The Virtues Project®
in a New Zealand Preschool

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The Virtues Project™

*The elimination of antisocial behaviour and reduction of shy/withdrawn behaviour*

Introduction

My Master's dissertation was designed as a pilot study to provide the first objective research evidence for the effectiveness The Virtues Project (TVP) [1] in reducing challenging behaviours (and increasing social behaviour) in 3- to 4-year-old children in a preschool. Surprisingly, the three most antisocial and the three most shy/withdrawn behaving children with scores close to or in the clinical range had substantial and rapid reductions in these behaviours which were normalised after the 3-month implementation and further improved and maintained at a 6-month follow-up using the SDQ teacher report and by two independent observers using a protocol based on the Early Screening Project (ESP) (Walker, Severson, & Feil, 1995).

In the graphs, each point represents two 10-minute random observations during free choice play time where the whole preschool area, including outdoors, is available. For antisocial behaviour, this is in seconds. For social versus shy/withdrawn, these are percentage of time spent. The clinically problematic level of shy behaviour is indicated in the dash filled bars marked (a). There were 9 children, typical cases are shown here.

Shy / withdrawn reduction


Elimination of Antisocial Behaviour
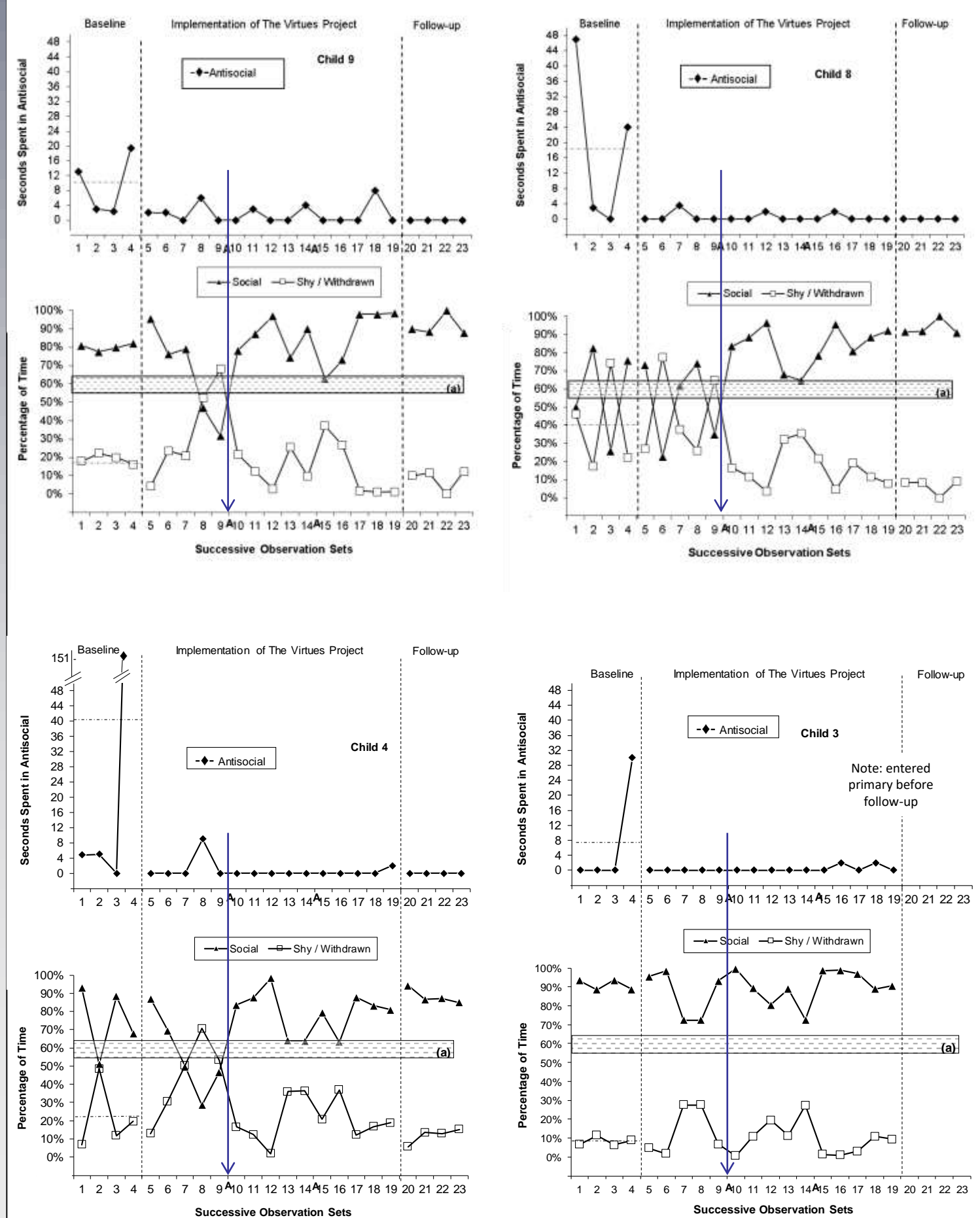
Discussion: Child 9 became shy while the antisocial behaviour was being reduced, and then a point A, she regained her confidence and by follow-up had consistently high social and no antisocial behaviour. Children 4 and 8, with serious problems on both domains, were completely "normalised" by 10 weeks and remained so in follow-up. Point A on the graphs was after 5 weeks of the intervention and indicates 2 hours of additional training and feedback to the teachers. Around this point, all children, except the most shy child (6), became more stabilised in increased prosocial and decreased levels of antisocial and shy/withdrawn behaviour. Child 6 became social very quickly, but teamed up with a group of highly active boys who could control themselves just on the respectful side of the boundary of antisocial behaviour. It clearly took some more time for this most shy boy to learn this boundary. By the end of the 3-month intervention, even more consistency in these effects can be seen in the graphs of all 8 children shown, even those who were doing reasonably well at the start. This is a very large effect size given a total of only 6 initial hours of training on a Saturday, followed by 2-hour and then 4-hour booster trainings (Points A) at 5 weeks and 10 weeks. The Department of Education chief psychologist in the major city of this research said that this preschool had been of concern prior the intervention, and she had independently noted this very large and rapid improvement during this time period. However, no one had told her that an intervention had occurred during this time, and she was pleased to find out the likely source of this major improvement.

Conclusions: This study lends credence to many anecdotal reports by schools in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the USA, Kenya and 100 other countries, that The Virtues Project has large and rapid effects on children, parents and schools. The "social validity" of this study was very high and can be termed "habilitative" given the preschool invested in two teachers becoming fully trained (3-day course) in The Virtues Project, so they could (and did) train the other classroom teachers, another preschool owned by the same person, and the parents. Much research claims "social validity" from asking participants their opinion immediately on completing the research, which is very problematic for long term change. A parent training after school attracted more parents, including fathers, than the annual Christmas barbeque. When teachers start training parents and parents take this on board, we have a very powerful system change which would have larger effects. If an intervention naturally leads to this kind of teacher behaviour, then funding agencies would get much higher societal effects at no added cost.

Follow-up: A 2-year check with the parents of 6 of the 9 children validated this. The effect of language by preschool teachers in this study could be considered as teaching children how to "think morally" through language. These capabilities were further studied by the author in a PhD thesis examining the wider topic of helping children to think for themselves in general. This can be found by searching for Derek Patton "Quality talk interactions in preschools".

NOTE [1]: The Virtues Project is primarily a language intervention that frames verbal prompts and feedback in terms of character strengths, rather than deficits (strategy 1). The other 4 strategies concern where and how this is accomplished and for school children this is primarily in the "teachable moments" (or the therapeutic moment) and in "setting boundaries". Thank you for your *patience*. Please be *gentle*. I see your *enthusiasm*, but we need some more *peacefulness* just now. We are going to need *orderliness* when we cross the road together. I need you to use your *tolerance* now. More information can be found at www.virtuesproject.com
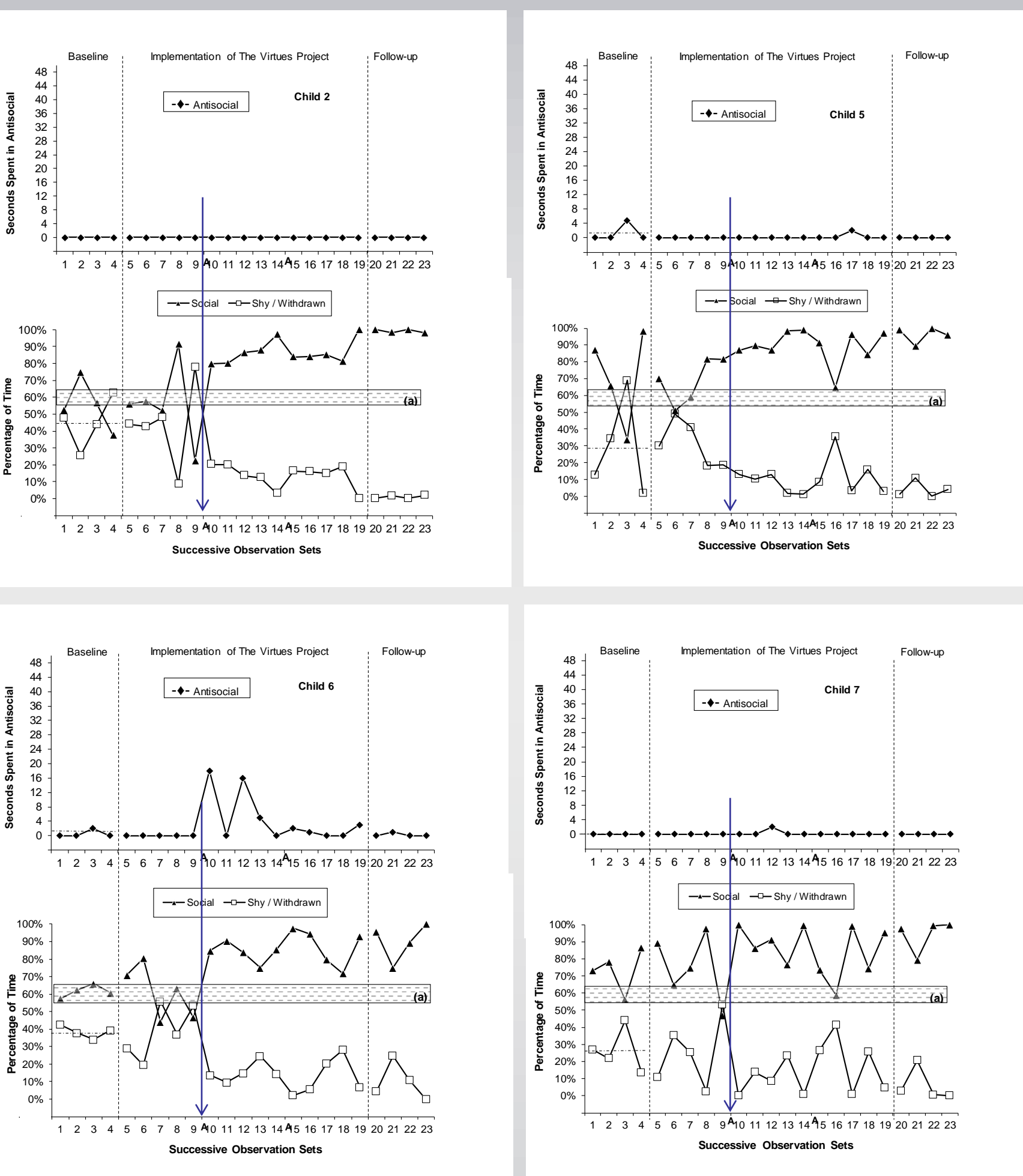
Method
This was a single subject design where the 3 most antisocial, 3 most shy/withdrawn and 3 "typical" children were chosen using the SDQ parent and teacher scores. These 9 children were identified to the researcher by his supervisors, but not to the preschool teachers. The observers did not know which children were in the three categories. This was therefore a double-blind to avoid perception bias in the teachers and observers. Each observer took roughly half the data on each child and had high inter-observer agreement. A statistical analysis of results comparing the two observers' scoring showed no bias or difference.

Training of teachers
This consisted of 6 hours on a Saturday and then a 2-hour and then a 4-hour booster session at 5 (shown as solid blue line at A on the graphs) and 10 weeks thereafter. The teachers used the 52 educator's virtues cards and posters in the school, with the main intervention method being pointing out children's virtues in the teachable moments occurring naturally. They also taught a virtue of the week at mat-time.

Follow-up
The 6-month follow-up data included very long observations of many hours , was done on each of 5 days, and was used to make sure antisocial behaviour had truly been eliminated.

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