinite wisdom. He could see his sister as a little person who is strong and competent. Instead of being someone who takes up more than her space in family life, a nuisance who tutus with his trains, or screams and lashes out when her wishes are not instantly adhered to. She is someone whom he admires someone who 'jogs on the spot'. He has a wonderful credit and strength based image of his sister.

The image of the child we hold is very important. It influences the way we relate with and to children. It guides our response to children. Te Whariki, our early childhood curriculum, is founded on the statement which aspires for all children

To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of being and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.19)

The image we as teachers hold of the child impacts on the possibility of achieving this aspiration.

Barbara Rogoff's (2007) work challenges the western world's image of the child particularly around age segregation and learning out of context. The evidence is clear, many indigenous communities learn through observing and "pitching in to the ongoing activities of their cultural community". The photo below is of an Efe 11-month-old skillfully using a machete to cut fruit, with his grandmother monitoring in the background. This child

is in the Ituri Forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this context they are seen as confident and competent. They are expected to learn as part of their cultural experiences. This is in stark contrast to a middle-class western child who is more often than not not trusted to use a knife. It is Rogoff's hope that her work around sociocultural practice will inspire teachers to change their current practices and profoundly change adults image of the child.



Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996, p.10) tells us that

The term "curriculum" is used in this document to describe the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development.

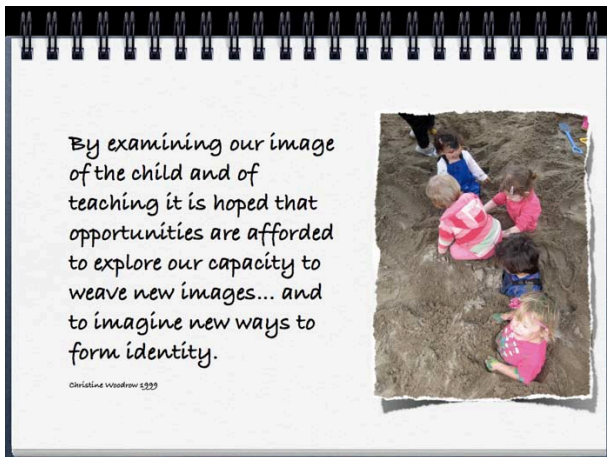
Our curriculum is not the book on the shelf in the Early Childhood setting office it is the sum total of experiences, activities and events that happen there. The sum total includes our image of the child and the impact that has on pedagogy. The 'image of the child' we as teacher and adults hold profoundly impacts on how we respond to children and how we teach. It also profoundly impacts on the sum total of experiences, activities and events.

We have all experienced a childhood. These experiences, cultural artifacts and our professional learning and knowledge informs our notion of childhood. Christine Woodrow (1999) mentions three current popular images of childhood. They are:

Child as Threat or Monster. This image is with us daily in shows and books with titles, such as: Toddler Taming, Super Nanny, and Angels and Demons. This image of childhood sees children as devious, troublemakers who need controlling. Adults are likely to need to control children and use rules and rewards. Agency is denied children.

Child as Innocent. This image is often shown in magazines and birth celebration cards. This image sees children as weak, not able, dependent, and needy. Adults are likely to have a position of power to make all decisions and provide knowledge and protection. Agency is denied children.

Child Embryonic Adult. This image is seen daily in media images of our knowledge economy drive where children are seen as an investment in our economic future and childhood is a developmental process that prepare children for life. Adults are likely to have a drive to teach children knowledge and skills. Agency is often denied children.



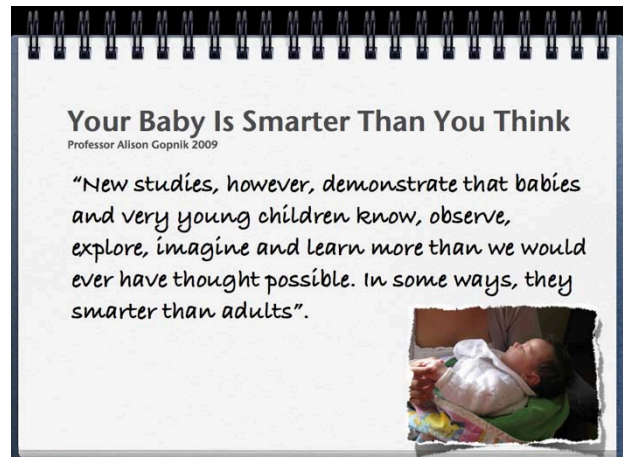
The image of the child as a confident and competent learner includes teachers holding central to their practice a notion of the child's agency, thus, affording the child their own sense of agency. Where the image of the child is of competent and confident, powerful, and resourceful learners 'curriculum' is a space where children have control over their own learning and choices in activity where they themselves 'find something of interest'. Children's own action actively unfolds and exposes their own curriculum. Curriculum is a space where the child's own agency is valued and given precedence in the 'sum total' of

[...] experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development. (MoE, 1996, p. 10)

When children have a notion of their own agency they are able to take action, to take control or make decisions and have an 'I can do it feeling'. Infants and toddlers as confident and competent learners have agency and lead their own learning.

Alison Gopnik explains that:

What children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play. (2009, p. 2)



The young brain is plastic and flexible. Babies' brains have more neural connections, these are pruned if they are not used. It is a case of 'use it or lose it'. Carol Dweck (at the "Ready, Willing and Able Conference" in Corby, England in 2010) reminded us that you don't see unmotivated babies, they are wired to imitate and learn of their own accord.

Carol also told us that we become the voices around us. When the voices around us support and feed back to us in positive ways we grow into those competent and confident learners. The voices around the child are spoken words, non-verbal communication, informal and formal assessment. When these voices around the child support their own sense of agency and value many kinds of learning, and when attitudes or disposition to learn are foregrounded, then infants, toddlers and children become powerful learners in the 21st Century.



It is imperative that what we, as teachers, see and 'notice' about a child is framed up by asking ourselves 'What learning is happening here?' or 'What have I learnt about John?' When we do this we frame up what children 'do' as learning, strengthen our image of the child, and keep our focus on the child as powerful learner.

Teachers use many lenses to assess and analyse "What learning do I think happened here?" These lenses include, dispositions, bi-cultural, literacy, physical skills, knowledge, maths, technology etc. When our foregrounding lens for assessing learning is dispositional the child is described as learner. Identity as 'learner' is strengthened and constructed by dispositional language.

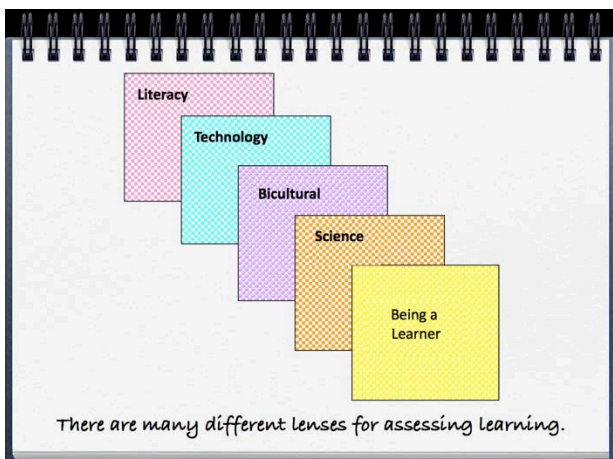
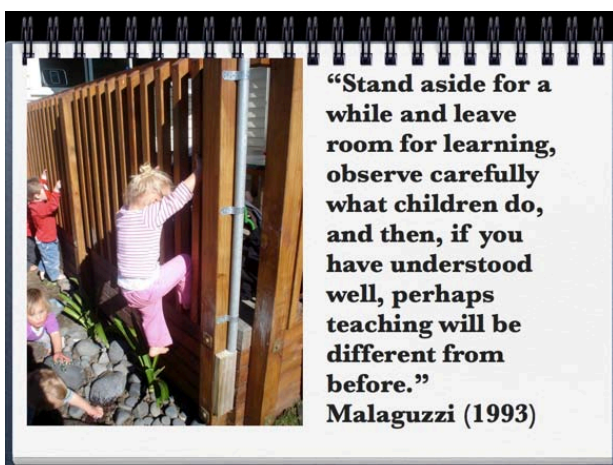


Image and identity are constructed through dispositional language, feedback and endeavour. Children are seen as and responded to as learners who are curious explorers of their world. Learners who take risks, puzzle over possibilities, investigate and build working theories.



Loris Malaguzzi (cited in Edwards et. al., 1996, p.77) reminds us that when we just let children do what they do best, and that is lead their own learning and decide their own learning goals, and view their endeavours as 'learning', our responses and teaching will be different. When our image of the child is as confident and competent, robust, and curious learner then teaching and responding is changed forever.

On our website are links to some exemplars for you to consider (Kei Tua o te Pae, book 7, George makes music; book 15, Issy's new role; book 6, Readers, carers, and friends; and Pipi's Learning Story). As you view each story ponder the following questions:

- What image of these children do you hold?
- What learning do you think is happening here?
- Does what the teacher writes celebrate the child as a confident and competent learner?
- Does what the teacher writes support the child's identity as a learner in the 21st century?
- Does the way in which the teacher responds to this child and his/her learning support his/her own agency?

We need to reflect upon what happens to our practice and our settings when we truly consider what it means to be a robust and resilient learner – a learner who is a curious explorer of their world. The possibilities are full of surprise as passionate learners take risks, puzzle over, investigate and build working theories. I hope that this paper provides you with an opportunity to reflect on powerful images of babies as researchers enabling teachers to stretch their imaginations to build collaborative learning communities where children have the support, inspiration and passion to 'fly'.

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