

Dolls for equity: young children learning respect and unlearning unfairness

by

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Abstract

Prejudice and bias often get in the way of people living together equitably. Learning to see and work with young children's prejudices and biases is an important part of working for equity in the 21st century. Bringing children's knowings about cultural diversity to the fore is essential to this task. Children's words and their silences can challenge us to think more deeply about how they come to know about cultural diversity and about the connections between these knowings, bias and peace. This paper explores these connections and how they can be used as a starting point for equity education with preschool using data collected in over 62 interviews with Australian preschool children.

Introduction

The most critical voices that are silent in our constructions of early childhood education are the children with whom we work. Our constructions of research have not fostered methods that facilitate hearing their voices. (Cannella, 1998, p. 10)

There has been a strong move recently to hear children's voices and perspectives on early childhood. In Australia, research has brought young children's perspectives into view on issues as diverse as migration experiences (Candy & Butterworth, 1998), learning to write (Martello, 1999) and social networks (Corrie & Leitao, 1999).

The Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project seeks to hear children's voices about equity and social diversity. To date, 62 children have participated in the project. Table 1.1 summarises child participation by gender and first language background.

TABLE 1.1: Child participation in PESD by gender and by parents' country of origin.

Parents' country of origin	Male	Female	Total	%
China	0	1	1	1.6%
Turkey	1	1	2	3.2%
Vietnam	7	8	15	24.2%
Australia	19	24	44	70.9%
Total	27	34	62	100%

Methods

The PESD project is a mixed method study of four and five year-old children's understandings of gender, 'race' and class. The aim of the project is three-fold. To:

- find out what preschool children knew about race, class and gender when we first met with them
- to use the dolls and their stories to positively introduce a range of equity and social diversity issues to the children
- evaluate if and how the dolls and their stories changed what the children knew.

The PESD uses semi-structured individual interviews with children, group discussions, stories and observation of children's play to explore how children's gender, 'race' and class intersect with their constructions of 'race', gender and class. In the interviews and stories with the children a co-researcher and four anti-bias persona dolls help me:

- Shiree who was from an Aboriginal-Australian family.
- Willie who was from a Vietnamese-Australian family.
- Olivia who was from a rich Anglo-Australian family.
- Tom who was from a poor Anglo-Australian family.

The dolls played multiple roles:

- They acted as an icebreaker for those conversations.
- They offered a focus for conversations and for stories with children about class, 'race' and gender.
- They acted as a provocation for play.

This paper draws on the initial interviews with children to explore how the children constructed meanings of 'race' / ethnicity. In these interviews children were asked semi-structured questions about the differences and similarities between the dolls, which doll looked most like themselves and which doll that they liked most.

We quickly learnt that the dolls raised questions and provoked comments from the children that told us much about their understandings of issues of social diversity and equity. Nowhere, was this more apparent than in how the children engaged with Shiree. Reactions to Shiree ranged from fear through indifference to curiosity. A child fearful of her told us to 'put that doll away' whilst pointing to Shiree. Several of the children didn't want to talk about her or look at her saying that they wanted to play with Tom and/or Olivia and then there was Terri's curiosity about, 'Why does that doll have clothes on?'. Prompted by questions from the researchers the children also talked willingly about which dolls looked most like they did and the differences they could see between each of the dolls. Exchanges like the following one were common:

Can you notice anything that is different about these dolls?

That one (Willie) and that one (Shiree) haven't got the same colored skin.

Can you tell me what color their skin is? Do you have some words for that?

Black and a kind of greenish color.

What about the other dolls, what words would you for the color of those dolls?

That one is white (Olivia) and so is that one (Tom).

The dolls that provoked such interest for these preschool children we call Anti-Bias Persona Dolls based on the work of Kay Taus and the Anti-Bias Task Force in California (see Dermon-Sparks, 1989). The Anti-Bias Persona Dolls were specially designed dolls that we used to tell 'Anti-Bias' stories to young children. Each doll had its own 'persona': a life history that details its ethnicity, family culture, gender, special interests and concerns. For each of our dolls we had detailed 'logbooks' in which we recorded their family and cultural background. Information ranged from details about the housing the dolls lived in, through information about family members to the daily events in each doll's life.

Through the PESD we have learnt several lessons about how best to use the dolls to help children learn respect for diversity and unlearn unfairness and how the dolls can help in this process. We learned that using Persona Dolls with young children requires careful planning and that it is important to get the pragmatics right. We would suggest from experiences that success in helping children learn to respect diversity and unlearn unfairness is most likely when staff:

- ask children what they know about social diversity
- allow children time to reflect on the issues staff are discussing with them and are patient in seeking their answers to our questions
- develop conversations through seeking the reasons behind the answers they give
- prepare the children for small group discussion
- evaluate progress.

Ask children what they know

Talking with individual children about simple issues of equity and social diversity proved an invaluable source of knowledge about how young children think and understand the complex social issues that wind through anti-bias work. For instance, from these initial interviews we learnt that most Anglo-Australian children's understandings about Aboriginal Australians were misunderstandings and many children were ignorant about indigenous peoples and their cultures. Common to those children who did have some knowledge about indigenous Australians were the beliefs that 'they' lived a long time ago and that 'they' were strange or exotic in some way. (MacNaughton & Davis, forthcoming). We also learnt that very simple conversations with children could reveal much about their understandings of equity, social diversity and 'race'. The conversation between Jamie and the researcher illustrates this well.

Black is for the Aborigines

This is Shiree, is there anything you can tell me about Shiree?

No. Does she look like Olivia? What's the same? Can you uses words for me/

Curly hair.

What about the color of her hair? Can you tell me about that?

It's not the same.

What's different? Can you use some words to tell me?

Their socks.

Their socks are different, what about their face, if you have a look at their face?

Their color is different.

Their color is very different, what words would you use to describe their color?

I don't know.

What about the color of her hair, what color would that be?

Black.

And if you look at her face, what color is her face?

Brown

What about Olivia, what color is Olivia's face?

White.

What about your face? What color is your face?

White too.

So, your face is bit like Olivia's face. Do you know anybody who has a face like Shiree? The color of Shiree? Have you ever met anyone?

No.

Well, Shiree is from an Aboriginal family, do you know any Aboriginal people?

No.

Have you heard about Aboriginal people?

Yes.

Can you tell me anything about them? What have you heard about them?

I heard that they have the same color as this.

Have you heard anything else about them?

Just that they are black.

Jamie's knowledge about color tells us that skin color does matter to children and it part of how they self-identify and how they identify others. So, in working with Jamie it was important to help her learn respect and to unlearn unfairness and to ensure that the color difference she knew existed between herself and Aboriginal people did not become linked with negative attitudes towards them. Jamie also needed to learn that Aboriginal people are not all the same color and do not all look the same. She needed to learn that being Aboriginal was more complex than the color of a person's skin. It was about who your family is and the spiritual and cultural relationships that they had built through their long relationship with Australia. She also needed to learn about how Aboriginal people faced unfairness and how she might challenge this. Meeting Shiree and her stories was only a beginning in Jamie's long journey of learning about Aboriginal Australia. However, meeting Shiree and talking with us about her helped us to understand the specific issues that needed to be addressed with Jamie on this

journey.

Allow children time to reflect on and construct answers to your questions

Heather, my co-researcher, brought several important skills to the research project. One of her most invaluable skills was her capacity to patiently wait for children to answer the questions she asked of them. Her questions were often greeted with silence and she regularly read this silence to mean that the child was thinking hard about what she had asked. It would have been easy to read the children's silence as indifference, shyness or ignorance. Indeed, sometimes these were reasons for their silence. However, more often than not it was not. Heather could wait for a minute or so for a response from a child when she felt the child was thinking about the answer. Often the wait proved that Heather was indeed right. The following exchange captures something of how Heather's ability to value silence produced important information about how young children think about complex issues of diversity.

The 'stolen generations'

I'm just wondering what you know about Aboriginal people.

Cause you noticed when you came in that this was a different doll, didn't you? You noticed that. . [LONG PAUSE WAITING FOR CHILD]

And, sometimes they make houses and sometimes they move on, because um they make it out of sticks and leaves. And also Aboriginals will [VERY LONG PAUSE/STOPS].

Anything else you can think of about Aboriginals that you know about?

Nope. And sometimes Aboriginals also um they also um Aboriginals [PAUSE].

What about you? Do you know anybody Aboriginal? Do you know any Aboriginal people?

Two.

You know two. Oh I see.

Boory and ah Bill Hiney.

And where do they live?

Um they live in Melbourne.

They live in Melbourne. [LONG PAUSE WAITING FOR CHILD TO CONTINUE]

But I also know that um a long, long time ago that the white people um took their children, the Aboriginal children away their mum and dad because they thought that they weren't treating them well. And also I think [PAUSE - HEATHER WAITS]

Anything else? You're trying so hard to remember. We'll talk about something else and if you happen to remember anything that you wanted to say you can just tell me. Okay. Now lets look at these dolls. Can you tell me something that look different about these dolls?

That one is brown and that one is white.

Anything else that's different?

The eyes are different? And she doesn't have [UNCLEAR], and they have different hair. They have different clothes, different skin.

If Heather had not waited for this child we would not have learnt that Jane knew more about Aboriginal people than the stereotyped and colonial knowledge about them living in 'humpys' that first emerged. We would not have heard that she had learnt about the 'stolen generations' and how she had attempted to make sense of this. The 'stolen generations' refers to generations of Aboriginal children who were forcefully removed from their families because it was believed that they would have better life chances if they were raised by white Australia. The stories of these children, their forced removal from their families and its long term tragic consequences for these children, their families and the Aboriginal communities in Australia are only now emerging. It has been estimated recently that 'between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970' (HEROC, 1997, p. 4). As one Aboriginal organisation trying to relink these children with their families wrote recently:

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, by caretakers who thought their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals. (HEROC, 1997, p. 3)

Jane's knowledge of the 'stolen generations' is uncertain but she is working hard to construct meanings about Aboriginal people and their lives in the past and in the here and now. She shows a capacity to produce many different meanings for the word Aboriginal. The meanings Jane is giving to the word Aboriginal also shows that young children can develop understandings of complex contemporary issues and show empathy for the pain of others. There is much that can be added to Jane's understandings of the lives of Aboriginal Australians but she has already learnt at four that there is more to being Aboriginal than the color of your skin.

Develop conversations seeking the reasons behind children's comments

My next story arose in the early days of the research project and it made us very aware of the importance of asking children why they thought what they did. One of Olivia's stories is called - The Blue Badge. In this story Olivia is given a badge for her birthday that has 5 on it. It is a Blue Badge. She is so excited by the badge that she wears it to her day nursery and shows her friends. Her friends laugh at her and say it can't really be her badge because it's blue. At this point in the story we ask the children: Do you think

that Olivia's friends are right. The reply in unison from the eight children listening to the story is 'no'. Heather asks: 'Why?'. Well girls and boys can wear any color they like comes the response once again in unison. It is clear that the children have been told this regularly by the staff. Heather then asks, 'Why do you think that Olivia's friends said what they did?' The response back: 'Because well, pink's really for girls and blue is really for boys'. With a second group of children in the conversation about the blue badge the children were asked what Olivia might have said to the boys when they told her that she couldn't wear a blue badge. The conversation developed as follows:

Well pink's really for girls

What do you think she might have said to those boys?

It doesn't matter if it's blue, girls still can have blue.

Because Meg is wearing blue today.

I got blue and I am wearing blue.

There you are. Olivia has got some blue. What do you think Robbie & Ciaran?

I got blue. So if somebody said that to you about your birthday badge, what do you think you would say?

Girls can still have blue.

Is that what you would say.

And if they got blue on their clothes, that doesn't mean to say

Oh! girls don't wear blue.

I wonder what color those boys thought should be on her birthday badge?

Pink.

It would have been easy to end the discussion when we heard that children had clearly reached a non-sexist understanding of color. However, if we had we would have missed out on their understandings of why the boys said what they did. Their answer to our question showed that we needed to talk more with the children about how boys and girls think and how to challenge gendered thinking. If you talk with children in small groups it allows for these understandings to emerge. Staff need to provide the time and the opportunity for children to question and comment on what they have seen and heard if they are going to process the ideas effectively.

Prepare the children for small group discussion

In one of the groups where the research was conducted it was extremely hard to see the Persona Dolls as valuable. The children found it difficult to listen to a story that was any longer than five minutes and to listen to each other. Their difficulty was clear as they got extremely restless with the stories and with each other. This reaction was in direct contrast to the children's reactions in the other groups. It was this group of children that remembered least about the stories and the dolls.

The children that remembered most and changed most in their understandings were those in the groups where not only could the children attend to the story but they were

clearly used to listening to each other in small group discussions. The capacity to wait and listen to someone else talking is essential to successfully achieving the goals associated with Persona Doll process. For instance, if the dolls and their stories are to be successful in helping children to problem-solve what is fair and unfair and to help children unlearn unfairness then children need to be able to listen to different points of view and to be able to contribute to group discussion. When they can do this much can be accomplished as the following discussion during Shiree's badge story illustrates. We pick up the story at the point at which Shiree is about to wear her new badge to kindergarten.

Now, I want to tell you that Shiree, was so proud to have this badge, she had never had an Aboriginal Badge before. And the next day when she was going to kinder, she was very excited and said to her mum, 'I really want to wear my badge to kinder today, to show my friends'. And so she came to kinder. And she skipped in happily wearing her badge. She rushed to her friends and said 'Look I have a present from my Aunt. She brought me my special badge'. And the children looked at her and looked at the badge and said 'Oh, that's not a special badge. That's just a silly old badge'. And so Shiree felt quite sad about that. And she walked away to play in the sandpit by herself. She didn't understand why the children said that.

Maybe because they don't know it's a special badge.

Maybe they don't know anything.

So what do you think Shiree could do about that?

Tell them that it's Aboriginal pictures [UNCLEAR].

And how would she do that, do you think?

She should say, 'This isn't a silly badge, it's an Aboriginal badge'.

Maybe she should've said 'Don't say that because it is a special badge. And [UNCLEAR] Aboriginal and it's special'.

It doesn't make sense Rachael.

It does.

And you think she could tell the teacher. And what do you think the teacher could do?

Smack them on the bare bottom.

[CHILDREN LAUGH]

Do you think, I wonder if the teacher knew about this Aboriginal badge?

All the grown ups know.

Maybe some of the kids don't.

Did you know, you told me this was an Aboriginal flag, before, did you all know that?

Yes. [ALL CHILDREN]

Where have you seen an Aboriginal flag?

Oh well

I've seen a picture in a book.

I've seen Bory hold an Aboriginal flag.

And where have you seen an Aboriginal flag?

No where, but I just knew.

And Jack? Where have you seen the Aboriginal flag?

In [UNCLEAR]. In the beach. I've also seen the Aboriginal flag on top of the building with the Australian flag.

So you've all really had a good look around and know these things. So now I'm just wondering, about what you would say if you were Shiree?

[UNCLEAR]

Rachael said that she would say 'It's a special badge and not a silly badge'.

Do you think it might be good to tell all the children about an Aboriginal flag and what it means?

[UNCLEAR], it's our badge. It's an Aboriginal badge.

This conversation requires that children listen to the questions, to the story and to each other. They cannot do this unless they are well prepared for listening and talking in small groups.

Evaluate your progress

When we reviewed with the children what they had learnt from the stories in our final interviews with them we learnt that they had ignored and/or forgotten many of our good intentions. In particular, we found that gender strongly influenced what children attended to and remembered. For instance:

- Tom's stories are remembered by boys (83%) and girls (69%)
- Willy's stories are remembered by boys (56%) and girls (46%)
- Olivia's stories are remembered by girls (69%) and boys (39%).

The only notable exception to this gendered remembering of the stories were those of Shiree. Her stories were remembered by girls (62%) and boys (61%). There is considerable hope from this finding. The difference we think can be explained in terms of children's prior knowledge. This is because Shiree's Aboriginality was mostly remembered by the first group of children, at the rate of 8 of 17 (47%). This group of children were attending a centre in which considerable work had been undertaken to introduce them to Aboriginal people and their cultures. Clearly this work made a difference to how they remembered Shiree and we think it made a difference to how they heard and remembered her story and strongly reinforced our sense that children's knowledge base strongly influences what can be learnt and remembered from the Persona Doll stories. The Persona Dolls can strengthen and enrich what children know but in our case this happened most when children already had some knowledge of the issue/persona being introduced via the stories. So, it is important to weave the stories around what is familiar to the children. They will pay more attention to them as they hear them and they will remember them more after they have heard them.

We also found that the children were working hard to make sense of what we had talked with them about. In this process several children had acquired new knowledge. One child had learnt and remembered the word Aboriginal and knew to apply it Shiree. However, as the following conversation illustrates she was struggling to see Shiree as Australian. She had not shifted her sense that being Australian meant being 'white'. There was clearly still much work to be done in helping her construct 'being Australian' as inclusive of those people who did not have 'white' skin like her own.

All these dolls were born in Australia. So I'm wondering what you know about being Australian? What does it mean to be Australian?

I don't know.

Were you born in Australia?

Yes

And so do you think you are Australian?

Yes

And do you think that all of these dolls are Australian?

She's an Aboriginal.

And can she be an Australian, too, do you think?

Yes. If she wants to.

What would she have to do to be an Australian?

Ask God.

And what about this one here, Willy? Do you think he could be Australian too?

Ask God.

So all these dolls are Australian?

[unclear] these two, cos I already know that they're Australian because they have white skin.

Stopping to review your progress help you see where you have helped children to build respect for diversity and where they still have to unlearn unfairness. We should never assume that just because children have been 'told' about an issue that they have understood it in the ways that we intend.

In summary

Persona Dolls, their stories and the conversations they invite can and do illuminate the diverse and complex understandings young children are constructing about the social world around them. We have learnt:

- that good organization and preparation is essential
- that group dynamics can undermine and/or illuminate your work
- the most powerfully remembered stories and dolls are those that link with the children's existing knowledge base
- that gender is an important factor in how children attend to and remember the dolls and their stories
- children do have complex understandings of equity and social diversity issues and

they can be helped to build respect and learn unfairness through the dolls and their stories.

Above all we have learnt that the Persona Dolls and their stories are a powerful tool for practicing anti-bias work with young children. They excite children's interest, they fascinate adults and they intrigue parents. This interest, fascination and intrigue provokes conversation and encourages exploration of what children know, how they know it and how we might help them construct fair and equitable meanings about themselves and others

Anti-Bias Persona Dolls can be used to achieve a number of equity goals with young children. They can be used:

- To introduce children to social diversity with which they have little or no experience or knowledge
- To make the different backgrounds of the children visible to others in the group.
- To enable all children to gain an awareness and understanding of the richness and diversity of different lifestyles.
- To help develop non-discriminatory attitudes and understandings within the children.
- To encourage children to value each other equally.
- To provide opportunities for children to see their own individuality and life experiences valued within the program.
- To build a child's self-esteem.
- To help children learn strategies for dealing with unfairness against themselves and others.

As many of our conversations with young children illustrated, we still need all the help we can get in our efforts to build a more positive and just world for all. If Shiree and her friends can help then we should use them. But it's important to use them with skill and with sensitivity. The process of telling stories to children should be interleaved with the process of listening to them and it must always be done with a spirit of and commitment to fairness and respect for all those involved.

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