



THE PERSONA DOLLS APPROACH FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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Abstract:

The existence of people from different cultural backgrounds is undoubtedly a reality that education should recognize and exploit for the benefit of all students. The pedagogical tool Persona Dolls can approach and optimize the concept of diversity to be treated as an element of enrichment in the educational process. The purpose of this research is to examine the contribution of the Persona Dolls Approach methodology in the management of cultural diversity by exploring the representations of eight Greek pre-school teachers on its implementation in the educational process. The qualitative method was considered appropriate for the study of this topic, and the semi-structured interview was used as a data collection tool. The survey data were processed using the method of thematic analysis. According to the results, the teachers consider the Persona Dolls Approach methodology to be an innovative and effective pedagogical tool for both teachers and students, which contributes to the effective management of cultural heterogeneity of the student population. What this research has highlighted is the need to educate and train pre-school teachers in innovative teaching methods, which in the context of a collaborative culture will promote the development of personal, social and emotional skills in children, so that they can become responsible and active citizens of the modern world.

Keywords: Persona Dolls approach, diversity, preschool teachers, interviews, training

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1. Introduction

Most Western societies are characterized not only by diversity but also by super-diversity, as there are now significant changes in contemporary linguistic, social, cultural, racial and religious norms and in the ways in which these norms are combined with gender, age, motivation, ability, values, legal frameworks and migration histories (Karanikola, 2024; Vertovec, 2022).

Therefore, the existence of individuals with different backgrounds is undoubtedly a reality that education should recognize for the benefit of all students. In this vein, the pedagogical tool Persona Dolls (P.D.) can approach and utilize the concept of diversity in order to be treated as an enrichment element in the educational process. The Persona Dolls Approach (P.D.A.) methodology has its roots in the U.S.A. when in the 1980s in the state of California, kindergarten teacher Kay Taus together with her colleague Ruth decided to harness the power of the P. D. in order to help young students to approach the concept of diversity and discover ways to use it as an enriching experience in their classroom (Smith, 2009; Acar & Çetin, 2017).

Initially, the two educators made paper Dolls with different physical characteristics, and their physical appearance resembled that of the children in the classroom. Then, P.D. were made as real Dolls with features and clothing sets that expressed the cultural and family background of the children in the classroom and the wider society (Nutbrown, 2006; Acar & Çetin, 2017). Each Doll brought with it a life story, which was shared with all children (Acar & Çetin, 2017), whereas their stories were based on children's experiences (Smith, 2009). Later in the USA, Louise Derman-Sparks, together with the ABC Task Force (1989, as cited in Kosmidou & Sfyroera, 2019; Acar & Çetin, 2017; Kazela, 2018), founded an organization, the Anti-Bias Curriculum, which addressed the issue of reducing discrimination and bias. This organization argues that the education of young children, should focus on four goals:

- Every child to develop a positive self-image and acceptance of their identity
- Every child to interact with people from different cultural background
- Every child to develop empathy towards his/her fellow human beings and finally
- Every child to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills related to prejudice in order to be able to resist discrimination against him/herself or others (Derman-Sparks, 2004; Smith, 2009, 2013; Derman-Sparks & Olsen, 2010).

The aforementioned objectives are the core of the Persona Dolls Approach methodology, which was implemented by the Anti-Bias Curriculum organisation as an effective pedagogical tool for preventing and combating negative attitudes of students towards diversity (Smith, 2009). These Dolls were called Diversity Dolls or Anti-Bias Persona Dolls (Dimitriadi, 2014). The basic tool of the P.D.A. methodology is P.D., which helps adults and young children to approach issues of diversity in an active way through storytelling and dialogue. This methodology is an innovative, effective, enjoyable and non-threatening approach to respecting cultural diversity and human rights (Smith, 2006, 2009, 2013; Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008). It is a learning opportunity for adults and children as through the story of the Doll and the ensuing dialogue, teachers and students deepen

their knowledge about cultural diversity, while at the same time cultivating empathy, eliminating any stereotypical perceptions and learning to solve problems arising from prejudice and discrimination (Bozalek & Smith, 2010; Logue et al, 2011; Smith, 2013; Acar & Çetin, 2017). Young learners empathise with Doll, and through the development of empathy (Bozalek & Smith, 2010), their critical thinking and emotional intelligence are activated (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2009; Smith, 2013).

Moreover, in such a safe environment, they externalise their own experiences, adopt positive attitudes towards otherness and strengthen their personal identity, feeling pride in their cultural achievement (Pitsou & Theocharidi, 2024; Smith, 2013; Logue et al., 2011). In addition, conducting dialogue enriches the vocabulary of the participants and contributes to improving children's language skills (P.D training organisation, 2020). The development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills in children through the above process contributes significantly to their all-round development and at the same time to their smooth coexistence in school and the wider society, regardless of their cultural profile (Derman-Srarks & Olsen, 2010).

Brown (2001, as cited in Smith, 2009) suggests that teachers should follow four steps to complete the P.D. methodology. At the beginning, the P.D. Doll is introduced to the classroom as a guest to develop familiarity and bonding with the children. This is accomplished through discussion of the Doll's external features and observation of similarities and differences with the Doll. In the next visit, the Doll narrates through its story a topic that it experiences and is concerned about, with the aim of strengthening the interaction of the participants. The nature of this topic needs to be related to issues of justice and equality through its own experience. In the third phase of presenting the Doll, children are invited to express their views and feelings about the Doll's problem and their own in case they are involved. The aim here is to develop children's empathy. In the last visit, teachers encourage students with appropriate questions to actively participate through critical reflection, in the intent to provide helpful insights to the Doll so that a problem can be solved. This helps children adopt an attitude of defending human rights and equality. In conclusion, the P.D.A. methodology is a powerful pedagogical tool that promotes children's knowledge about human diversity and at the same time, cultivates important life skills. Based on the above, this study sought to highlight how the innovative P.D.A. methodology helps manage cultural diversity in pre-school classrooms, as well as its overall impact on educational practice.

2. Material and Methods

By investigating the representations of pre-school teachers, this study attempted to highlight the contribution of the innovative P.D.A. methodology in the management of cultural diversity in kindergarten classes. The target population of the research were eight (N=8) teachers of the Pre-school level of the Regional Unit of Attica, who applied the P.D.A. methodology in their classrooms in order to manage general issues of diversity, racism and bullying. The sample was selected through the purposive sampling procedure and the selection criteria were in alignment with the purpose and objectives

of the study (Creswell, 2011). More specifically, the criterion used to select the sample was the experience of the participants in applying the P.D.A. methodology in culturally diversified classes.

Personal interviews were considered to be the most appropriate data collection tool, which enables the interviewer to elicit useful information on the issue under study, as participants respond more flexibly and describe data in a more detailed way (Creswell, 2011). The tool of semi-structured interview was applied, and open-ended questions enabled participants to respond freely without being directed by the interviewer (Creswell, 2011). The interview questions were based on C. Smith's (2009) Persona Doll Life Skills Project (P.D.L.S.PR.) questionnaire. With the aim of securing permission to make use of the questionnaire, approval was sought via an email sent to C. Smith, who responded positively.

Before the interviews were conducted, participants were briefly informed about the topic and purpose of the research, the required time of the interview, the use of the results and the possibility of withdrawing from the research if they wished to do so. After being assured of their anonymity and the safeguarding of their personal information, they were informed that they would have the right to obtain the summary of the survey after its completion. Their consent to participate in the research was obtained by signing a consent form (Babbie, 2021).

The analysis and interpretation of the data were based on the principles of thematic analysis, which include the following stages: familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting the data - writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In order to ensure the validity of this research, the interview questions were defined in a way to respond to the posed research question, while a pilot implementation was carried out. Furthermore, an attempt was made to analyze and present findings in a transparent manner (Creswell, 2011), without bias and prejudice, and through continuous personal reflection on the topic under research (Babbie, 2021). It is also worth noting that during the interviews, questions with the same content but different wording were repeated in order to check the validity of the results. Ethical considerations were considered through the implementation of interviews.

3. Results and Discussion

The data of the interviews of pre-school teachers were analyzed, and their representations on the overall impact of P.D.A. methodology were explored. The teachers' responses highlighted the usefulness of the P.D.A. methodology for both themselves - their educational practice and the children, which emerge as the two central themes.

The first theme includes the findings of the impact of P.D.A methodology on teachers and their educational practice. According to the participants, the use of P.D.A had a positive effect on teachers themselves, since the methodology made it easier for

them to handle difficult issues in the classroom, approach contemporary current events in a pleasant way and prevent any form of discrimination.

"It is a new tool in our field, so it helped me to be able to deal with different situations that happen in the classroom [...] it also helps you to prevent school violence and social exclusion." (N7)

"I think yes, some more sensitive issues that you can't approach otherwise are passed on to the children nicely with the Doll." (N1)

It is worth noting the representations of a participant, who stressed that the use of P.D. had a catalytic effect on a personal level, as the teacher developed the ability to better understand the emotional state of the children, to react more directly and therefore to act as a role model. Self-confidence also seems to have been imparted to the teachers by their experience with P.D. Moreover, it is clear from their statements that, during the implementation of P.D., they actively assumed the role of mediators, creating opportunities for children to develop their personal and social skills through targeted interventions and the use of open-ended questions.

"After implementing methodology, I now focus more on empathy." (N3)

"Initially, we asked the children, we asked them...to tell us if they understood what Doll feels." (N5)

"...I have a weapon in my quiver to deal with, I mean I think I am better equipped to deal with issues of otherness in the future in this way if I need to." (N2)

Kindergarten teachers, after their positive experience, focused on the motivation offered by the use of the P.D.A. methodology to transform their teaching methods and became more oriented towards taking initiatives that promote a culture of innovation and collaboration within their school and with a network of schools, aiming at educational change and upgrading the educational work provided.

"This is how we decided as a teachers' association [...] to be and work together as teachers in one department." (N2)

"We presented the Doll to the parents at the beginning of the year. Then there was a workshop where we presented all the Dolls in the area because we happened to run the program in five kindergartens in the area." (N4)

"We could all do something collaboratively with Persona Dolls. ... To exchange not only our experiences but also our Persona Dolls." (N4)

All teachers wished to implement this innovative teaching method again as an auxiliary tool in their hands in order to manage any form of diversity, which would emerge in the context of general and special education and in situations of adaptation of children in the organized environment of the school. In fact, the participants, confirming their positive attitude, made a series of proposals for the dissemination of this methodology to the wider educational community:

"Yes, I would definitely use it because I have a very positive attitude towards it. With Persona, one can approach any form of diversity, gender diversity, ethnicity, physical, social class, and forms of disability." (N4)

"I would use it with children who find it difficult to obey the rules and consequently follow the class schedule..." (N6)

"I would like to say that it is a tool to achieve one's infinite goals, and it would be useful to make it widely known to teachers in pre-school and primary education" (N3).

"It's not just a Doll to play with, it has an identity, it has a character, it is always the same, and it has very specific objectives. So, it's something different maybe, and that's why it's effective." (N5)

However, some limitations were stated even if P.D.A. methodology was successfully addressed by the teachers, and the program was completed effectively.

"Yes, there were difficulties and obstacles, first of all to mention the cost of the Doll and afterwards the number of children in the class." (N2)

"We had disappointment from the children at the beginning because they thought a child would come to school, and when they saw P.D., they were a bit disappointed. Then they fully accepted this contract..." (N5).

"...while the parents of the class had been informed, some had some objections to using this methodology." (N3)

Among the key factors contributing to the successful implementation of this methodology, teachers highlighted the necessity of additional training in the subject, as well as the gradual introduction of the innovative approach to a small number of students at the beginning of the academic year. This strategy allows sufficient time for formative assessment and iterative improvement. Furthermore, teachers emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration and exchange of professional development practices between schools. They also suggested that integrating the methodology across the entire curriculum -rather than presenting it as a discrete, isolated subject- could enhance its effectiveness and sustainability.

"I would like to keep up to date on this, to educate myself a bit more." (N1)

"We were five kindergartens and we had a very good relationship and cooperation, so we could also exchange the Persona, so we could have different faces." (N4)

"Yes, next time I would use the app with a smaller group of children." (N2)

The impact of the P.D.A. methodology on children was the second theme. An analysis of the eight interviewees' perspectives on the usefulness of the P.D.A. methodology reveals their strong conviction regarding its positive contribution to children's personal and social development. According to survey participants, this methodology plays a crucial role in fostering emotional intelligence, cultivating a positive attitude toward culturally diverse peers, and, consequently, strengthening group cohesion and promoting more effective classroom functioning through the inclusion of all students. All teachers reported that children reacted positively during the Persona doll visits. They anxiously awaited her arrival and reacted enthusiastically to her presence. Even in cases where children initially expressed disappointment upon realizing they would be interacting with a Doll rather than a real child, they ultimately identified with the Doll, embraced it as their own, and accepted it with affection and care.

"The first meeting was impressive. Because they didn't want to part with Surgav, as I told you. There was a brainstorming and an attitude of acceptance." (N6)

"Well, Noah - that's what we named the Doll - entered the classroom, when the children saw him, they started laughing and clapping, they wanted to hug him." (N7)

"Well, at the beginning, while the children gathered a little, then they started... to have a party and shout his name here, there, "come here Surgav, we want you, ... Mrs... put him here among us, where we are sitting and we can play, to him we bring toys, we will play with him in the yard, we will help him, we will be able to have him as our friend." (N6)

"Their first reaction was a little embarrassment; along the way they treated her normally like a child." (N5)

The participants also stated that the children presented a positive attitude towards the problem of Doll, which emerged through the narration of her story; they were able to understand and empathize with her emotional state and were willing to help her by proposing solutions. At the same time, they expressed some of their own experiences and feelings.

"Yes...it was a positive attitude. Children's emotional part was more mobilized, and they wanted to share things, become friends with him, include him, offer him markers, everything they had inside the school class..." (N6)

"The children immediately wanted to help him." (N3)

"Well, the children who attend our kindergarten and derive from different cultural backgrounds were touched by the story of Doll. Those children who had differences with the rest of the group were touched by this diversity as well." (N6)

"Yes, several children, in principle, managed to interact perfectly with Valantis. They identified with him and also referred to their own experiences, such as "the other children didn't play with me at the daycare either", "I have also felt alone many times", "I also sometimes feel isolated..." (N2).

Moreover, it is found that children, through this methodology, managed to acquire mental resilience, to cultivate an emotional understanding towards others and at the same time to interact initially with the Doll and then with their classmates.

"So, if you want to set a goal, to strengthen the child's self-esteem, empathy, solidarity, this methodology helps a lot." (N8)

"This was my aim... to help not only the children who are facing the problem but also all the other children to feel that there are people who are facing the problem and that it is good to help them with our attitude and not to make their daily life and adaptation to school more difficult." (N5)

The excitement and sustained interest that the Doll generated among the children persisted throughout her visits. According to the teachers, the students engaged in a variety of inquisitive questions and actively exchanged information, demonstrating a sense of intimacy and emotional identification with the Doll through their participation in the dialogues. This interaction also contributed to the development of their communication skills. Notably, the children's visual artwork revealed their capacity for self-regulation, as they depicted their feelings toward the Doll, offering valuable insights into their emotional processing.

"Well, they didn't just ask questions in the meeting with the Doll, but they also expressed a lot of feelings." (N3)

"The children who had a problem realized ways to solve their problem, to ask for help." (N5)

"The children were more easily able to express themselves through such actions, to recognize themselves, to realize their own position and the position of the other." (N6)

Teachers also emphasized that the usefulness of the methodology lies in the fact that children consider P.D. as peers. They recognize themselves, understand her own

feelings and then express their own inner world more easily. They also developed their critical thinking with the ultimate goal of finding solutions to difficulties.

"They developed empathy, they considered her to be their friend and not a Doll." (N3)

"... in particular, a child of Albanian origin said to P.D.: "you know, I felt the same way in the first days when I came to kindergarten, I was sad because no one wanted me." (N5)

In addition, they believe that the implementation of the P.D.A. methodology provided children with the opportunity to understand the injustices that individuals may experience due to cultural differences and to empathize with the challenges they face. They also suggest that the use and influence of the P.D. approach helped students become more familiar with the concept of injustice and encouraged them to adopt a new perspective - one that is free from negative bias and predisposition.

"No comments have ever been made about how the little kid speaks the Greek language or how he comes dressed or whether he smells or not." (N3)

"I saw the children becoming more positive, wanting to play and more easily accepting their classmate who had come from India." (N6)

"Yes, changes in behavior... they learned to apologize more easily, when they had a behavior that was not correct." (N1)

"We saw a change in attitudes and movement in relation to the Roma attending the school." (N2)

The contribution of the methodology to fostering children's positive social development was also clearly evident. Kindergarten teachers provided children with an opportunity to enhance their social competence, engage meaningfully with culturally diverse classmates, and internalize important social values such as respect for others. This, in turn, promotes the development of cooperation and teamwork. A significant factor in this process was the children's reflection on the challenges presented in the Doll's story, as well as the guided discussions and open-ended questions posed by the teachers. These strategies were designed to stimulate critical thinking and self-reflection, ultimately empowering children to propose alternative solutions and deepen their understanding of social dynamics.

"...it greatly encourages children to learn to cooperate with people from other cultures." (N8)

"The students became aware of the issue of diversity, and we achieved greater cohesion in the group" (N8).

"After the implementation of the program we saw that the Roma child was more integrated within the group and was more accepted by his classmates." (N2)

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the contribution of the innovative P.D.A. methodology in managing cultural diversity in pre-primary classrooms. Regarding the participants' representations of the P.D.A. methodology, it is evident that they evaluate its application as a reinforcing tool which could enhance students' personal and social development by establishing a supportive context that could enable them to understand others' emotions, strengthen critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, build a positive self-concept, and ultimately cultivate a school culture founded on respect for diversity and fundamental social values. The above is consistent with related research studies (Smith, 2009, 2013; Etienne et al., 2008; Srinivasan & Cruz, 2015) and the primary goal of the major training material for preschool education (Didachou et al., 2011).

Moreover, the survey participants reported that they themselves benefited from the use of this pedagogical tool. Their mediating role was strengthened by formulating open questions, which encouraged the children to express themselves and capture their thinking in different ways. They emphasized that this particular methodology serves as a facilitating factor in addressing challenging situations arising from social exclusion linked to cultural diversity within the classroom. In fact, they stated that it helped them prevent extreme behavior on the part of the students. Related results on the role and power of the P.D. in the management of sensitive issues have also been captured in related research studies (P.D training organization, 2012; Smith, 2009, 2013; Srinivasan & Cruz, 2015).

The positive effect of the methodology on the teachers themselves can be seen through their certainty that the use of P.D. was an initial trigger for their personal reflection regarding their teaching practices and the desire to change the way they work with children, with the aim of self-improvement. More specifically, they state that they now focus more on the value of emotional intelligence and their ability to listen to the inner needs of children with the ultimate goal of cultivating a healthy personality in their students. According to their responses, they feel more confident about their professional career as they have a powerful tool for managing issues related to cultural diversity and respect for human rights. The impact of the methodology on the development of emotional skills and self-confidence in teachers, as well as on the intention to change their teaching practices, is also found in international research (Etienne et al., 2008; Smith, 2009, 2013; Logue et al., 2011; Acar & Çetin, 2017).

Another significant contribution of the P.D. methodology is its role in fostering a cooperative climate, both within the school unit, and externally with the wider educational community. Their classrooms became more open and extroverted, and all the participants sought social contact with students, colleagues, the scientific community and the external environment of the school with the aim of spreading the methodology. The specific practices followed by the kindergarten teachers are also a factor of

educational change in the school unit (Etienne et al., 2008; Karanikola, 2024). The creation of a collaborative culture, which took place in many of the kindergartens implementing P.D.A, is explicitly expressed in similar international research actions (P.D training organization, 2012; Irish, 2009).

Their representations outline the P.D.A methodology as an innovative and effective tool, which can be integrated from the beginning of the school year into the general and special education program, so that everyone involved in the educational process can reap its benefits. The specific placement of the kindergarten teachers in the sample is also consistent with the findings of previous research regarding teachers' opinions on the implementation of P.D.A (Irish, 2009; P.D training organization, 2012; Smith, 2009, 2013). Any difficulties that arise concerned either their personal uncertainty about the successful outcome of the action or the children's initial reaction to the appearance of the P.D. In addition, they mention as a negative feature of the methodology the cost of the doll, the number of children in the class and the negative attitude of some parents.

To conclude, this research shows on the one hand that P.D.A. is an innovative method by which pre- primary teachers can effectively manage issues related to cultural diversity and the defense of human rights in the classroom. On the other hand, this research reveals that given the existence of multicultural classes, the need to educate and train pre-school teachers in new methods of approaching and managing otherness is imperative with the ultimate goal of developing personal, social and emotional skills in those involved in the educational process (Karanikola et al., 2022; Karanikola, 2025a, 2025b; Nantsou et al., 2025; Pitsou et al, 2025; Pitsou & Koios, 2025; Pitsou & Zotou, 2025).

Finally, some limitations were presented in this study, since it focused on exploring the representations of pre-school teachers working in a specific geographical area of Greece, with all the participants being female. Also, further research needs a more critical examination of P.D.A. and a comparison with other related alternative pedagogical approaches which function in an innovative, empathy-driven way of cultivating inclusive school environments.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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