

Persona Dolls in South Africa by Carol Smith

A dream come true

The Persona Doll approach builds on the African belief in 'Ubuntu' (*motho ke motho ka batho ba bang* – a person is a person through other people) and the universal and African traditions of storytelling, building this empathy, and then taking it a step further into problem solving discussion. The focus is on the importance of hearing children's' and adults voices, respecting diversity and 'unlearning' discrimination. A practical tool with which to implement Nelson Mandela's belief that: *No one is born hating another person because of his skin, or their background, or their religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love.*

The objectives are to:

- train, empower and support practitioners, lecturers and trainers to implement the Persona Doll approach
- set-up a doll-making project to produce Persona Dolls and to skill women from deprived communities with high levels of unemployment.
- adapt and develop Persona Doll Training materials for South Africa Research and evaluate the project.

The approach is fully consistent with the revised schools' curriculum which states that: *Prejudice, often in the form of racism, is still present in post-apartheid South Africa. These prejudices must be acknowledged and challenged if they are to be overcome.*

South Africa is a country emerging from decades of apartheid and oppression. Women and children are the most vulnerable group. The South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights (1996) outlaws discrimination on the basis of 'race', culture, faith, gender, sexual orientation and disability. The problem is that because of the high levels of ignorance and prejudice, many teachers and trainers are ill-equipped to deal with equality, inclusion and diversity issues. They are seeking answers: *'Our children won't go near others with HIV/AIDS, I don't know what to do.'* *'Racism is rife in our school.'* *'Sexism is a huge problem'*. They welcome the support and guidance Persona Doll training provides and appreciate that the Dolls are not toys but props to engage children in active learning about diversity through story and dialogue.

As this teacher affirms: *"This is a completely non-threatening way to talk about equality issues – the Dolls make it easy to open up. The approach is creative, stimulating and fun."*

One of my first tasks was to set up a Doll-making facility. Unlike in the United Kingdom, buying of the Dolls has often to be heavily subsidised because many settings/schools and community organisations do not have the money to pay for them.

Doll-making

Juanita Bosch who manages and oversees the manufacture of the Dolls has always shown a keen interest in crafts as well as in the social development of adults and children: *"My reason for getting involved in the Doll making business was a fascination for*

cloth dolls since I was small. I always wanted to make cloth Dolls and when Carol approached me in 2004 regarding this project, I immediately responded."

Juanita has trained three groups of previously unskilled women and a few men. All are from deprived communities with high levels of unemployment and many are HIV positive. Their work provides much needed income for their families as they are the sole bread winners. All the Dolls for the project are produced by them - on average about 500 per year. They also make the dresses, knickers, jeans, trousers, school uniforms, headscarves and T-shirts for the Dolls. And that's not all. A large number of the U.K. Persona Dolls are dressed in clothes made by these South African Doll-making groups.

Persona Doll Training has run workshops for the groups so they know how the Dolls they make are being used. Through the group they have been empowered, learnt new skills and their newly found confidence is tangible.

The Training

Organisations, schools, universities and colleges are charged according to their individual circumstances – some are able to pay the full fee while others pay very little or nothing at all. In the beginning most of the training took place in Cape Town and the surrounding areas but since then it has spread to other parts of this vast country. We try to ensure that it is delivered in the dominant language of a particular area, and our team includes part-time trainers who are able to speak a range of languages. There are 11 official languages in South Africa – some are more widely spoken than others and many people speak and understand more than one.

The training helps to raise awareness of human rights issues, builds confidence and gives participants the skills they need to confront the bigotry and the internalised oppression that all South African's carry. In schools in urban and rural areas characterised by deprivation and great poverty as well as in those in wealthy, well-resourced, high status middle class neighbourhoods, bullying, exclusion, fighting and teasing linked to racism, sexism, xenophobia and HIV /AIDS are commonplace. The training raises teachers' awareness of, the importance of talking about their own and the children's feelings, and learning how to use Persona Dolls to address difficult issues like HIV and AIDS in a non-threatening and constructive way.

Some personal responses from teachers to the training are shared below:

A woman in Cape Town who said after a session: *"I have never spoken to anyone about that childhood incident before."*

An older mixed race woman in Cape Town wept after talking of forced removals in her childhood, and her fear of Black people.

A male participant said: *"If you cry there is something that is a relief to yourself and you feel free. And children love to talk about their feelings so that they can feel relief."*

"Culture has changed people they have to change."

"We are so stressed at school but we fought to come to this workshop. The Dolls de-stress and energise us."

"It was amazing how everyone worked with the Dolls, even the men!"

"Another thing I have learnt about is gender, issues of gender, homosexual and heterosexual I didn't know anything about this."

Support visits help to ensure that what is learnt at the training is implemented and to motivate people to start working with the Dolls. The visits are particularly valuable when they involve teachers who have varying levels of training, experience and skills. There are exceptional teachers who, despite dealing with classes of 40-90 children on their own, volunteer as child-care workers in deep rural areas with little support, training or resources and who care for and give of their own time and money to try to do the best they can to promote children's development.

Pre-school teachers in community based centres, primary school teachers, social workers, psychologists, childcare workers and toy library workers are all being trained by Persona Doll trainers. In order to reach as many children as possible, Carol and her team run training the trainer courses for non-governmental organisations NGOs, colleges and universities. They then integrate the Persona Doll approach into their ongoing accredited in-service training programmes. A training of trainers resource pack has been developed which all trainers can use. It has been translated into Afrikaans and Xhosa.

In 2004/5 the Western Cape Education Department and Persona Doll Training launched The Valley Life Skills Pilot Project in the southern Cape Peninsular to train teachers working with children from three to nine years of age and Family and Community Motivators on how to use Persona Dolls, particularly in terms of the stigma attached to HIV/Aids. Research confirms the need to address discrimination against children and adults with HIV/AIDS because, for example, children are denied access to schooling and those that are admitted, frequently face exclusion by other pupils. In 2006/2007 training was extended to include more teachers and childcare workers. Workshops were held to support those who had previously been trained. In recognition of this work, Persona Doll Training was selected to make a partnership submission with the Western Cape Education Department for the Commonwealth Countries Good Practice Awards, in the Action Area of, Mitigating the Impact of HIV/AIDS on Education Systems' (2007). The partnership was also short listed for the Western Cape Premiers Service Excellence Awards in 2008. They didn't win but were one of the finalists and thoroughly enjoyed the award dinner and the dancing.

Teachers reported that when they used the Dolls to implement the life skills learning programme, the atmosphere was happier and livelier, the children showed greater interest and participated more actively, they concentrated better, were more curious than usual and there was a rise in problem solving, confidence and language development. Some teachers found that there was less aggression and a calmer atmosphere when the Dolls visit. Teachers are becoming more aware that the way they behave and model respectful interaction with children has a powerful effect. The Dolls are helping teacher-child and child-child relationships with regard to respect and care.

In settings/schools in the U.K. it is generally agreed that the educator's job is to support children by asking questions, listening and talking to them, rather than simply feeding them knowledge and skills. In South Africa the debilitating anti-educational apartheid inheritance is one of de-motivated, under qualified, unself-confident, dependent teachers. Many are coping with classes of 70-80 children and that's without any assistance! Being trained and supported to work with the Dolls has been a stimulating, and for some, a far-reaching and profound experience.

Some comments from teachers:

"The Dolls helped me to identify with other people's experiences."

"Some shy children have started to speak up and they keep asking when the Doll will visit again."

"Also Dolls help me to plan and give the true information and relate to young people more and more."

"The Persona Dolls can be used to dig the hidden information from the child. These Dolls also help to pull out the strengths that a child have."

"Before I used to think Dolls were useless things but now I know and I feel that they are carrying power to influence."

"The children listen in a different way now, they are so involved and curious."

A teacher with more than 12 years teaching experience reports that her Persona Doll, Molly, who frequently visits her class of boisterous four- year olds has enabled her to tackle tricky social issues:

"Molly looks so lifelike that the children treat her like a friend. She has her own identity and we've created a whole story around her. She lives in nearby Sun Valley with her family and faces similar challenges that our children have to deal with so it's through her that we are able to address their issues. I bring Molly into the group, sit her on my knee, tell the children she's having a problem with for instance, bullying, and I ask them what advice they have to give her. This is usually the start of a lively discussion with the children giving suggestions or sharing their stories. Somehow, if Molly says that she hates being bullied and feels frightened, it's easier for the other kids to open up. It also empowers them when they come up with solutions that they can imagine being implemented. And when it's time to go, all the kids want to give her a big hug."

Nobuhle – a typical Persona:

Nobuhle is the name of this Persona Doll. She is 4 years old, speaks isiXhosa and her clan name is Mambhele. She lives with her grandmother, uncle and cousins in a two roomed shack. Her mother is working as a domestic worker far away from home. She shares a bed with her grandmother and another cousin.

Every night before they sleep her grandmother tells them a traditional story. Nobuhle attends pre-school in Khayelitsha near where she lives. After school or during weekends she helps her grandmother washing dishes and laundry.

Nobuhle likes to play with her cousins and friends hide and seek and to share her favourite meal 'umgqusho' with them. When they get tired of playing, they watch TV programme especially Takalani Sesame. She doesn't like violence and fighting (she hears fighting noises at night) and she fears fire.

Nobuhle is not feeling happy today because one of her friends, Khanya is very sick. She is in hospital for the past two days. The class have made and sent her a get-well card.

Using Persona Dolls in Secondary Schools

It is not only primary school teachers who are working with the Dolls. A secondary school life orientation teacher used the Dolls very effectively with a group of 14 year olds. He changed the approach slightly. Small groups of 6 teenagers created the Dolls' personas and solved problems based on their life situations. They engaged with empathy, spoke freely about the issues as they personally were not 'on the spot' and came up with realistic ideas for solving problems and providing support. Through the Dolls, the teacher was able to address issues of privacy, addiction and sexual awareness. One of the teenagers said, *"I am late for school every day because I must wait in line for the one communal toilet that has a lock - I can't get dressed home in our shack because my mother's boy friend is always there."*

Persona Dolls in the Community

There is a great need for psychosocial care and learning for young children and adults. Persona Dolls have proved to be a practical and effective tool to use in communities characterised by unemployment, poverty, crime and violence. Family and Community Motivators work at a local level with families, the most vulnerable children and their primary caregivers. The high levels of unemployment mean that most young children in South Africa do not have access to organised early childhood development programmes. Many who enter the school system do not make adequate progress, and the high drop-out rates by Grade 2 (7- 8 year olds) is of grave concern.

The training that PDT provides for Family and Community Motivators addresses difficult issues like HIV and AIDS in a non-threatening and constructive way. Some participants had avoided talking about the subject before the training and one told how the Persona Doll had helped her: *"When I am feeling anxious, I make eye contact with the Doll and then I can speak about AIDS and carry on."* Family and Community Motivators are now using Persona Dolls as part of their work.

The team are also training childcare workers, volunteers, and community workers in rural areas in KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape Province who provide home-based care, support for orphans and vulnerable children. These children have lost parents, or who may be losing them in the near or medium future. The childcare workers make daily home visits to designated 'orphaned' homes to develop the fortitude of the orphans, visit them in mornings before school, ensure they go to school, make sure they

have clothes, guide them, help to do their homework, develop life skills at home and in group workshops.

Some concerns that emerged in the training of childcare workers include:

- uneasiness around culture in transition and coping with new influences
- challenging gender issues in the context of traditional African culture and traditionally taught roles. There is conflict between issues for example of sexual orientation and the South African Constitution which outlaws discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation
- the link between HIV and poverty ie young women and girls being seduced into having sex in return for food and believing they'll be cared for. This often results in their contracting HIV/AIDS
- gender education and the implications for HIV-AIDS including the implications of what boys are apparently being taught at initiation schools - the myth of having sex with a virgin to 'cure' aids is still prevalent

These are some of the issues that the Dolls are helping to address. Many reflect the huge social problems that decades of oppression, brutalisation and poverty have generated. Issues include:

HIV/AIDS, stigma and awareness of the issues
Racism and Xenophobia
Albinism
Poverty
Violence issues: gangs, street violence, rape
Gender issues: stereotyping, discrimination, and sexuality
Sexual abuse of children
Physical abuse
Teenage pregnancy
Disability
Discrimination – culture, language and 'race'
Not understanding children's rights
Drugs and Alcohol
Orphans / child headed households
Absent fathers
Divorce, Single parents
Abandonment
Fear
Hygiene: Lack of information
Lack of emotional support
Bereavement
Lack of self awareness

It is a depressing list but on the bright side the Persona Doll approach is becoming widely understood and implemented in South Africa. It is one of the few organisations where the focus is clearly on promoting anti-discrimination and helping adults and children to unlearn the prejudices and bigotry they have been exposed to for so many years. The Dolls are really helping to make a difference in South Africa.