

Sociodramatic Play with Racially Diverse Dolls in a Child Development Center

Toni Denese Sturdivant



There is a prevailing myth that young children do not notice race (Doucet & Adair, 2013; Hirschfeld, 2012). While, in fact, infants as early as three months old notice race (Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2005). Further, three-year-old children have been documented as showing racial bias (Clark & Clark, 1939b; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Stevenson & Stewart, 1958). Additionally, Hindley and Olsen (2017) argue that “by age eight, racial attitudes are well developed and tend to stay the same unless a child has significant experiences and adult guidance that directly contradict the prevailing social attitudes” (p. 14). Unfortunately, our society is filled with racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In short, children notice race and use the information available to them to make racial preferences. Therefore, if numerous early childhood educators find discussing race and ethnicity inappropriate for young children, children could be left to figure out race and ethnicity using the products of our society that praise some groups and negatively depicts others (Doucet & Adair, 2013).

This study sought to increase our knowledge of racial awareness

in young children by utilizing teacher observations of their students’ play with racially/ ethnically diverse dolls. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to explore racial awareness and racial attitudes through the racial discourse present in the dramatic play of children in the preschool classroom.

Knowing more about how children are making sense of race and ethnicity in their play provides insight in how early childhood educators can address race and ethnicity in classrooms and what specific issues could be of interest to their young learners. The intention of this exploration was also to learn more about the ways in which early childhood teachers notice

and describe racial bias and racial attitudes in the doll play of their preschool students.

What the Literature Reveals

Research involving interviewing young children about dolls has a long history and similar findings. Researchers using Black and White dolls consistently found that both Black and White children showed a preference for whiteness (Clark & Clark, 1939a, 1939b; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Stevenson & Stewart, 1958). Jordan and Hernandez-Reif (2009) found the same White bias in preschoolers that were presented with two choices of a White or Black digital cartoon character. Even recently, Sturdivant and Alanis (2020) found that children in a preschool classroom with no talk about diversity, rejected the Black dolls in the classroom in favor of the White and Latina dolls, both having light skin and straight hair. This is not just a Black American and White American issue either. Jesuvadian & Wright (2009) found that children associated the dark skin of an Indian doll with why the doll did not have any friends. Additionally, in an implicit association test of Chinese and Indian

children in Singapore, Setoh et al., (2017) found that the Chinese children (dominant group) showed a clear preference for their own race, and the Indian children did not. Taken together, it is possible that young children tend to prefer the dominant race or ethnic group in their society.

It is important to note that in two of the studies listed above, the researchers were able to alter their racial attitudes through rewards and storytelling (Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). While it is unfortunate that this strong preference for whiteness and dislike of blackness has been found over and over again, it is quite encouraging that adults can play a role in the views of children. As stated by Escayg, Berman, and Royer (2017) “although research has demonstrated a pro-White bias among minority children, it is important to note that parents and teachers can play integral roles in promoting a positive racial identity in children” (p.15). While research may show that young children could be influenced by the greater society; there is also evidence that teachers can serve as a buffer.

For example, Sturdivant and Alanis (2019) reported that Black students were visibly excited when their pre-kindergarten teacher was intentional about incorporating their interests into the curriculum. Early childhood teachers that incorporated discussions about their student’s hair through culturally relevant read alouds, also helped to support positive racial identities (Wanless & Crawford, 2016). Additionally, Earick (2010) reported profoundly positive changes in the dispositions of young Black children once their teachers began to incorporate their culture into the classrooms.

Research that involved observing play has also documented examples where children of color showed their preference for whiteness through play (Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; Earick 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2010). Young children have also been reported to refuse to play with children based on race (MacNevin & Berman, 2010; Park, 2011). Additionally, MacNaughton, Davis and Smith (2010) found that young White Australian children felt that whiteness was “normal” (p.142). Young children in various settings have been reported to show a pro-White bias in their play.

With past research being clear about children in different settings favoring whiteness over non-whiteness, it is interesting to see how children within racially and ethnically diverse classrooms in a nationally accredited preschool interact with racially and ethnically diverse dolls.

Procedures for this Study

This observational study involved two early childhood teachers, two lead preschool teachers, taking notes on the ways in which their students played with dolls during center time. Each teacher observed their students’ play and then reflected and completed a questionnaire about what they observed. In addition, the questionnaire included questions about the teacher’s themselves, including basic demographic information, number of years teach-

ing, and their teacher preparation among other questions. The teachers observed and reflected on the play behavior over a three-week period. The questionnaire included questions about what dolls students preferred, rejected, or simply ignored. It also included questions about which children engaged in play with dolls, with whom they were playing, and the ways the dolls were used in the play. The study explored the ways in which young children played with racially and ethnically diverse dolls by asking the following question: *How do preschool teachers describe the play of preschool children with racially diverse dolls during sociodramatic play?*

Setting

The setting for this project was a university-based child development center where the young learners that attend are either the children of faculty or students of the university. The center serves children from the ages of six weeks to five years. This study focused, specifically, on the two preschool classrooms. The center is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It uses a project-based curriculum that values hands-on learning experiences, play, and social-emotional development. Additionally, the center emphasizes cultural relevancy.

Participants

Following the protocol approved by the researcher’s institutional review board, two teachers were recruited through convenience sampling. The teachers volunteered to be a part of the study after the researcher shared a recruitment flyer with the center director and gained approval to ask the two preschool lead teachers at the center if they would be willing to participate. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ and their students’ confidentiality. Both teachers had four-year degrees in early childhood education.

The first participant, Ms. Laura, a Latina, had been teaching for 33 years. Before working at the study site, she ran her own home child care center and taught and supervised in child development centers. She had taught in Spain, Italy, and the United States and had worked at the study site for the last 15 years, teaching in a preschool classroom. When asked how she addressed diversity in her classroom she replied “by reading different stories, asking parents to come and do an activity with the classroom from their culture... during the holidays the lessons will be on different holidays, Hanukah, Kwanzaa, etc.” She also stated that she has discussions with her students about diversity, including talks and activities about their families.

The second participant, Ms. Sadhvi, an Indian American, had been teaching for 28 years and had spent her entire career teaching preschool (ages three to five). When asked how she addressed diversity in her classroom, she stated that she “acknowledges both individual and cultural differences in a positive matter.”

Data Analysis

A comparative analysis (Mills, 2008) approach was utilized to arrive at the findings discussed below. To analyze the data provided by the teachers, the researcher conducted an initial read of both of the questionnaires. Following this read, the author read



The way in which teachers make an effort to address diversity may influence children's views about human diversity.

Ms. Sadhvi wrote of a similar play experience with four diverse children. The children included Chelsea (White from the USA), Ian (White from the USA), Ming (Asian from China), and Hamed (Middle-Eastern from Iran). The four children were playing in the dramatic play area taking turns with the shopping cart. One of the students had previously placed a Black baby doll in the child seat in the cart.

over the data multiple times, looking for similarities between the responses of the two participants. After finding similarities and noting them the following information was found.

Findings

In order to answer the research question, how do preschool teachers describe the play of preschool children with racially diverse dolls during sociodramatic play, the researcher provided Ms. Sadhvi and Ms. Laura with a questionnaire to fill out after observing their students and reflecting on their play. Both Ms. Sadhvi and Ms. Laura reported that their students showed no preferences for any particular race or ethnicity in the dolls nor did they show any biases. Ms. Sadhvi wrote “regardless of color, dress or shape, they enjoyed playing with all kinds” in response to a question about whether the race or ethnicity of the child matched or did not match the race and ethnicity of the doll with which they chose to play. Ms. Laura provided an example of four children¹: Tommy (White), Kay (African American), Margo (Asian) and Michael (White), playing in the dramatic play area.

Tommy: I am the mommy, you [Margo], are the baby. Lay down on the couch. Go to sleep baby.

[Margo lies down and pretends to be asleep].

[Kay pretends to cook in the kitchen].

Michael: (gets all the babies) These are my babies.

Ms. Laura: Why are they all your babies? You could just play with one.

Michael: No, because nobody wanted them so I will take care of them.

Ms. Laura stated in her reflection that she “has four different dolls (one Black doll, one Asian doll, one White doll, and one Hispanic doll). Therefore, when Michael chose all of the babies, and said “these are my babies” he had four different races/ethnicities represented and did not see this to be an issue in his pretend family.

Despite the doll not matching the race or ethnicity of any of the four children, they pretended to be the baby's parent, shopping at the grocery store.

In this highly diverse childcare center, these two experienced minority teachers reported that their students showed no racial/ethnic bias in doll selection. Both of these teachers reported making an effort to positively acknowledge diversity. Ms. Laura provided that she engages in classroom discussion about differences in addition to including families into the room and reading diverse children's literature. Additionally, Ms. Sadhvi reported that she makes an effort to positively acknowledge and address cultural differences within her classroom.

Teaching Young Children to Accept Diversity

The children in the setting were reported to show no racial bias or preferences in their play. Groups of diverse children were said to play together with diverse dolls without there being any effort to ensure that dolls looked like them, that their families included children and dolls with similar skin tones, or that any of the dolls were not included. These findings are quite the departure from past research in which children are said to disregard and reject Black dolls and toys (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Sturdivant & Alanis, 2020), show a preference for whiteness (Earick, 2010) and see whiteness as normal or desirable (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011; MacNaughton, Davis, & Smith, 2010).

While the findings of the present study seem to be a departure from previously published research, there is a possible explanation for this difference. The way in which the teachers make an effort to explicitly discuss human diversity in their classrooms through activities, books, discussions, and family involvement may account for this difference. Perhaps, explicit adult attention to diversity is necessary for young children to accept diversity. MacNevin and Berman (2017) reported that the teachers in their

Table 1 Ways to Celebrate Diversity in the Early Childhood Classroom

	Teaching Practices	The Physical Environment
Get to Know Students	When early childhood educators take time to learn about the backgrounds, interests, and experiences that their students have they are able to include authentic aspects of children into the curriculum.	Include pictures, books, and play materials that represent the children in the classroom and represent them in an authentic way.
Involve Families	Families have talents, skills, interests, and knowledge to share. Involving families in in-class activities as well as meaningful at-home bonding experiences helps to diversify the worldview and ways of knowing to which children are exposed.	Include pictures of the children’s families in the classroom. This helps to show the diversity of family make-ups as well as showing the importance of each family.
Diversify the Space	Early childhood educators can use authentic cultural artifacts as materials for small and large group instruction, as well as learning materials in interest areas.	Including an authentic representation of student’s lives in the physical space of the classroom shows the value and legitimacy of different ways of being. It is important that authentic materials are used. Parents can help with this. As multicultural items from large stores can be stereotypical and actually work to foster stereotypes rather than supporting children.
Engage in Conversations	Play time is a great time to make sure that all children feel valued and belonged. One way to help ensure this feeling is to engage in conversations with children. Having a personal relationship with each child and showing a genuine interest in what each child has to say sends the message that all children are important regardless of their cultural background.	Early childhood educators can include the voices of their students in the physical environment by engaging in shared writing activities where teachers write down the words and ideas shared by the children in the classroom. Making sure that all children are heard and that a diversity of opinions and views are worth writing down shows children that differences are to be celebrated.
Examine own Biases	We all talk, move, and act in the way that we were taught through our own experiences. Oftentimes this translates into the experiences that we offer children as well. For example, some early childhood educators bake pumpkin pies with students during November, without realizing that pumpkin pie is a culturally specific dessert and that some children have other desserts that are just as significant to their culture. Without taking the time to think about how biases may be influencing teaching, early childhood educators run the risk of always incorporating certain cultures and ignoring others.	Packaged curriculums and materials that are commonly used in Early Childhood classrooms sometimes silence and ignore children and families that are not White and middleclass. This fact can be difficult to see as many educators, are accustomed to this flaw as it has been present for so long. It is imperative that educators take time to stop and think about the voices and experiences that are represented in the classroom to better ensure that a message of valuing diversity is being sent.

study did not see a need to openly discuss race with their young children. Other researchers had similar findings in their adult participants’ attitudes toward discussing human diversity (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch, 2015; Earick, 2010; Park, 2011; Sturdivant & Alanis, 2020). Earick (2010) provides further evidence of this, as the African American students in the study began to accept themselves and stop rejecting blackness after their teachers engaged in activities which dealt with celebrating human diversity overtly. This study provides hope for early childhood classrooms where racial bias is not present in the play of the children by providing some evidence on how a difference could be made.

Limitations

It is important to mention that the study had some constraints. One is the fact that this study was conducted with two teachers from the same center. Because the students attend the same center, there may be unintentional similarities between the two classrooms. Additionally, teachers reflected on the play that occurred rather than recording the play as it happened.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Early childhood educators may have the power to positively im-

pact the preferences and biases in their young children. These two experienced educators reported no biases in their young learners' doll selections. As reported by the teachers, they made an intentional and explicit effort to discuss and include issues of diversity in their classrooms. Early childhood educators that would like to facilitate the development of children who see human diversity as a fact of life may be able to achieve this goal by engaging in the activities mentioned by Ms. Laura and Ms. Sadhvi. For early childhood educators aiming to engage in culturally diverse practices and create classrooms where diversity is celebrated, just as Ms. Laura and Ms. Sadhvi have, may wish to include some of their practices listed in Table 1.

Using the Teachable Moments

In addition to the intentional diversity techniques in Table 1 and the teaching practices used by the study participants, early childhood educators should also be prepared to respond to teachable moments, in which children ask questions or display a misunderstanding about human diversity. It is in these moments where teachers can truly show a commitment to diversity and the importance of celebrating differences because, instead of ignoring or glossing over these sometimes uncomfortable moments, teachers spend time in discussions and investigations with children just as would likely happen if a child found a worm on the playground. Ms. Laura's and Ms. Sadhvi's classrooms provide hope that with an intentional focus on diversity, we can educate young children to accept and celebrate differences.

Toni Sturdivant, PhD, is an early childhood researcher, consultant, and Pre-K teacher. Dr. Sturdivant's research focuses on racial identity development in young children and play.

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¹ All names of children as well as of teachers are pseudonyms.