

# Persona Dolls: opening dialogues with children about exclusion and discrimination

Anke Krause introduces one way to tackle social inequality and exclusion that can occur in child care centres.

Every child has the right to be protected from exclusion and discrimination. But in an international review of work on promoting respect for diversity and equity, Glenda MacNaughton found there is little knowledge about how staff and children can be supported in the most effective way. Some findings, though, do point to targeted intervention changing the attitudes of children if it is planned and implemented emphatically, purposefully and long term. Working with Persona Dolls can meet these conditions.

This work originated in the United States, moving to Europe in the 1990s where it was developed by colleagues in England (Babette Brown), the Netherlands (Anke van Keulen) and Denmark (Marianne Egedahl). Since 2000, in the framework of the KINDERWELTEN project, we have been working with Persona Dolls in Germany.

## What are Persona Dolls?

Persona Dolls are special dolls, dolls with personalities. They "visit" the children in an early childhood group, telling about themselves and their experiences. They have a name, a family, a history, likes and dislikes. They have a home, speak certain languages, have favourite foods and dislike others; they enjoy doing some things, but are not very good at doing others. They have certain characteristics and experiences, which many children will recognise in themselves. They experience, just like the children in the group, happy and sad things. These are the stories they share. The children sympathise with them, whether they are happy or sad. They quickly make friends with the dolls and look forward to their visits. The design of a Persona Doll and its personality reflects the diversity of the group of children. It is important that the doll looks life-like, so that it is easier

for the children to identify with it. To avoid stereotypes, it is also important to have correct information, firstly from parents. When questioning parents, the teacher should remember that every family's culture is different. One Turkish family does not represent the habits and rituals of all Turkish families! The stories told by the dolls contain facets of the children's experiences. However, they also tell of things that the children have not experienced, providing insight into unknown areas.

So children can identify with some features of Persona Dolls. At the same time, if they have features that are not found in the group itself they can convey the experience of diversity to children. By reporting experiences in which they are treated unfairly or rejected, they open up the possibility for the children to talk about similar experiences of their own. They stimulate respect for diversity and introduce sad or challenging experiences so that children no longer have to cope with these alone.

## What can Persona Dolls do?

They can contribute to a number of important goals:

*Strengthening self-identity and identity of reference groups:* in exchanges with the dolls and with each other, children experience recognition and high regard for themselves and for their primary reference group, their family.

*Bringing diversity to life:* the dolls make it possible to gain access to different family cultures.

*Stimulating critical thinking about prejudice and discrimination:* the dolls can help further develop children's understanding of justice and unfair behaviour.

*Challenging and resisting prejudice and discrimination:* the dolls help children to think about how to defend themselves and others against unfair behaviour, and

to develop problem solution strategies and competencies.

## What do the children gain?

Pleasurable experiences with diversity enable children to feel at ease with differences and deal with them competently. They become proficient in dealing with unfair behaviour and feel able to change something and act together against injustice. The important basis for this is the development of dialogue and competence in negotiation, which goes hand in hand with a culture of exchange, marked by mutual respect.

**Anke Krause**  
([anke.krause@kinderwelten.net](mailto:anke.krause@kinderwelten.net))  
is coordinator of the German nationwide dissemination project **KINDERWELTEN**.

## Persona Dolls in Europe

Denmark:

[marianne.egedal@webspeed.dk](mailto:marianne.egedal@webspeed.dk)

Germany: [www.kinderwelten.net](http://www.kinderwelten.net)

England: [www.personadolltraining.uk](http://www.personadolltraining.uk)

Netherlands: [www.mutant.nl](http://www.mutant.nl)

Northern Ireland: [www.nippa.org](http://www.nippa.org)

