

DIVERSITY, REPRESENTATION, & INCLUSION THROUGH DOLLS IN THE KINDERGARTEN

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It feels important and relevant that I start this article by naming some of my own social identities. I am a white cis-gender woman who lives and teaches in a primarily middle to upper middle-class village. I have a passion for inclusion and strive to grow in my knowledge of my own privilege and how it shapes my biases. From that I continue to grow in my own practice and life, finding ways to create inclusive environments for the children in my care. I am not at an end point of this journey, but right in the middle of it and it continues to evolve as my learning grows. One of the most effective tools for diversity and inclusion I have in my toolbox right now has been with the dolls in my kindergarten.

Diversity is often defined as having a variety of racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, ethnic, abled, and other social identities represented in a space, community, institution, or society. Inclusion and representation are keystones to working with diversity in the early years.

I have heard kindergarten teachers say that we are inclusive by nature because “everyone is welcome in kindergarten”. In my own experience of being white, in a primarily white, neurotypical, able, cis gender environment with the majority of families being heterosexual, results in a situation where we are saying children who look like you, act like you and have families like you, are welcome.

It is through our conscious decisions to be inclusive that we can bring diversity into the kindergartens in a way that is in alignment with our pedagogical practice. Because we work through gesture, the open-ended nature of dolls and how we care for them is one way for children to directly observe and imitate the care and love we can have for all that dolls can represent.

Representation is very important for the young child. It can shape how society views minorities and how minorities view themselves. ‘Minorities’ as a term can be any marginalized portion of our society and within each society, who those marginalized people are is different. For example, making sure you have dolls with different skin tones is important, but it isn’t the only social construct to consider. A child having the opportunity to see themselves in a doll, or someone they love represented by a doll, and seeing that doll looked after by their friends, is a gesture of great value to us all. Sometimes, just through the nature of play surrounding dolls, topics of diversity come up which lends itself to ‘in the moment’ teaching opportunities for topics surrounding inclusion.

Doll maker Babette Brown, founder of Persona Dolls and perhaps one of the most famous diversity-promoting doll makers, wrote a book called *Combating Discrimination: Persona Dolls in Action*. She created a training program that allowed teachers to examine discrimination and promote inclusion.

There are doll makers, Waldorf and non-Waldorf, all over the world who are striving to find ways to support representation for the young child. Wheelchairs, stoma bags, artificial limbs, body scarring. It is both exciting and much needed.

Here are some examples of how dolls can support inclusion in a kindergarten through four different social identities:

Racial: Research shows that children not only recognize race from a very young age, but also develop racial biases by ages three to five (Katz and Kofkin 1997)⁴.

What is race? This question alone is worth its own essay and its own investigation on how dolls and representation can support unconscious bias. Essentially it is a grouping of not by culture or religion but by the colour of their skin.

For dolls, puppets and nature table characters, there are so many skin tones available for doll makers now. Having a wide range of skin tone, natural hair colours, and eye colours allows children to see themselves as well as others that are different from themselves, in the form of a doll. It is important to think broadly in this way, to think who your own demographic is and to judge what representation is needed for inclusion in your space.

Class / Economic: By having an assortment of plain cotton and wool garments, dolls' clothing is neither 'rich' nor 'poor', but it is respected. It is well taken care of, well-used and loved, it is washed and dried with care. Even with dolls' clothing, we work with archetypes, so our dolls do not wear 'fashion'.

However, we can work to counter bias by the way we tend to the clothing: for example in fairy tales and children's stories, if a character is poor they are often depicted dressed in rags and unwashed. We also need to consider whether the clothes in the group represent both the traditional and modern clothing worn in the wider community. When consulting for a school in India, we discussed traditional vs modern clothing – should saris be in the basket? In this case, yes – because the children's grandmothers and many of their mothers wore saris. Should I have a sari in my English kindergarten basket? This is a more nuanced question, but one that is important to keep living in our own practice. For my own kindergarten, I strive to have dolls' clothing that is neutral, but beautiful and well-kept.

Gender: The Mayo clinic writes “Most children typically develop the ability to recognize and label stereotypical gender groups, such as girl, woman and feminine, and boy, man and masculine, between ages 18 and 24 months. Most also categorize their own gender by age 3 years. However, because gender stereotypes are reinforced, some children learn to behave in ways that bring them the most reward, despite their authentic gender identity. At ages 5 to 6 years, most children are rigid about gender stereotypes and preferences. These feelings typically become more flexible with age.”⁵

Due to the way the dolls we use in the kindergarten are made with a gesture of openness; the gender of the dolls can be what the children want them to be. Some things to consider are having dolls with both short and long hair, having clothing and bedding that is gender neutral with different colours, and not naming your dolls for the children. Allow the children to name the dolls in their own play.

The care of dolls is also a tool for gender identity inclusion. Children see each other, both boys and girls and their teachers, cuddle and love the dolls. Most kindergarten teachers are women, and in caring roles in general. It is important to normalize boys and men showing care. Children process their own home lives, and the gender roles in their own families, within the kindergarten. At tidy up time, having both boys and girls tuck the dolls in, or put back on the doll clothes as well as both

Sexual Orientation: The statutory guidance for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) states students should know “that families are important for children growing up because they can give love, security and stability” and that “others’ families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences and know that other children’s families are also characterised by love and care.”

One of the most common ‘in the moment’ teaching opportunities that arises and gives opportunities to meet the requirements for the RSE falls into this category when we hear “You can’t have two daddies” or “You can’t be a mummy without having a daddy”.

Often, they happen while playing in the home corner with dolls. After hearing adults respond with “There are so many ways to be a family, you can have.....” I heard a child respond in kind to their friend and carry on with their play.

There are so many ways which we can use the tools we have in our kindergartens to explore diversity, inclusion, and representation in our pedagogical practice. The ideas in this article are just some of the steps that can be taken. There is so much room for creativity that can unfold in our work in a natural conscious way. Taking time to explore individual privilege (the ways in which we, as individuals, have an advantage over another group) will lead to an understanding of the unconscious biases we all hold and will support a deeper understanding of inclusion because it is true - Everyone is welcome in our kindergarten.

References & Notes:

1. Cis- gendered: denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex
2. Inclusion: The notion that an organization or system is welcoming to new populations and/or identities. This new presence is not merely tolerated but expected to contribute meaningfully into the system in a positive, mutually beneficial way. Derived from Carter-Hicks, J. (2015). "Inclusive Education". Encyclopaedia of Diversity and Social Justice. Vol.1. (Ed. S. Thompson). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. P. 412-3.
3. Neurotypical: refers to anyone who does not have developmental disorders such as autism, ADHD, or DCD. It is a term that is used both in the neurodiversity community as well as the scientific community.
4. Katz, P. A., & Kofkin, J. A. (1997). Race, gender, and young children. In S. S. Luthar & J. A. Burack (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Perspectives on adjustment, risk, and disorder* (pp. 51–74). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
5. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/children-and-gender-identity/art-20266811>
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/relationships-education-primary> Gender Spectrum. Parenting and family. <https://www.genderspectrum.org/explore-topics/parenting-and-family/#more-340>. Accessed Dec. 23, 2016.

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