

Using Persona Dolls

to Help Children Develop Anti-Bias Attitudes

BY TRISHA WHITNEY

The foundation of the *Kids Like Us* storytelling method is a set of dolls. These dolls can be homemade or bought from a catalog. They can be as small as 10 inches or as large as life-sized. They can be made of cloth or plastic and dressed in handmade clothing or thrift store baby clothes that look like older kid clothes. In other words, many types of dolls are useable for storytelling. *Kids Like Us* dolls are special. They are not the same as the dolls found in the housekeeping area of many classrooms. Classroom dolls are usually babies, meant to be diapered and fed, held as one's own baby in each child's imaginings. *Kids Like Us* dolls are not babies. They are the same age as your students. Each doll represents a real person and maintains its own

identity: personal traits, family, and culture. Some of these details are invented before presenting the dolls to the children, and some are added as they relate to stories the dolls take part in. But these details stay the same over time, just as the details of a real student's life would.

For example, when I made a doll with dark brown skin and black cornrows, I decided it was a girl, named her Ianthe, and set her age at 6 years old and her race as African American. I decided that she lives with her mother and father and her younger brother Henry, one of my other dolls. As I told stories about Ianthe, I added to her biography that she is a very close friend of another doll named Julio and that she likes to jump rope and climb trees.

These are the basic facts of Ianthe's life. Children meet Ianthe early in the year and can always say, "I know her!" when she comes to talk to them. All kinds of things happen to Ianthe throughout the year. The children see her at storytelling sessions. They listen to her problems and hear about her joys. They help her think of ways to solve her problems. They are happy for her and sad for her. They relate to her much as they would a classroom friend.

A classroom collection of *Kids Like Us* dolls can be as few as four and as many as twenty. The dolls are introduced one at a time, helping the class get to know each one individually. The collection should represent the population of students in the class and many other kids who are not represented in the class. Take into account a number of details when creating the dolls' lives—gender, age, race and ethnicity, religion, family structure, culture, class, likes and dislikes, languages, special abilities and disabilities. In this way each student will see herself in parts of the dolls and will also become comfortable with diversity.

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To make the storytelling situations as real as possible, the dolls are treated much as if they were students in the class. They are kept in a special place in the classroom where they can "observe" what is happening in the room. They are available to come to talk with the group at a moment's notice but are not within a child's reach. When they are brought down from their observation point, they are treated with respect. They like hugs but do not want their hair pulled or their clothes taken off. The teacher sets the

tone for this scenario of "real kids, just like us," and the children love to be part of it. "Ianthe has a problem she is hoping you can help her with," is answered with cries of "What's wrong, Ianthe?" and "We'll help you, Ianthe! Don't worry!"

Telling stories with your dolls will allow you to easily involve your students in practicing pro-social skills, problem solving, cooperation, and dealing with emotions. Being involved in discussions about the stories enables each student to develop empathy and anti-bias attitudes. Doll stories are the perfect way to gently correct incorrect beliefs or stereotypes your students may have picked up.

The bias that children experience may take several forms. You will tell stories in which children experience name-calling, exclusion, hurtful teasing, and other biased behaviors.

"When everyone went around the circle to tell what they want to be when they grow up, Brad said he would like to be a nurse. Then Rajit laughed and said 'You can't be a nurse, dummy. That's for girls!'"

"When Henry went to play in the boat, two kids yelled at him, 'Go away! No black kids in here!'"

"When Ianthe was at play practice, one of the other kids told her to give up her chair. Ianthe told him no, because she was sitting in the chair. He said she should go sit on the floor because her family comes from Africa. He said everybody in Africa sits in the dirt, so Ianthe should too."

Don't be afraid to tell stories like these. Children need to experience the feelings these dolls have in order to understand how much bias hurts. They will learn by empathizing with the dolls, discussing strategies for dealing with the situations, and seeing themselves as a person who will not act in this way.

Remember that although many such situations feel heartwrenching to us, children listening to the same story may not be aware of the implications of hundreds of years of history that we feel behind such comments. And many of these situations are likely to be occurring in their everyday lives. Many times children will have even more intense experiences to relate when you

bring these issues up in a story. In fact, the last two stories are real ones. The first was observed in a childcare setting with 4-year-olds, and the second was related by a 10-year-old.

The stories you tell will have a different meaning for each student. Some children will relate to the story as something that might or already has happened to them or the people they know. Others will recognize their own biased behavior. Both groups of children will benefit by hearing the story.

This is not to say that students will be unaffected by the feelings inherent in the stories that you are telling. As part of the planning process, you will need to prepare to support students who might relate personally to the story you are planning.

The main goal for all of the children when listening to these stories is the same: to learn that acting in a biased way is unfair, hurtful, and, most important, not something any of us ever want to do. They will learn to recognize common biased behaviors such as name-calling, exclusion, and hurtful teasing. As they critique these situations, all the children will practice the critical thinking skills that are essential to recognizing and rejecting bias as they experience it in their lives. This ability will make it possible for them to avoid incorporating biased ideas into their belief systems and allow them to stand up against bias when they encounter it.

To plan a story line about a bias situation, decide what bias the story will present and in what way the bias will be expressed. Determine whether the doll you use as the main character will be acting in a biased way or experiencing the bias. Then choose the doll that best fits these details.

It is important to deal extensively with the issue of exclusion. You can do this as part of the process of learning about the common biased behaviors. Because behavior that involves excluding others is very likely to occur among your students, you will probably find yourself needing a story about exclusion at the beginning of the year, before you have even had a chance to tell many other stories. As with any bias incident, be sure to intervene in these situations *at the time they happen*.

Then you can use your *Kids Like Us* dolls in an exclusion story, even if you have not yet practiced all the preparatory skills. You can always go back and work on those later. It is more important to deal with the issue immediately.

Children often use exclusion, based on any bias that comes in handy, to wield social power. Yelling a derogatory name and insisting on making someone an outsider gives a child a sense of power and superiority if the group goes along with her. Your goal, then, in telling *Kids Like Us* doll stories about exclusion is to unmask the reasons for this behavior and turn the "kid culture" against it. This will make it impossible for anyone in your group to use this method since the others will see through the bias to this child's motivation and refuse to cooperate with the exclusion:

"The other day at recess Julio was watching a basketball game some kids were playing. He really wanted to play, but when he tried to get in the game one of the kids said, 'Man, you can't play ball with those lame shoes!' Julio ran and hid in the bathroom."

"Lucia wanted to sit with Brad at lunch time. But Brad told Lucia she couldn't sit next to him because she was a stupid girl. He said only boys can sit with him."

"Umoja and Ianthe started a doggie club with the kids on their street. Everybody got a great doggie name. But when River came by and asked to join the club, they told him, 'This club is only for us African American kids. You're white, so you can't be in it.'"

To help students understand what bias is and how hurtful it can be, you will want to tell stories about subjects common to most of your students' lives. Telling stories about things that might happen at school are easiest to create accurately and uses an environment that is familiar to the children.

Language bias; Hurtful teasing: "Julio is doing very well learning English. One thing he has a hard time with is saying the V sound. In Spanish that letter sounds almost like 'buh.' And then yesterday Julio told the class he was working very hard on his science project. Rajit laughed and said

it sounded like Julio was working 'berry hard.' He said, 'Is your project about berries, Julio?' And the whole class laughed."

Family structure bias; Insistence on conformity to another's beliefs: "One of the kids looked at Lucia's drawing of her family and said, 'Where's your mom and dad? You can't have a family with just a grandma in it!'"

Racial bias; Exclusion: "The kids were having fun up on top of the jungle gym. When Mei Lin came and tried to climb up, Rachel yelled 'NO! ONLY AMERICANS UP HERE!'"

Single incident bias; Name-calling: "One day Rachel got the flu while she was at school. Her stomach hurt really bad and then she threw up on her desk. Melly yelled, 'Stinky! Stinky! Don't come near me, Stinky!' when Rachel walked past her. The next day Melly called her Stinky again, and so did some of the other kids."

Disability bias; Constant focus on one characteristic of another person: "Henry talks with his hands. When he first came to Saed's class, he wanted to teach Henry words with his mouth. He went to speech class to learn how to do this. But Saed would take him around the classroom and say words to him and make him try to copy him. At recess he would take his hand and make him go with him to learn more words all round the playground. But Henry wanted to play in the sandbox.,,

Gender bias; Name-calling: "Brad was very excited because he got to go to dance class with Elizabeth one day. But when he told Mickey about it, Mickey said, 'A boy at dance class? What are you, a fag?'"

Culture bias; Put-downs: "Julio could hardly wait for lunch because he had some special yummy tamales left over from the party the day before. But when he got out his lunch, Elizabeth looked at his tamales and asked, 'What's that blucky thing?'"

Remember to tailor these situations to your own class. In a class that is mostly Latino, this story might happen from the following perspective: "Elizabeth could hardly wait for lunch because she

has some special yummy potato salad left over from the party the day before. But when she got out her lunch, Julio looked at her lunch and said, 'What's that junk?'"

Each group of students has had different experiences. Your knowledge of them and the issues important to them will be the best guide as to which stories they are ready to discuss. Later you can examine biases they may not have any experience with yet.

It will be important to tell the stories based on many different biases. In this way students learn that biased behavior is not really about the subject of the bias itself but about a lack of knowledge, the wielding of power, or the need to feel better than someone else. Knowing that the problem lies with the person expressing the bias helps children avoid believing in the bias themselves.

All of your students will experience bias aimed at them. This is not just an issue for the "diverse" students in your class. While some children will experience more bias throughout their lives because the bias against them is backed by the institutional power in our society, every single one of the children will feel the threat of having bias leveled at them at one time or another. If a child doesn't get teased about her race or religion, there are always other targets—a nose that is too freckled, hips that are too wide, the "dorky" shoes, or the time she threw up in class. You will want your doll stories to represent this fact and not focus on a few dolls for whom bias might be "a problem." Bias is a problem for all of us.

The story line is only the beginning of the story process. With your students, you will examine the feelings of the character being treated unfairly. They will discuss the problem with the way the doll is being treated. They will brainstorm strategies to deal with the situation, and you will relate how the doll successfully handled it. Your students will take a journey through the story to the successful conclusion, right along with the doll.

Some stories should be told from the perspective of the doll that acts in a biased manner. This way you have an opportunity to discuss how a person is

feeling when they do this and to help them understand the motivations behind it. An easy story line to create is one that tells about a doll who experiences something new and then rejects it.

"River had never met anyone with cerebral palsy before. When Mickey first came into River's classroom, River asked his teacher, 'How come that kid's all jerky? He gives me **the creeps!**'"

"Rachel's class learned a lot about what it is like to live in India. Then one day they had a special India party. Some of the kids tried on beautiful saris and jewelry from India. Everybody enjoyed a shadow puppet show. Rachel said that the saris were pretty costumes but she liked real clothes better."

Another story line that comes from the perspective of a doll acting in a biased way shows the doll actively avoiding other people due to its incorrect beliefs. This is a common reaction to diversity. These stories are especially good for bringing out the feelings that cause children to act in a biased way.

"Elizabeth saw a man with a missing hand at the library. He had a metal claw that could grip things. Elizabeth cried and tried to pull her morn out of the library because she thought the man was a bad man and that he would grab her with the claw."

"When Marcy first came to her child care she didn't want to hold hands with Henry. She thought his brown skin was like dirt and would rnb off on her."

Dolls can also tell about a stereotype or other bias that they have come to believe. In these stories, the dolls tell about a mistake they made because of a stereotype or incorrect belief they had and how they learned from it. The feelings of both characters will be examined. The doll believing the stereotype will come to the circle to help the children understand that everyone acts in a biased way sometimes. The doll who has been treated unfairly will be named, to help the children begin to look at both perspectives in one situation.

"Lucia was all excited about Christmas coming. She asked Saed if he was excited too. Saed told Lucia that his family is Muslim and they don't celebrate Christmas. Lucia thought everyone celebrated Christmas."

I tell another story, usually around Thanksgiving, to counteract the stereotypes to which I know the children will be exposed.

"When River learned that Melly was Native American, he was excited. He asked her, 'Will you show me how to hunt for buffalo?' Melly said she belongs to the Siletz tribe, because her morn and dad do. She told him Siletz are water people and never hunted buffalo, even a long time ago."

Most bias stories should be told from the perspective of the doll being treated unfairly since children need much practice in putting themselves in this doll's place. To focus on how it feels to experience bias, bring a doll to circle to relate how another doll or dolls acted in a biased way toward her.

"Marcy got permission from her mom to invite Brad over to play. But when Marcy asked Brad if he could come, he said, 'Naw, I don't wanna. You don't hardly have any toys to play with at your house, Don't your parents ever buy you anything?'"

"When Lucia got mad at Mei Lin, she pulled her eyes into little slits and said, 'I don't have to do what you say. You have ugly eyes!'"

"Last week all the kids made flower vases for their mothers for Mother's Day. Rajit made two vases so he would have one to give to each of his moms. Then Umoja said, 'You can't have two moms! Everybody has only one!' When Rajit told Umoja he *did* have two moms, she said Rajit was weird."

Some stories should show how a doll used to believe in a bias against herself. This is the reality for many children (and adults too). The children really like the dolls, and so taking part in a *Kids Like Us* doll story where the entire class encourages the doll not to believe those biased ideas can help them feel better about themselves.

"Umoja hates her name. She wishes she could change it to Susan. Or maybe Hilary. When she first came to her school and the teacher told the class her name, some of the kids laughed. Now Umoja is afraid someone will laugh again,"

"Mei Lin hates her straight black hair. She thinks it is ugly. She wishes she had long blond hair like River."

"Elizabeth loves dancing. Whenever she hears music, she just has to move. She even got her mom to sign her up for dance class so she could learn more. But then one of the kids at the dance class said to her, 'What are you doing here? Don't you know elephants can't dance?' Now Elizabeth never dances any more. In fact, at recess time she sits on a bench and reads a book instead of running and playing tag like she did before."

"Ianthé used to think she wasn't pretty because she has dark brown skin. She used to put herself down about it. Then her class got a brown bunny for a pet. Everyone said what a beautiful brown coat the bunny had-and then Ianthe realized her skin is almost the same beautiful brown color as that bunny." ■

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