

“Are we doing the right thing?” An Early Childhood Teacher’s Reflections on Persona Dolls as a Child-Centered Tool for Anti-bias Education

Tullah Dash
Cambridge Ellis School, Massachusetts

Lacey Peters
Hunter College, CUNY

Abstract

This paper shares a narrative account of an early childhood educator who is making a strong effort to engage in anti-bias education within her school community (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). While anti-bias education is broad in its scope, the focus of this research is specifically on race as it was explored in this particular classroom community. The teachers make use of current literature on anti-bias and anti-racist education, the Persona Doll approach, along with research on children’s understandings of race/racism to ground the stories narrated by Tullah Dash, an early childhood teacher contributing to this work. Tullah’s reflections on the classroom’s learning experiences are used to identify the challenges teachers might encounter when enacting anti-bias education in their daily work. We also discuss future practices and how teachers can use the Persona Doll approach in a more inclusive and responsive way. Through lessons learned, the aim is to better understand how early childhood educators can create openings and opportunities for heightening children’s social and critical consciousness (Shier, 2001).

Keywords: Teacher-Child Experience, Persona Dolls, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Down in the block room four, prekindergarten children are engaged in dramatic play: two White girls, one White boy, and one mixed-race boy. One minute the children are sick kittens that need medicine from the veterinarian, then all of the sudden the script changes. "Everyone, come over, we need to have an important meeting!" Jenny says. Tara, the other girl comes over, a little reluctant to leave her kitten character behind. "Ok, we need to hold a meeting because the lawyers of this city said that Brown people can't shop in the same stores as White people. What are we gonna do about it?" "That's not fair!" Tara exclaims. "The White people should let the Brown people shop in the same stores as them." "Yeah, but the White people are not being nice." Jenny says. "So, we need to fly over the land and ask them, 'Are you doing the right thing?'"

This piece begins with the above vignette to illustrate a conversation that children had during a dramatic play experience that served as a catalyst for a deeper exploration of racial and social justice in Tullah’s classroom. We also highlight this moment to show how aware children are of injustice, and the ways in which they use dramatic play to construct deeper understandings of what transpires in their social worlds and deal with

complex social issues. Corsaro asserts that through dramatic play, children explore social norms, power dynamics, and address their concerns about their lived experiences (Corsaro, 2012). By closely attending to what children think and say about social justice issues, teachers can build dialogues and plan activities with them to broaden their understandings of diversity, equity, and inclusion -- in this case, topics related to race and racism.

Long, Souto-Manning, and Vasquez (2016) argue early childhood educators have a responsibility to teach children about the advantages and disadvantages different life experiences provide, and to empower young people to disrupt and dismantle any injustices. Yet, despite a heightened focus on social justice and anti-bias education (ABE), and even though teachers have access to a growing number of resources to guide their pedagogical decision-making, they often encounter challenges when talking to children about issues related to social identities, bias, prejudice, and privilege (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008; Pelo, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2013). For instance, ageist views about children as being inexperienced, incapable, or incompetent (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007), coupled with people’s beliefs about childhood being a period of innocence, inhibit important conversations in classrooms (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004).

Additionally, people often feel hesitant to teach from an anti-bias curriculum because they feel insecure about how to articulate its content, and research indicates many teachers feel ill-prepared, anxious, or uncomfortable (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008). Furthermore, the legacy of the “color-blind” approach in many early learning settings, and a fear of causing bias in children by leading anti-bias lessons, also presents significant challenges in teachers’ daily work (Boutte, LaPoint, & Davis, 1993; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). As Farago, Murray, and Swadener remind us, systems of prejudice and discrimination pose significant challenges in undoing the legacy of racism and oppression. As they point out, the work in early childhood is both “challenging and rewarding” and requires the time, commitment, resources, and the engagement in professional learning and introspection grounded in what is known about the socio-cultural nature of human development and racial identity formation (Farago, et al., 2017, p. 3).

We invite readers to explore the potential of using persona dolls in early childhood spaces to engage children in conversations about race and other social identities. Persona dolls and persona doll stories are one strategy used in ABE to broaden children’s minds about their own social identities and the diversity of others. Swadener and Marsh assert the importance of centering practitioners’ voices in early childhood research writing (Swadener & Marsh, 1995). Therefore, we centered Tullah’s experiences and reflections because of the essential need to elevate the perspectives and lived realities of teachers in discourse(s) related to ABE and culturally responsive teaching in early childhood. In order to amplify the lessons learned, and inspired by the work of Vivian Gussin Paley, Tullah uses her “voice” and storytelling as a way to reflect on how her classroom used the PDA approach to talk about culture and diversity (Paley, 1979, 1997, 2014).

Reflecting on Our Standpoints

As two White women we move through the world with distinct privileges (Earick, 2018; Summer, 2014; McIntosh, 1989). In the realm of early childhood and higher education our efforts to engage in anti-racist teaching may be perceived as less threatening than when people of color engage in similar work. We seek to be guided by the notion of acting as co-conspirators in the fight for justice and equity, realizing that ultimately, we must be actively taking risks and putting our privilege on the line in order to shift norms and systems that are deeply rooted in white supremacy (Love,

2019; Smith, 2020). Additionally, we recognize the need to study and name white-ness and white culture in our personal and professional lives as a pathway to dismantling white supremacy (Jones & Okun, 2001).

Literature Review

People in the United States have long confronted racism and other forms of oppression by bearing witness or directly experiencing insidious and overt forms of prejudice and injustice. In more recent years, a greater number of adults have recognized the importance of talking to children about race and racism as a way to combat the deeply embedded issues that plague US society (Garcia, 2020; Souto-Manning, et al., 2018; Farago, et al., 2017). In the wake of the Charleston shooting on June 17, 2015, in which nine innocent Black men and women were murdered in a racially motivated attack, the Affirmative Action Committee of the Early Childhood Education Assembly (ECEA) released a statement urging early childhood educators to overcome their anxiety and discomfort in order to address race in their classrooms.

(This committee) strongly believes that it is through our teaching of young children that we can affect the most change. We believe this because research points out that when we do not explicitly teach anti-racism early, it becomes too easy for a racist consciousness to form in our silence, the same consciousness that tolerates racist acts we see today. (retrieved from <https://ncte.org/statement/early-child-educ-racism/>)

Numerous other early childhood organizations have taken stronger stances on the need to discuss racial justice issues with young children. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released its Advancing Equity position statement in 2019. While the dissemination of these statements is a positive step forward, there still needs to be a push toward action and accountability.

Talking to Children about Race and Racism

Tatum (2017) describes the different ways children process messages they receive about their social identities at very young ages. She points out that as early as three years of age children begin to internalize oppressive beliefs about their physical appearance (e.g., their skin color) and make associations with how society views one thing as being superior to another (Tatum, 2017). Van Ausdale and Feagin found children between the ages of three and five categorize themselves and others according to race and use race as a basis for inclusion or exclusion from play (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). By the age of seven, Hispanic and Black children are likely to have experienced ongoing racial discrimination leading to lower levels of self-esteem (Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, & Cockerham, 2011). Further, early childhood educators are increasingly participating in professional learning experiences emphasizing culturally responsive teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and anti-racist and anti-bias practices. However, there is still much to be done to dismantle the stronghold white supremacy has on the dominant conceptions of children/childhood and ideas of what constitutes “best practice.” As Escayg argues, “At its core, anti-racist early childhood education requires educators, practitioners, researchers, policy-makers, administrators, and knowledge brokers reject the persuasive appeal of color-blindness, and instead name and challenge racism with integrity and intentionality” (Escayg, 2020, p. 11).

The Use of Persona Dolls in Early Childhood Spaces

While it is important members of early childhood communities recognize the importance of talking to children about race and racism, justice, equity, and inclusion, there are still challenges in understanding how to generate these conversations with younger people. One promising tool for engaging in culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching in the early childhood setting is the Persona Doll Approach (PDA). Kay Taus, an American educator in the 1950’s, created the first Persona Dolls when she wanted dolls to reflect the ethnic diversity of the children in her class (Brown, 2008). In the following years, the PDA was slowly developed to include these defining characteristics: dolls have authentic, detailed identities; storytelling sessions explore issues of fairness, discrimination, and struggle; open ended questions give children the opportunity to make up their own minds; and children are asked to problem solve or imagine what they would do if they were the doll (Brown, 2008). Children’s voices, perspectives and understandings constitute a substantial portion of this approach, in that the teachers functions as the facilitator of a three-way dialogue between the children, the Doll, and themselves.

While these dolls have a small, but passionate following, there is limited research into how they are being used and how children are impacted by the story-telling sessions that are part of the PDA. The limited research available suggests Persona Dolls serve as a rich catalyst for discussion (Ebrahim & Francis 2008; Buchanan 2007; Srinivasan & Cruz 2015; MacNaughton 1999; Smith, 2009). MacNaughton found that the use of Persona Dolls was most effective when stories were built on children’s prior knowledge, sufficient wait time was given for student responses, and educators deepened conversations by seeking to understand the reasons behind children’s answers (MacNaughton,1999). Jesuvadian and Wright found that Persona Doll sessions created a safe space for children to share their own experiences with racial prejudice (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011). Smith enumerated a number of promising practices for the PDA, as well as some common challenges of the approach (Smith, 2009).

In the next section contextual information about the school community where Tullah and her colleagues worked is presented. Tullah shares a reflection of her own childhood experiences growing up in a low-income blended family in order to shed light on how her life experiences have led to her becoming an anti-racist early childhood educator. She then shares two vignettes to highlight moments with the Persona Dolls where race and ethnicity played a role. Tullah’s work with race is highlighted, as it was this topic she felt most challenged by. Each vignette is followed by a research-based analysis.

The School Community and its Commitment to ABE

During the 2015-2016 academic year, the school where Tullah worked, which boasted a dedication to social justice work, embarked on a year-long engagement with ABE, influenced by a number of factors, including the growing Black Lives Matter movement and a shift in the community demographics as observed by the parents, teachers, administration, and children. Once defined as a low-income neighborhood, the area had been (re)shaped by gentrification and other indicators of affluence, one being the private school¹ where Tullah was teaching. LeeKeenan and Nimmo point out that knowing significant contextual factors about communities (e.g., the history, values, politics, and culture) is key to diversity work (LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2016). Further, attending to the connections between home, school, and community allows for culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and a stronger appreciation for funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) that can be woven into a school’s approach to curriculum and teaching. The ABE professional learning sessions in this school included opportunities for the staff to confront their own biases, learn about ABE strategies and ideas, such as “windows and mirrors” (Bishop, 1990; Style, 1988), and work in groups to plan Anti-bias lessons.

Having previously worked at an even more affluent private school whose teachers and administrators were reluctant to dive into issues around identity and justice, Tullah was excited to be part of a school with an overt commitment to engaging in ABE. At this new school she was fortunate enough to be co-teaching with Robyn,ⁱⁱ a Black educator passionate about anti-bias work. While Robyn also experienced some anxiety about leading these lessons particularly related to parents’ reactions and how to lead lessons on challenging topics in “developmentally appropriate” ways, the teachers’ commitment to this work helped them press through any nervousness.

Tullah and Robyn chose to use the PDA as a result of reading Trisha Whitney’s piece, *Using Persona Dolls to Help Children Develop Anti-Bias Attitudes*, in *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* (2008) as part of the year’s professional development. In this piece, Whitney details how the PDA served as a platform for children to discuss issues of bias in a familiar way through storytelling and problem solving. Previously Tullah struggled with envisioning how to incorporate ABE into the curriculum without devolving into didactic teacher lectures. She felt the dolls would provide a child-centered conduit for discussions of identity, discrimination, fairness, and more. Together Tullah and Robyn were able to use Persona Dolls and other teaching tools to address racial biases within a racially diverse class.ⁱⁱⁱ Tullah documented her experiences engaging in the Persona Doll approach throughout the 2016-2017 school year by maintaining extensive notes on the classroom’s interactions with the Persona Dolls, along with their conversations about race and racism. We used the notes to create the narratives shared in this paper to offer critical reflections on the transformative power of using Persona Dolls as a way to build dialogues with children around race and racism.

Tullah’s Narrative: Growing Up

As a White woman raised in a low-income blended family with three bi-racial stepsisters, gender, class, and race have long been part of my framework for examining and relating to the world. While I feel mostly comfortable discussing the intricacies of gender and class with both adults and children, I become very anxious at the prospect of discussing race. Growing up in a nearly all White rural community as a White member of a mixed-race family, skin color was rarely discussed, but the distinction, and inequality between my stepsisters and I were still keenly felt. In my memory, the few times I raised questions, or made comments about skin color, the reception from adults was chilly, if not reprimanding. I internalized the notion that skin color is something we don’t talk about. Years later, through my reading, study, and research, I came to understand that in order to combat racial prejudice and systemic inequities, we need to engage our youngest students in healthy, open conversation about skin color, difference, and discrimination (Bouette, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Katz, 2003; Katz & Kofkin 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Although research has shown that structured opportunities for children to talk about race is an effective practice for diminishing racial biases (Aboud & Doyle, 1996), I found myself confronted by a fear of saying the wrong thing, of inadvertently hurting the children of color, confirming racial misconceptions, being perceived as racist, or making parents uncomfortable.

“Bumblebees^{iv}, I have someone special to introduce you to.”

Tullah and Robyn used the Persona Dolls to address a wide range of identifiers, including gender, class, religion, ethnicity, family structure, and ability. They held persona doll sessions about once a week in a whole group setting. Their set of persona dolls included an Asian girl and boy, a Latinx girl and boy, a White girl and boy, a Black girl, and a Black gender-non-conforming child. During their curriculum planning

sessions, Tullah and Robyn worked together to create fully formed backgrounds for the dolls, using some details that reflected students in the class, and others to introduce identifiers that were not part of their classroom community, all the while being mindful to identify and correct any biases or stereotypes that arose. Each doll was introduced one at a time, and during the first session details about their lives were shared, along with photos that represented details about their backgrounds. After a doll was introduced, the teacher could then lead problem-solving sessions, in which she shared a problem the doll was having and asked the children to help process the problem and work toward solutions. At times teachers asked the children to draw and narrate their responses to a doll’s problem. These illustrations were placed in a binder, along with the visual representations shared about each doll. The first vignette details our first doll being introduced; the second vignette is an example of a problem-solving session.

“Why is Her Skin Color Different from Mine?”

At circle time one morning a few weeks into the school year, I sit with a doll with Asian features, dressed in a yellow shirt and blue pants. “Bumblebees, I have someone special to introduce you to. Her name is Yin You. Can you say good morning to her?” The children say good morning in unison, some seeming confused that I am pretending that this doll is a real person. I hold the doll up to my ear. “She wants me to tell you all a little bit about her. Would you like to hear that?” I describe her interests (blocks, legos, race cars); her favorite foods (fish sticks and moon pies), showing pictures of the items as I talk. I elaborate, “She used to eat moon pies more when she lived in China. China is far away from here, and it’s where Yin You used to live. But now she lives in Brooklyn just like all of you.”

By now the children are caught up in the story, already shaking their hands vigorously to show a “quiet connection” – they too like building with legos and blocks! I hold the doll up to my ear again “Yin You wants to share a picture of her mommy and daddy with you. This is Yin You’s mommy. Her name is Shailene, and this is her daddy. His name is Mark. Yin You doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, but she does have a cat named Meowy” In the photo two White adults sit on a couch with a cat.

After “listening” to the doll again, I share the last detail about her for the day, “Yin You can speak two languages. The language she knows the most is Mandarin, which she learned when she was growing up in China. Yin You’s mommy and daddy don’t speak Mandarin. They speak English, so Yin You has been learning many words every day in English - she knows how to say a lot! If you speak another language give Yin You a quiet connection.” Each of the three students who have a home language other than English enthusiastically shake their hands, showing their connection to Yin You, along with some students who had learned a few Spanish words in their class last year.

Having shared this information, I ask the class, “Do you have any questions for Yin You?” I call first on Pilar, the child of a Black man and Latina woman, who asked, “Why does Yin You have different skin than me?” I was quite taken aback that in this very first time I introduced a Persona Doll, a student was raising

questions about skin color. I responded, “We all have different skin color and that’s what makes us unique.””

I added, “Would you like to put your hand next to Yin You’s to see if your skin is the same or different?” I brought the doll over to where she was sitting; she placed her hand next to the doll’s and examined them seriously and said, “They look different.” “I want to see!” students nearby exclaimed, and so I slowly walked around the circle giving students the opportunity to place their hand next to Yin You’s, and I asked if their skin was the same or different from Yin You’s. When I got to Ayo, a child with deep brown skin, she stared at her lap and shook her head when I asked if she wanted to put her hand next to Yin You. The next question was from William, a White boy with a passion for trains, who asked what her favorite train is. I ‘listened’ to Yin You and said, “She likes the R train because it is yellow and yellow is her favorite color.”

Research has shown children as young as two years categorize individuals according to race; by age five they use racial categories to interpret behaviors, associating positive characteristics with the majority group and negative ones with the minority group (Hirschfeld, 2008). If we remain silent on the topic, these associations will go unchecked and will be reinforced by society. In this vignette, we see four-year-olds noticing, wondering about, and making inferences about skin color. Here Pilar shows her confidence by eagerly speaking up in class along with her comfort in talking about skin color. At the beginning of the year Pilar’s mother told me that they frequently discussed skin color in their family, and that self-affirmations, including positive words about skin color, were part of their nightly ritual.

Katz found that children with parents who spoke openly about differences in skin color were less biased than those with parents who did not talk about these differences. Katz also found that around age five same-group preference increased for White children, but drastically decreased for Black children. She attributed this to an awareness of racial status that grew as children aged, in which Black children began to feel White children occupied a higher status (Katz, 2003).

Ayo’s declining to place her hand next to Yin You’s may demonstrate her self-perception about occupying a lower status within this perceived hierarchy. However, one incident does not provide enough evidence to substantiate this claim. Van Ausdale and Feagin claim children’s ideas on race and identity are nuanced and situational and it is therefore necessary to observe children over time, and in multiple situations, to ascertain their notions of skin color and identity. Additionally, they found when teachers initiated conversations on race, or intervened in racialized occurrences, children tended to censor themselves and cede to the beliefs of the teacher (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

After Ayo declined to place her hand next to Yin You’s, I immediately realized that this activity was not well designed; it put students on the spot, and reduced skin color to a dichotomy. Much like the participants of Ebrahim and Francis’s study, which stated educators were not fully prepared for the complexity of the identity issues that arose through use of Persona Dolls, I had not been ready for a discussion on skin color, because it hadn’t been in my lesson plan (Ebrahim & Francis, 2008). What drew me to Persona Dolls, their capacity to be highly child-centered, was also what made them a challenge for me: no matter what my lesson plan said, I could not predict, nor fully prepare for where the discussion might go once children could comment and question.

Another essential element to creating a strong connection between the class and the dolls is the mindful crafting of each doll’s persona, or background, which provides the foundation for the anti-bias work that will unfold throughout the year. Personas usually include the doll’s family structure, favorite foods, activities, and other defining factors, including languages spoken, religion, or disability, all presented with visuals to support children’s understanding. It is important the details shared feel true to life, and also create “windows” and “mirrors” for the students in the class – that is, aspects of their backgrounds should reflect, or mirror, certain students in the class, as well as provide a view, or window, into lived experiences that are not present in the class (Whitney, 1999).

Teachers must be especially mindful of the ways in which their own personal biases and subconscious stereotypes might show up as they work to create each dolls’ persona (Smith, 2009), and they must be engaged in the ongoing work of recognizing their biases as they arise (Jacobson, 2000). In this case, I wanted Yin You to serve as a “mirror” for Ronnie, a Black boy who was adopted by White parents. Because he was the only adopted child in the class, I made sure that the doll was a different gender and race than he so he would not feel put on the spot, as suggested by Whitney (1999).

I felt anxious in the lead-up to this lesson, wondering if I should state she was adopted or see if the class would ask why she looked different from her parents and spoke a different language. During the lesson I felt frozen from my deeply internalized notion of the taboo of race; as I shared many details about Yin You’s life, I neglected to directly name Yin You as adopted, or draw attention to the racial difference between Yin You and her parents, instead focusing on the linguistic differences. The class raised no questions about her family structure and I was left wondering if Ronnie felt mirrored at all.

“Raise Your Hand If You Love What You See When You Look in the Mirror”

One winter morning my co-teacher Robyn calls the class to the rug. “Come on over everyone. Annie has a book she wants me to share with you.” From a persona doll session held a few weeks prior, the children already know that Annie, one of our Persona Dolls, lives with her uncle in Brooklyn, while her mother and younger brother live in Ghana. They know Annie loves to sing, dance, and make jewelry.

After getting settled Robyn tells the class, “Annie told me she is having a hard time at school and doesn’t want to go there anymore. She said this book will help us understand why, and maybe later Annie can tell us her own story.” Listening to the story “Chocolate Me” by Taye Diggs, the children express a mixture of empathy for the main character, whose peers make fun of his nose, hair, and skin, and are confused by how this could happen. “If someone said that to me, I would not be happy,” says Ronnie, a Black boy in the class. Fiona, a White girl, adds, “I would say, ‘Stop I don’t like that.’” When Robyn asks, “Do you think he feels proud right now?” “No,” is the resounding answer, and then children, as if the idea of not being proud of yourself upsets them too much, begin to assert their own pride in themselves. “My skin is bright!” Pilar, a mixed-race girl, says. “Mine too!” says Henry, a White boy. “My skin is brown,” says Ronnie. “Anyone can wear braids,” says Jenny, a White girl. Robyn seizes on this momentum and says, “Raise your hand if

you love what you see when you look in the mirror.” Every hand in the room shoots up. After his mother tells him his skin is like velvety chocolate fudge and his hair is as soft as cotton candy the character is loving what he sees when he looks in the mirror too. Fiona smiles and says, “I think he feels confident now.”

Later in the same day, Robyn gathers the children back on the rug to share more of Annie’s story. They tell the class, “Annie is ready to share more about the hard time she is having at school. The kids in her class said unkind things to her. They said, ‘You sound like an animal. Your hair is too big. Your skin looks burnt! We don’t want to play with you, because your skin is too dark.’” Robyn went on to say, “These words made her feel sad and hurt, and she also felt confused because there were other children nearby who heard what her peers were saying and didn’t do anything. If you had heard these peers saying hurtful words to Annie, what would you have done?”

At first the class was quiet, seeming to still be processing the story. While Annie’s story very closely mirrored the events in the book, the children seemed to take it much more seriously when the story was happening to one of our dolls, with whom they had already formed a connection. After a moment, the usual hands went up. Jenny cited one of our school’s values, exclaiming, “That’s not being compassionate! They could say (to Annie) ‘You have perfect hair.’” Many other children now wanted to share their thoughts, which were similar to Jenny’s, all involving intervening and telling the unkind peers that they needed to stop being mean and work to undo the harm they had caused Annie. Ronnie, a Black boy, was the first who addressed his attention to Annie, instead of the unkind peers, when he said, “They hurt her feelings. She can play with me,” which inspired all the children to extend invitations to Annie to play with them as well.

Robyn, wanting to highlight the racial discrimination in the story, said, “The peers said Annie couldn’t play because her skin is too dark. Do you think that’s fair?” Nearly every student shouted “No!” in response to Robyn’s question. “Should we tell friends they can’t play with us because of the color of their skin?” she asked. “No!” they shouted again.

Robyn wrapped up the lesson by asking the class if they had kind words they could say to Annie about her hair and skin to make her feel better, much like the character’s mother does in “Chocolate Me.” Responses ranged from compliments about the doll’s clothes and accessories, to affirmations more linked to Annie’s racial identifiers, such as “I like your hair” and “I like your skin.” By the end of the lesson many of the children were asking if they could give her a hug and a kiss.

Robyn used literature to set the stage for a Persona Doll session by reading a story the teachers framed as something Annie wanted to share. While at this point in the year the teachers hadn’t witnessed any blatant instances of exclusion from play based on skin color, there is no doubt they had occurred. Van Ausdale and Feagin documented the many ways children used “racial and ethnic ideas and concepts to control interactions

with others, maintain their individual space, or establish dominance in interactions with other people” (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 96). This behavior, ranging from covert and insidious, to overt and harmful, was noted through power struggles over play spaces, toys, rest spots, and teachers’ laps. Both Van Ausdale and Feagin and Srinivasan and Cruz found children rarely report racialized instances to a teacher. (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Srinivasan & Cruz, 2015). Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, and Cockerham found young children of color are more likely to have experienced racial discrimination during a four-week period than their White counterparts, and this reality negatively affects their self-esteem (Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, & Cockerham, 2011). Both the exclusion based on skin color and the ensuing low self-image are evident in “Chocolate Me.” The children in the class empathized with the character saying how they would feel and what they would do if they were him. In reacting to this story, the children met the first anti-bias goal: pride and celebration of their own identities (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

This vignette also demonstrates an example of a problem-solving Persona Doll lesson. Here Robyn speaks for the doll, telling a story that shows how she was impacted by other children’s biases. After telling the brief story, Robyn facilitated a discussion with two goals: highlighting children’s voices and affirming celebration of unique identities while discouraging bias. At times these goals can be difficult to balance. A number of studies found in order to truly highlight children’s voices, teachers must allow for sufficient wait time, pose open-ended questions, and follow up children’s responses with probing questions (Smith, 2009; MacNaughton, 1999; Buchanan, 2007). However, often teachers struggle to allow for ambiguity in sensitive topics. The open-ended question -- “If you had heard these peers saying hurtful words to Annie what would you have done?” -- allowed for a multitude of responses, including Ronnie’s, which demonstrated anti-bias goal four: feeling empowered to act against prejudice and injustice.

Aiming to make sure children grasped the important lesson -- that it is not acceptable to exclude others based on skin color -- Robyn began taking the lesson in more of a teacher led direction by asking, “Do you think that’s fair?” and “Should we tell friends they can’t play with us because of the color of their skin?” Buchanan found educators leading storytelling sessions might be unduly influencing children’s responses by seeking particular answers by asking leading questions (Buchanan, 2007). While the class all shouted “No!” in response to the teacher’s question, this unanimous response does not provide a nuanced understanding of children’s ideas on exclusion and identity. Perhaps by asking, “What do you think of Annie’s story?” we might have gained more insight, or even heard from children who had experienced or observed a similar situation. This question could have also provided an opportunity for children to fulfill anti-bias goal three -- recognizing and naming the hurtful bias in the story -- without being explicitly set up to do so. It is a challenge to balance the desire to condemn bias and discrimination, while also allowing for ambiguity and the possibility that a student might voice a bias that will be hurtful or feel “inappropriate.”

A number of researchers were able to gain insight into children’s biases on complex matters, such as the intersection of nationality and race, by using persona dolls and open-ended questioning in small groups or one-on-one interviews (Ebrahim & Francis 2008; MacNaughton, 1999; Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011; Srinivasan & Cruz, 2015). As educators, the more we know about our students’ misconceptions and biased beliefs, the better we can create a meaningful curriculum to address these gaps of knowledge and harmful ideas. The alternative to asking leading questions that receive unanimous response will leave us uninformed and children’s biases untransformed (VanAusdale & Feagin, 2001; Hirschfeld, 2008).

Robyn ended the lesson on an affirming note, asking each and every child to say something kind about Annie, fulfilling anti-bias goal two: celebrating human diversity. While this request was also a teacher directed activity, it was thought to be powerful and valuable to balance the meanness of Annie’s “peers” with kindness from the students. Many of the children seemed emotionally moved by the story and relieved to be able to help their friend feel better.

Successes, Challenges, and Future Practices

Beginning to integrate a new teaching practice is a challenge in and of itself, and all the more so for anti-bias education, which requires confronting personal biases and learned silence on topics considered taboo (Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009); Jacobson, 2000; Swadener & Marsh, 1995). Although Tullah was proud to have finally begun to integrate ABE into her teaching on a regular basis, she felt their implementation of ABE at times was excessively teacher directed and didactic. Persona doll lessons were initiated and designed by teachers, and occasionally the line of questioning limited the scope of the lesson. For a number of reasons, Robyn and Tullah weren’t always able to consistently utilize research-based promising practices of the PDA, such as ample wait time, open ended questioning, seeking a deeper understanding of what rationale lies underneath children’s initial response (Smith, 2009; MacNaughton, 1999; Buchanan, 2007). Lacking training in Persona Dolls, and with only minimal training in anti-bias teaching, Robyn and Tullah did not have practice in leading open-ended discussions related to identity. While it wasn’t a conscious decision, it is possible that due to the sensitive nature of the discussions, they sought to limit the scope of the lesson because they didn’t feel prepared to respond to the questions or comments children might make. Additionally, reflecting on the teaching year, the teachers’ passion for wanting to instill anti-bias values caused them to ask leading questions to which children could sense there is only one “correct” answer, and thus censoring any bias or misconceptions children might have been holding.

In choosing to lead each of these lessons as a whole-group activity, teachers may have missed out on opportunities to have more in-depth conversations. A number of studies that found Persona Dolls to be a valuable tool in facilitating discussions where children were free and comfortable to express their ideas took place in small groups (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011; MacNaughton, 1999; Srinivasan & Cruz, 2015). The pressure to keep children engaged during whole group lessons often caused Robyn and Tullah to move on quickly, even as an interesting thread was emerging. Many children are reluctant to participate in whole group discussions, no matter what the topic, and benefit from a more intimate setting where they may be more encouraged to participate.

Finally, due to pressure to cover other material, such as school values and project-based learning units chosen by the administration, Robyn and Tullah didn’t hold anti-bias Persona Doll sessions often enough or with enough continuity. Lessons occurred on a roughly weekly basis, but often lacked follow up on previous stories, and thus ideas raised in Persona Doll sessions did not often gain strong momentum among the children. While the class connected emotionally with the dolls during sessions, they didn’t seem to feel like a true part of the classroom community.

The following is a list of structures and practices Tullah hopes to explore and deepen in her future:

- Partnering with families in order to find out what children may be wondering about regarding race/skin color in an atmosphere where they are more at ease.
- Providing more unstructured time for children to interact with the dolls, and observe what themes arise.

- Working to integrate the dolls into the class community more by having them visit during the morning meeting, choice time, and recess.
- Creating opportunities for children to role play as the dolls in storytelling situations.
- Dedicating more time to creating well-rounded personas for each doll, which provide windows and mirrors for children in the class regarding: ability, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, family structure, and socio-economic status/class.
- Documenting lessons in a more thorough way, including updating the Persona Doll book more often, and including children's drawings of their reflections and solutions to the doll's story.
- Creating more small group persona doll story-telling sessions in order to give each child the time and space to fully participate.
- Continuing to be aware of racial diversity in all resources in the classroom, and to engage in race-conscious reading, as proposed by Raising Race Conscious Children (<http://www.raceconscious.org/>).
- Inter-school Anti-bias Support-Supervision Group, as proposed by Jacobson (2000), as a place to continue to unpack personal biases, and work through anxiety and/or missteps that have occurred.

In Closing

The title of this paper poses the question, “Are we doing the right thing?” We do not define the “right thing” in a literal sense, and we are not trying to implement ABE in one-way or correct way. Rather, this provocation is intended to maintain a high level of introspection and reflexivity. In using the words of children in Tullah’s class, we highlight the impact that a year of focused attention on ABE may have had on the students. In the opening vignette we see children grappling with issues of exclusion based on race, and one child asking the others, “*What are we going to do about it?*” As educators, we also ask ourselves this question -- What are we doing about the systems that perpetuate gross inequities and harm people of color? How will we use our position as educators in the realm of early childhood to foster and support children’s ability to recognize and speak out against injustice?

In addition, Derman Sparks and Edwards assert that in order to engage in meaningful anti-bias work, collective action among all members of a learning community should strive to broaden adults’ understanding of themselves, as well as the children and families they work with in early childhood settings (Derman Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Yet, this recommendation presents one of the biggest challenges to an anti-bias approach in that people are at different phases of their awareness, interest, and knowledge of racial and cultural inferiority. More to this point, some adults within the school community did show some resistance to engaging young children in ABE. For example, after a lesson Robyn led on Ruby Bridges, one administrator suggested that perhaps pre-kindergarten was too young to talk about racial discrimination. Lingras states, “Historically it has been common and acceptable to minimize difference and emphasize ‘inclusive ideas’ with regard to adults addressing race with children (Lingras, 2021, p. 10). She shared findings from a study conducted by Kotler, Haider & Levine that showed adults are reluctant to talk to children about race, particularly if they are White. They report that only 39% of the teachers in their study felt it was appropriate to have conversations about social identities.

Much has unfolded in the years since these lessons took place during the 2015-2016 school year. The Trump Presidency, with its innumerable attacks on immigrants and people of color, amongst other minoritized and marginalized groups, as well as the increased media attention on the ever-present threat of police brutality against Black

men and women, represent the deadly effects of state-sanctioned white-supremacy. On another end of the spectrum, there has been increased focus on how deeply white-supremacy is embedded in our culture and institutions, resulting in microaggressions, tone policing, tokenism, and more (Saad, 2020). The early childhood field continues to uphold whiteness through its strong allegiance to Developmentally Appropriate Practice (NAEYC, 2020) and Eurocentric perspectives and practices (Escayg, 2020). Within this context, we consider engaging young learners in anti-racist learning is more urgent than ever; however, it is essential this pedagogy be accompanied by sustained reflection on our own biases, privileges, and leanings as well as the discomfort that can accompany this work (Summer, 2014). We should never stop asking ourselves, “*Are we doing the right thing?*”

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- ⁱ Private schools in the United States are tuition-based institutions where often times, parents and families will pay thousands of dollars for a child to attend, especially in New York City.
- ⁱⁱ All names have been changed to protect privacy. Robyn uses they/them pronouns.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The racial makeup of the class consisted of 13 White children, 5 mixed race children, 4 Black children, and 1 Asian child as identified by their parents in a survey to gather information on a wide range of identifiers. The children ranged from 3 year 9 months to 4 years 9 months.
- ^{iv} Bumblebees was the name of Tullah's classroom, and was often used to refer to the children as a whole group.
- ^v Our school value of the month was uniqueness, so this had been a frequent topic in our classroom during this time.