



Persona dolls work with all the similarities and differences of human kind including: the genius, the obese, the short, the bespectacled, all the range of skin colours, differently abled etc. The persona doll interacts with the children through the storying framework. Every child comes to the centre with their own story: "your story." The persona doll is introduced to the children at mat time and the teacher tells the children the doll's story: (my story). The children meet the doll over several sessions, developing a relationship with the doll. "Mei is 3 years old. She immigrated to New Zealand two months ago with her older brother and her parents. She loves to play in the sandpit and her favourite food is chicken nuggets. She speaks Cantonese and is learning English. She is a little shy today but is keen to play in the sandpit." The children are encouraged to interact with the doll. Each child develops a clear understanding of their own story: "your story" in relation to the persona dolls story: "my story". They understand where their experience/story is similar to the doll's story and where it is sometimes very different. Once the doll has visited several times the doll shares a problem with the children, "the story". This is the universal story and a wide range of issues can be explored through "the story" for example:

Thandanani loves her name but her swimming teacher says it's too hard to say so she calls her Narni. So do all the children. Thandanani doesn't like to be called Narni. It's not her real name. She thinks it sounds horrible. She's not Narni, she's Thandanani. Can you help her?

Ben wants to know if you can help him. There is something he doesn't understand. He asked his Mum why his friend David has brown skin. She said it was because he came from a very hot country and got burnt by the sun. But David says he never has been to a hot country. (Brown, B., 2001 & 2008)

The teacher, through the persona doll, facilitates a discussion supporting the children to problem-solve the issue. "The story" provides an opportunity for children to explore the hidden taboos around difference and bias. It helps develop children's emotional and social literacy, and cognitive and language competence as they problem-solve to resolve the persona doll's issue. Through interacting with the persona doll the teacher models a non-threatening way to challenge inequality and support creative change. Critically persona dolls empower children to deal with their own experiences of exclusion and discrimination. By exposing biased attitudes and misconceptions it helps children develop their own moral compass and to cultivate their ability to stand up for themselves. It lays the foundation for citizens who are critical explorers, decision makers, problem solvers and activists. "No child should want to wash away their skin colour or blush when they tell us who they are" (MacNaughton, 2002).

Our reflective capacity as teachers helps us to frame the conversation between the persona doll and children. Discussions amongst our teaching teams on possible hidden taboos in our centres will help deepen our awareness of issues that our 'tinted glasses' may limit us from seeing. Exploration of "The Story" supports the creation of democratic early childhood communities where children can fully develop as citizens, participating, working in partnership, protecting theirs and others rights. Persona doll work helps strengthen children's identity and mana, further develops whanaungatanga and lays the foundation for weaving a strong and inclusive whāriki in our centres.



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