

# The image of the child

ECE resources

The concept of the 'image of the child' recognises that the ideas that teachers and other adults hold about children and childhood are created by the societies in which they live: ideas and conceptualisations of children and childhood are social, cultural, political and historical constructions<sup>1</sup>. The concept of the image of the child highlights these constructions and the assumptions they engender – assumptions that influence the vision or understanding teachers and other adults hold of the children they live and work with. These constructed ideas about children and childhood act as the foundation that informs teachers' behaviour – the ways they talk to, listen to and observe children<sup>2</sup>. The images that teachers hold of children determine the actions and interactions they have with them.

## Why is it important for teachers to reflect on this idea of the image of the child?

The concept of the image of the child can be imagined as a pair of glasses that adults and teachers unconsciously wear and through which they come to see children in a particular way. It matters which glasses teachers look through because the way they see and understand children informs the curricular and pedagogical choices they make as teachers. How teachers understand children's abilities and competencies guides them as they design learning environments and enact curriculum<sup>3</sup>.

Comparing various images of the child allows teachers to assess both the restraints and affordances that each image offers and empowers them to consider which image of the child they want to foster through their teaching practices and philosophies. Teachers can consciously choose which pair of glasses to wear when working with children. This is not a matter of becoming fixated on a particular image of the child at a particular time, but rather of being cautious that the image of the child does not limit the possibilities or desired learning outcomes of an interaction or activity.

It is important to recognise the unequal power relations between adults and children that are involved in these constructed images<sup>4</sup>. What this means is that images of the child are strongly influenced by the desires, agendas and interests of adults and the social institutions (such as ECE centres and schools) that adults construct to integrate children into society<sup>5</sup>. It is also important to acknowledge that these unequal power relations between adults and children can be constructed for pragmatic reasons. For example, adults often need to make certain decisions for children, in the interest of their wellbeing and healthy development, that they lack the knowledge and experience to make for themselves.

## Some common images of the child and how they manifest in practice

**The image of the child as a cute object** might lead to an over-emphasis on 'cute' or 'child-like' cartoons and images to decorate the walls and display boards of early childhood settings, or love heart borders to frame assessment documentation, at the expense of a range of other interesting visual imagery. Teachers might be tempted to share assessment documentation images of children with co-workers based on their 'cute factor' rather than their significance in relation to the child's learning and development.

**The image of the child as an empty vessel or clean slate** might lead to the assumption that the child needs to be filled up by the predetermined knowledge of society. This image assumes that children

cannot be left to make their own decisions and must be taken by the hand and led through life by 'wise' adults. If teachers hold this image, they risk ignoring the emergent questions and creative activity that children bring to the learning environment as autonomous individuals. Teachers might feel an impulse to 'correct' children constantly rather than prioritising experimentation and the process of learning and the development of working theories.

**The image of the child as the naughty or smart-ass kid** might lead to the belief that the child is a kind of wild creature that needs to be tamed into becoming a 'civilised' adult. Certain films and advertising campaigns featuring young children tend to perpetuate this image<sup>6</sup>. This image of the child might lead teachers to prioritise certain behaviour management techniques over others, such as implementing a kind of 'naughty corner' for children rather than employing a relational teaching practice for resolving conflict that treats undesirable behavior as a learning process and an opportunity for children to take responsibility for their actions.

**The image of the child as innocent** might lead to the assumption that childhood is some kind of paradise that is corrupted by growing up in a particular society. This image of the child is constructed through adults' sentimental attachment to childhood<sup>7</sup>. This image might manifest in practice when teachers feel the need to shelter or protect children from complexity and challenging ideas and topics rather than treating them as an opportunity for learning and creative activity. When adults assume this innocent image of the child, they run the risk of glossing over or ignoring the deeper questions that engage, stimulate and challenge children.

## The influence of different theoretical lenses on the image of the child

One of the influences on the image of the child is the field of developmental psychology<sup>8</sup>, which described childhood in terms of clearly defined developmental stages conceptualised as universal and natural passages of life. Viewing children solely through a developmental lens may lead teachers and parents to overlook the impact that diverse socio-cultural contexts have on children's learning, as well as the agency of children to contest these universal boundaries. Research critiquing the developmental understanding of the child explains how adults' reliance on developmental stages may lead them to lose sight of the complexities of children's lives and their actual and potential capabilities<sup>9</sup>. Images of the child informed by developmental psychology are still very much present in educational contexts. It is important to stress that this is not inherently bad or wrong, but teachers should understand where these assumptions come from so that they can reflect critically on their teaching practice and make informed decisions.

The influence of social-historical psychology<sup>10</sup> has led teachers to focus increasingly on the impact of social and cultural context in relation to children's learning and development. Seeing children as creators of culture is one way that teachers and parents can acknowledge the cultural and social complexity of children's worlds and construct an image of the child that is underpinned by agency and competence. Conceptualising children as active producers of culture who create rather than simply replicate existing cultural constructs will inform the kinds of learning experiences that teachers design for children<sup>11</sup>.

Talking about children as active producers of culture also acknowledges the inherent value and worth of a child's contribution to the learning environment. This image views the child as strong, competent and rich in learning resources. For example, consider the many drawings and paintings that a young child may produce during their time in early childhood education. Adults may have an inclination to gloss over the significance of such expressions, which often include abstractions that are difficult to make sense of, and dismiss the seemingly random squiggly lines, dots and dashes common in the artwork of young children as an immature phase in the child's artistic development towards representational expressions

that can be easily identified – ‘that is a tree’, ‘this is a dog’, ‘here is my dad’, and so on. Considering the child as an active producer of culture means taking a step back from this inclination and working towards recognising certain qualities and potential in children’s work that present themselves in the moment.

### How can we foster positive images of children through teaching practices?

Reflecting on the image of the child allows teachers to consider the possible impact these images have on teaching practice and the children that experience these practices. Considering various images of the child in relation to each other allows teachers to assess both the restraints and affordances that each image offers, making the image of the child a useful tool for critically reflecting on teaching practices and making informed decisions. Teachers can consider and discuss which image of the child they want to foster or create through the teaching practices and philosophies of their settings. Some questions to promote reflection include:

- What images of the child are (consciously or unconsciously) generated and reinforced within our local educational settings?
- Who do these images serve?
- How do these images affect the wellbeing and learning experiences of the children we work with?
- How do the images we hold of children inform teaching practice?
- How might we come to resist certain (deficit) images of the child and foster others that broaden the possibilities of learning and development in our local contexts?

For example, the image that teachers hold of children may influence the type and nature of **material resources** that they provide for children. It is common to hear in ECE settings that particular resources and materials are not safe for children of a certain age. While health and safety is always a paramount concern in early childhood settings and something of which teachers should always be mindful, reflecting on the image of the child might help teachers to confront and challenge the assumptions that inform their decisions to deem certain resources or material objects unsafe for children of a certain age. Some questions to consider are:

- How does the age of the children I work with determine the kinds of resources and activities I provide within the learning environment?
- Do I stop certain children from exploring certain materials?
- Do I encourage experimentation or act to regulate children’s use of materials?
- What types of materials might serve as provocations to encourage children to explore complex ideas?

Another way in which the image of the child influences teaching practices relates to the idea of a **pedagogy of listening**. This derives from the Reggio-Emilia educational philosophy<sup>12</sup> and involves being deeply attentive to the thoughts and expressions that children bring to the learning environment as agentic learners. Through deep listening, teachers can foster an open dialogue with children that is neither adult-directed nor completely child-led. Open dialogue and a pedagogy of listening is a collaborative practice that develops a respectful and meaningful relationship between teacher and child. Some questions to consider include:

- Do I take children’s questions and expressions seriously?
- Do I consider these questions and expressions as meaningful provocations for further activity and learning?

- What image of the child do I promote if I do not consider such questions and expressions as valuable contributions to the learning environment?

When teachers intuitively disregard a child's contribution to educational environments, they may be assuming the image of the child as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge that is predetermined and fixed by the teacher. To take children's questions, activity and expressions seriously as valid points of departure for future learning opportunities is to challenge this image of the child and to take the child seriously as a competent and capable learner. When teachers challenge this deficit image of the child, they assume another image – the child as the creator of culture and their own learning trajectories.

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## Endnotes

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- 12 Rinaldi (1998); Rinaldi (2006).

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



### Daniel Whitaker

Daniel is an educator and researcher-artist based in Wellington, Aotearoa-New Zealand. His research critically and creatively examines photographic practices in the context of educational research. This research explores the potential of process-based methodologies, with a particular interest in how the meeting of philosophical and artistic practice can construct new forms of knowing and being. Daniel strongly believes in the transformative power of educational research/theory, and is passionate about making this work accessible for practicing teachers.