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Guest Editorial: Exploring Our Image of the Child

Nadia M. Ollivierre

Have you ever considered how you view children, and the experiences that may have influenced that view?

The purpose of this reflective question is to encourage practitioners to explore their image of the child and begin to analyze whether that image aligns with their current teaching methods.

The Image of the Child

The concept of the “image of the child” has become a topic of focus in the early years sector, although it is not a new idea and was also discussed by the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, Loris Malaguzzi. The image of the child refers to our ideas about children and what we think they are capable of. Malaguzzi (1994) stated that it is actually “difficult to act contrary to this internal image” (p. 1). Nonetheless, this image, whether conscious or subconscious, impacts how we teach and support children’s learning. The metaphor of a fingerprint comes to mind when thinking of the mark we make when touching the lives, classrooms, and families of children in our care. Could our seemingly invisible marks on early years education be what the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2007) referred to as “the individual efforts of a teacher, early childhood educator, or family worker that outweigh the effect of a particular curricular approach” (p. 14)? When we analyze the lens through which we view children in relation to our current practices, we can ensure we are demonstrating our beliefs in the classroom and better determine how to enhance the learning experiences we offer children.

Do you know what your view of children is? Do you know how the families you work with view children?

Our Lens

The metaphor of the lens is used to describe the perspectives we form based on our day-to-day experiences, interactions, and observations. It is important that we recognize the lens we are using, and which experiences have influenced our choices in various settings or situations we encounter throughout the day. Our professional identities are shaped by our experiences and are an essential component in our role as educators (McGillivray, 2011). We interpret the world and are influenced by our experiences and perspectives. Gittins (2009) referred to this vantage point as adult-centric. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) can help educators begin to identify systems of influence that impact children as they grow, but it is also a useful tool in beginning to understand our own lens. When determining how their lens has been constructed, practitioners can place themselves in the center and begin to explore each dimension of influence from the beginning of their quest to shape young lives. This contemplation of personal background includes our culture, generation, and our geographical location, as each context has a profound effect on how we view children

(Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Leung, & Malcomson, 2011). By realizing how and why we view children in particular ways, we can develop an informed understanding not only of children, but also of ourselves as practitioners.

Do you ask yourself how or why you interpret your experiences in a particular way? Do you challenge yourself by imagining other lenses through which to interpret any given experience? Do you know how your lens has influenced your decisions in the early learning environment?

Learning Environment

The learning environment is considered the setting in which children can explore their surroundings and manipulate materials. Callaghan (2013) emphasized that the environment communicates powerful messages; it is not merely a matter of decorating. What opportunities are we offering the children each day where they learn? If we went into the room when the children were not present, would we be able to identify the uniqueness of every child, their likes, their dislikes, and the uniqueness of their families? The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) suggested that there can be a mismatch between school culture and children's culture. If the intent is to construct a learning environment that reflects the children that occupy the space, how can we as practitioners be mismatching? It would seem helpful to analyze our lens and adjust it as needed to ensure that the learning environment is so much more than a physical space or a classroom, and remind ourselves that for parts of the day the learning environment is also outdoors. The learning environment is an atmosphere created by the people, materials, and time spent interacting. Research indicates that the most powerful influence on whether and what children learn occurs in educators' interactions with them (NAEYC, 2009). Could this not include the interactions that occur as a result of educator choices in the learning environment? By assessing our environments with these thoughts in mind, we can begin to determine how and if they reflect our view of children or if our environments are sending mixed messages. For instance, you may believe that children should have the opportunity to explore freely, but realize that in practice, you direct their play throughout the day. Or you may believe children can make good choices, but in practice design a classroom seating plan for each child.

Do you take time to reflect on interactions you have observed and participated in throughout the day?

Reflecting

Katz (2012) identified habits of mind that intrinsically motivate educators to evaluate their own work and progress. Cultivating such habits of mind can significantly impact our ability to link theory to practice and reflect on past experiences or events in order to discover various perspectives (Schön, 1983). Reflecting on our beliefs in relation to our practices will help to ensure that they are in alignment. Take a moment to reflect on what you believe children are capable of. Write down the words that initially come to mind, then finish the following sentences:

If I believe **children are...** then I believe **children can...**
 If I believe **children are...** then my **learning environment should** enable children to...
 If I believe **children are...** then **I will** allow children to...

Does your image of the child align with your current teaching methods?

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