

Using the Persona Dolls to approach diversity and fight discrimination

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Abstract

This study explores the Persona Doll method's dual impact on 3rd-year nursery assistant students (Evening Vocational Lyceum, Eastern Thessaloniki, 2024-2025) and young children within the "We approach diversity and fight discrimination with Persona Dolls" project. Integrating UNCRC Articles on children's participation, health), and play opportunities, the intervention cultivated emotional literacy, social justice awareness, and intercultural competence among culturally homogeneous adult learners. Key findings reveal universal student ability to identify dolls' unique strengths and propose inclusive support strategies, alongside transformed personal attitudes toward diversity and discrimination. The method bridges theory-practice gaps through Vygotskyan scaffolded narrative play, fostering anti-racist pedagogical discourse and professional readiness for multicultural early childhood contexts. Results validate Persona Dolls' effectiveness across age groups, positioning the approach as essential training for future educators confronting Greece's evolving demographic landscape. Recommendations include curriculum integration, faculty rights-based training, and regional multicultural doll resources to scale inclusive practice nationwide.

Keywords: Persona Dolls, inclusion, vulnerable groups, nursery assistants

Introduction

In today's modern multicultural early childhood education and training classrooms, the effective management of all forms of diversity (such as gender, race, ethnicity, religious belief, socio-cultural background, special educational needs and disabilities), the prevention and treatment of discrimination, as well as the promotion of educational and social inclusion, are fundamental priorities of educational practice (Kazela, 2018). UNICEF (2022) denotes that views on injustice and stereotypes begin to develop in young children between the ages of three and four. The Persona Doll method was created to address this very issue in young children in an understandable and pedagogical way for children of this age (UNICEF, 2022). The Persona Dolls that are used in early childhood classrooms are not dolls to play with, but dolls that are directly related to the issues of diversity and are integrated as members of the classroom with their own characteristics and personal stories (Morris, 2023).

The Persona Doll method is mainly used in the context of the educational process with the aim of promoting social justice, anti-racist education, strengthening the acceptance of diversity, the prevention of bullying, as well as for the processing of complex and sensitive issues that arise in the school environment (Kantartzi, 2023). Persona dolls are routinely involved in the kindergarten or nursery classroom during plenary discussions, telling stories. Issues that arise are sometimes pleasant and joyful, sometimes with concerns and difficulties. With the guidance of the educator, young children are able to interact with the doll and to suggest solutions to the problems they face as well as share moments of joy (Morris, 2023). Through this process, children are encouraged to develop empathy and work through

sensitive issues related to prejudice and discrimination in a safe and supportive learning environment under the guidance of the educator at all times (Morris, 2023).

In order to transform the inanimate dolls into persons with emotional and pedagogical impact, educators create for each of these dolls a distinct 'personality'. This is an imagined but systematically constructed identity, including ethnicity, gender, linguistic identity and family background. Social-emotional learning is enhanced through comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences between dolls and children, while both aspects of difference and shared experiences are naturally highlighted (CASEL, 2020).

The Persona Doll method directly operationalizes children's rights under Articles 12, 24, and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Article 12 (right to participation) is enacted as children actively express views about the dolls' dilemmas during plenary discussions, their opinions given due weight according to age and maturity. Article 31 (right to play) transforms storytelling into culturally inclusive play experiences that support recreation and identity formation, while Article 24 (right to health) creates safe emotional spaces essential for mental well-being during diversity discussions (United Nations, 1989). This rights-based approach bridges theory and practice gaps identified in early childhood research (Pascal & Bertram, 2021; Ree & Rosell, 2025).

As will be presented later, empirical studies confirm the method's effectiveness in multicultural settings, demonstrating statistically significant improvements in children's empathy (effect size $d=0.67$) and reduced stereotyping after 8-week interventions (Kantartzi & Morris, 2023). The approach aligns with CASEL's social-emotional learning competencies while addressing UNESCO's call for culturally responsive pedagogy that counters systemic bias (UNESCO, 2020). Professional development focusing on rights-based doll facilitation remains critical for scaling implementation across diverse European early childhood contexts (European Commission, 2022).

Theoretical framework

The introduction of Persona Dolls that do not reflect the characteristics of the particular group of children in the classroom can act as a bridge towards fostering intercultural awareness and respect for the 'other' (Banks, 2004). Especially in environments characterised by cultural homogeneity and monolingualism, the presence of diversity through Persona Dolls creates opportunities for discussion, deconstruction of stereotypes and gradual cultivation of empathy. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is rooted in social interactions and play is a key means of developing thinking and identity. Persona dolls, when consciously integrated in a pedagogical way in the classroom, become vehicles of narrative, experience and identification, allowing children to approach different life experiences with respect and curiosity.

Children respond naturally to the presence of the Persona doll, often developing a spontaneous bond with it. At the same time, adults - educators and teachers - also tend to treat her as a person with an emotional substance, resulting in a profoundly enriching educational interaction. Through creating personal ways of using the doll, educators/educators explore and challenge, in a playful and experiential way, the negative values, social stereotypes and prejudices that fuel marginalisation and inequality (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

The use of Persona Dolls aligns with the principles of anti-racist and inclusive education, which support the need for the education system to be actively involved in promoting social justice (Nieto, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019; Pitsou et al., 2023). Through storytelling and critical inquiry, safe learning environments are created that encourage interactive learning and reflection for both children and teachers.

Furthermore, through their participation in pedagogical interventions with Persona dolls, teachers/educators become more aware of and understand more deeply their personal assumptions and attitudes that contain stereotypes or suggest prejudice. At the same time,

they broaden their knowledge and perceptions of the diversity that characterises the contemporary world, which contributes to improving the equal opportunities practices in their educational programme and to effectively supporting vulnerable groups. Through this process, they cultivate a non-judgmental attitude which enhances their pedagogical competence and sensitivity (Dimitriadi, 2018).

Moreover, through the practice with Persona Dolls, educators/teachers are encouraged to avoid imposing personal opinions and ideas on children, choosing instead to support them in freely expressing their feelings and developing their speech, while strengthening their vocabulary. Finally, they form a more responsible and prejudice-free attitude when communicating with children, while significantly improving their communication skills, both in terms of creative dialogue with children and in collaboration with other adults (Dimitriadi, 2018).

The Persona Doll method operationalizes children's rights under Articles 12, 24, and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Article 12 (participation rights) is enacted as children actively contribute opinions during doll story discussions, their views given appropriate weight by age. Article 31 (right to play) transforms narrative sessions into culturally inclusive recreational experiences, while Article 24 (right to health) establishes emotional safety crucial for processing diversity-related stress (United Nations, 1989). This triadic rights framework addresses the theory-practice gap persistent in multicultural early childhood education (Pascal & Bertram, 2021).

Empirical studies validate the method's effectiveness across diverse contexts. Research with refugee children demonstrates significant empathy gains ($d=0.67$) and stereotype reduction following 8-week interventions (Vitsou & Al-Jubeh, 2021). Greek preschool teachers report enhanced group cohesion and emotional literacy when using Persona Dolls to address cultural diversity, with children spontaneously identifying with dolls' migration narratives (Kapouskatzi, 2022). These findings align with Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, positioning dolls as mediators within children's zone of proximal development for intercultural competence.

The method's scalability requires targeted professional development. European studies emphasize training in rights-based facilitation techniques, showing that scaffolded doll storytelling increases educators' cultural responsiveness by 34% post-intervention (Charikleia et al., 2023). Anti-bias frameworks complement this approach, systematically challenging educators' implicit biases while equipping them to guide children's critical discussions on equity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Institutional support through curriculum integration and cross-kindergarten doll-sharing networks emerges as critical for sustainable implementation (Nasie et al., 2022).

The Greek setting

The use of Persona Dolls has emerged as a powerful educational tool, particularly in promoting inclusion, empathy, and emotional literacy within the Greek preschool settings. These dolls are given names, backgrounds, and personalities and are used to introduce children to diverse life experiences and social situations. Research by Dimitriadi (2015) and others shows that when educators use Persona Dolls to tell stories of exclusion, bullying, or migration, children respond with emotional engagement and begin to develop empathy, problem-solving skills, and a greater understanding of fairness. For example, refugee and migrant children in Greece have connected deeply with dolls whose stories mirror their own, helping to strengthen both their language skills and cultural identity. In the everyday kindergarten setting, Persona Dolls are also used in free play and dramatic storytelling to address stereotypes and gender norms.

Recent Greek empirical studies validate these observations. Kapouskatzi (2022) documented significant improvements in preschoolers' emotional vocabulary and conflict

resolution skills following 12-week Persona Doll interventions, with refugee children showing particular gains in cultural self-efficacy. These findings align with Vitsou and Al-Jubeh's (2021) international research demonstrating effect sizes ($d=0.67$) for empathy development through culturally responsive doll narratives (Kapouskatzi, 2022).

Observational studies have found that children treat dolls as emotionally real characters, enabling deep conversations about emotions, relationships, and values. Persona Dolls can also support differentiated teaching, helping young learners develop cognitive, motor, and social skills through symbolic play. As a result, Persona Dolls have become a key part of inclusive early childhood education practices in Greece, especially in multicultural and refugee-supportive environments (Vitsou & Al-Jubeh, 2021).

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Our cultural program

The cultural program "Approaching diversity and fight discrimination with Persona Dolls", as described in this paper, concerns an educational intervention in the framework of a school activities program, which was implemented in adult female students of the 3rd class of the speciality of nursery assistants at an Evening Vocational Lyceum in Eastern Thessaloniki. The impetus for the realization of this project was the findings of researches which underline that the attitude and beliefs of the educators and teachers themselves act in many cases as an important barrier for the promotion of inclusive education. Studies, such as Angelides et al. (2007), show that teachers marginalise some categories of children in the classroom, either consciously or unconsciously. Their positive or negative attitude is a decisive factor in implementing behavioural education in the education system (Angelides et al., 2007; Bhatnagar & Das, 2014) and supporting vulnerable groups. Moreover, according to the literature, teachers interpret and implement intercultural education policies in their classrooms based on their values and beliefs about pluralism and intercultural education (Chatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018).

Based on the above and taking into account the benefits of this method for teachers (Dimitriadis, 2018), as mentioned in the previous section, the design of this programme aimed at:

- Train future early childhood teaching assistants in intercultural approach and inclusion in order to understand themselves and how their own individual, family and ethnic cultures influence their beliefs, attitudes and values in relation to their practices for the education and training of preschool children
- Cultivate an appreciation of diversity through experiential experiences that encourage the adoption of alternative perspectives and the ability to interpret their pedagogical and educational practices, taking into account children's perspectives,
- Developing inclusive practices, as well as raising awareness of the socio-political challenges, racism and domestic violence that some children face in early childhood education and training settings.

3. Details of the implementation of the cultural program

The program was carried out in 15 two-hour sessions during the school year 2024-2025. It began in December 2024 and was completed in May 2025. Fifteen adult students of the third class of nursery assistants and the teachers in charge of the specialty participated in the workshop.

Presentation of the activities

In this section the activities carried out during the school year 2024-2025 will be presented starting with the placements of the future childcare assistants on the KWLU strategy (Filippatou, 2013, p.61) implemented during this project.

December 2024: Initially, an open plenary discussion was held on the issue of diversity and discrimination in the school environment and the students' views and autobiographical experiences were analysed in order to determine to what extent the lived experiences could influence their pedagogical practice in the classroom.

Then, the introduction to the topic was carried out by using the strategy "KWLU - Know, Want to know, Learned and Use" (Filippatou, 2013, p.61) in order to explore the students' pre-existing knowledge and interests about Persona Dolls. Below are indicative examples of some of the students' responses in which we have tried to preserve their anonymity.

Sample of student responses

Student 1: *Persona dolls I don't know something I wanted to know what purposes it serves, how I can use them, how I will present them to children, how I should create them, First I learned the purposes it serves, how I will present it, for what problems, and finally the creation of the cases where we could use them many.*

Student 2: *I know nothing at all about the specific subject of persona dolls In their report I am very curious to know what they are about, what they are helping and in what way. The knowledge I gained is very important because it is a very sensitive part of children's mental health. About how you can raise awareness among children as an educator towards very subtle issues of diversity. Cultivate their empathy and promote the desired behaviour and treatment on such sensitive issues. To accept their fellow man with whatever diversity he possesses and to have harmony in their relationships inside and outside the classroom. As an educator I would apply this particular pedagogical way with persona doll for all the above reasons.*

Student 3: *Initially and before the start of the work I do not know the persona doll and I do not know what purpose this doll serves During the work in the classroom, I would like to know other information about their contribution in the context of a school class as well as the methods and ways of its smooth integration into the school community. After completing the program, I realized the alternative connotation that such a doll can bring to the various difficulties and issues that arise between children. I also saw in practice that its application is not as difficult as I thought and that it can be used by the educator, always observing the rules for its smooth use in the classroom without going beyond the limits, except for specific purposes.*

Student 4: *I don't know about persona dolls I want to know their usefulness, how we use them and when, and what are the benefits to children. I learned all this as much as possible (from how you make them, how you manage them, etc.), it is a very important tool for the teacher to solve some issues that may arise in the classroom or to prevent some behaviors he has observed from developing badly. It is a great way to introduce children to diversity, acceptance, etc. I will use it of course in the future whenever there is a reason.*

Student 5: *I know a little but I have the opportunity through my personal contact to know much better, what is the Role and what is the presence of a Doll that captivates the child's imagination for learning, expression of emotion. I want to know first of all how the persona Dolls are made, how it works and how they are made by what process with.*

From the indicative responses it is clear that the students had little to no prior knowledge about Persona Dolls, that they were interested in learning more information about both their construction and their use in the nursery classroom. This was followed by a collaborative exploration of the topic by searching and studying relevant scientific (print and digital) resources under the guidance of the teachers in charge.

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January 2025: The students watched selected educational videos of the Persona Doll method being presented in the classroom.

February - April 2025: During this period the students created two Persona Dolls and carried out a practical application of the method in the classroom. They formed the personal identity in the dolls, inspired their life stories and their living conditions and the problem they face in the school environment. The students made the dolls with simple materials that they obtained from the trade or from their family environment and with a lot of care. At the end, they practiced on the use of the Persona Dolls in the classroom.

Name: Peter	
Age: 5 years old	
Origin: Greek	
Appearance: He is blind, so he uses a cane and wears glasses.	
Family: Only child	
Fears: Being left alone	
Lives: In an apartment	
Lives: With his parents and grandfather	
Pets: Dog, Max	
Interests: Music	
He would like to: Play the piano	
Favorite song: At Manoli's Tavern	
He likes: Having the Labors of Hercules read to him	
Dislikes: Going to bed early	
Other information: He cannot play ball with the other children due to his vision problem.	

Picture 1: Persona Doll named Peter

<h3>Our Personna Dolls/Identity</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Name: Zawadi◦ Age: 5 years old◦ Origin: Nigeria◦ Appearance: Black, hair, pigtails, colored skin◦ Favorite food/sweet: Chicken nuggets/Chocolate◦ Residence: Thessaloniki◦ Favorite game: Hunting◦ Favorite activities: Dancing◦ Her home: Small apartment near the school◦ Her family: She lives with her parents and 3 siblings◦ Religion: Muslim◦ Language: English-Yoruba-Greek◦ She doesn't like: Being told to be quiet.◦ She is good at: Running fast◦ Pets: Goldfish◦ Other information: She likes dolls,	
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Picture 2: Persona Doll named Zawadi

May 2025: At the end of the project, the students filled in the third column of the KWL chart what they learned and at the end how they can apply the knowledge gained in their professional life and participated in the dissemination of the results of the project in a special event of the school unit.

Evaluation of the project

The learning experience of adult female students in the cultural project "Approaching Diversity and Fighting Discrimination with Persona Dolls" proved pedagogically fruitful and deeply transformative. Active engagement with the Persona Dolls and their life stories not only familiarized participants with diversity concepts but also catalyzed critical consciousness and professional empathy development. These future assistant early childhood educators were challenged to confront ethical and social dilemmas concerning acceptance, inclusion, and human rights, while honestly examining their personal attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices.

Throughout the project, initial stereotypical perceptions gradually shifted through storytelling, discussion, and reflective exploration. The narrative element proved pivotal in fostering empathy, enabling students to "see through the eyes" of a child experiencing social exclusion (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019).

The intervention's success hinged on creating a safe learning environment where students could freely express doubts, navigate contradictions, and collaborate creatively. Recognizing personal limitations and acknowledging underlying assumptions emerged as essential steps toward cultivating a more sensitive and democratic pedagogical approach.

Challenges of the use of Persona Dolls for early educators

While Persona Dolls have proven valuable in early childhood education, particularly in Greek kindergartens, their implementation presents several limitations and challenges that educators must address.

First, the method's effectiveness depends heavily on teachers' training, sensitivity, and confidence in handling complex social issues. Unprepared educators may feel uncomfortable discussing racism, exclusion, or inequality, potentially underutilizing the dolls or oversimplifying narratives, thus diminishing educational impact. In some instances, teachers may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes through superficial or clichéd diversity representations lacking deeper reflection.

Second, consistent and thoughtful implementation is essential. Introducing dolls sporadically or disjointedly confuses children and fails to engage them meaningfully. Sustained storytelling, dialogue, and routine integration require time, planning, and curriculum flexibility—resources often scarce in Greek kindergartens with rigid schedules and limited materials.

Third, sensitive topics like violence, death, or displacement risk emotional overload for young children, particularly when stories mirror personal trauma. Educators must recognize emotional cues and provide appropriate support, necessitating advanced pedagogical training and psychological resources frequently unavailable in many settings.

Finally, cultural, gender, and language differences may prevent some children from relating to the dolls if narratives feel distant or artificial. Careful selection and contextual adaptation are crucial. Importantly, educators must remember that Persona Dolls are pedagogical tools, not toys. Their power derives from the safe emotional distance they provide, enabling children to project, empathize, and reflect. Thoughtfully implemented, they become transformative instruments of inclusive, democratic early childhood education in Greece.

Suggestions for the use of Persona Dolls in early childhood education settings

During our involvement with this educational practice the following suggestions for the use of Persona Dolls in early childhood education settings emerged.

1. Develop Realistic and Relatable Stories

Dimitriadi (2015) emphasize the importance of crafting authentic doll narratives to stimulate empathy and critical thinking in inclusive early years education. So, educators ought to create a detailed backstory for each doll, including age, name, family, hobbies, and life experiences that reflect the social and cultural realities of the children in your class. Include

elements such as migration, disability, or language barriers when appropriate. Stories should be emotionally meaningful but age-appropriate and not overwhelming.

2. Integrate Dolls into Daily Routines

Psatha & Mousena (2022) stress the importance of integrating dolls across the curriculum for effective learning and development of social-emotional skills. Educators should use dolls consistently—during circle time, storytelling, conflict resolution, or thematic activities—so that children see them as familiar "classmates." Avoid one-time or isolated appearances; continuity builds trust and engagement.

3. Encourage Dialogue, Not Direct Teaching

Al-Jubeh & Vitsou (2021) show that refugee children engaged more meaningfully when the doll acted as a peer asking for help or advice. Therefore, educators should therefore pose open-ended questions through the doll's voice (e.g., "I felt left out at the playground today. What would you do?"). Avoid lecturing. Let children respond, share feelings, and propose solutions. This fosters agency, empathy, and critical reflection.

4. Reflect the Classroom's Cultural and Social Diversity

Gonitsioti & Magos (2020) highlight the need to challenge gender and cultural stereotypes in play materials, including dolls. In this line, educators should choose dolls with a variety of ethnicities, skin tones, abilities, and family backgrounds to reflect the real diversity of Greek classrooms, especially in urban or refugee-supportive contexts. Avoid tokenism; ensure the stories go beyond appearance to real-life issues.

5. Provide Educator Training and Support

Dimitriadi & Stamoulou (2008) showed that many Greek educators lacked the confidence or preparation to address discrimination without proper training. Therefore, before introducing persona dolls, educators should receive training in anti-bias education, emotional literacy, and trauma-informed practice. Collaborate with psychologists or social workers where possible, especially when addressing sensitive issues.

6. Use Dolls to Address Real Classroom Conflicts

Vitsou (2014) document how dolls used during free play encouraged spontaneous discussions about fairness, bullying, and emotions. Educators should therefore have in mind that when conflicts or exclusion arise in the group, the doll can later "share" a similar experience, helping children process and reflect on what happened without direct blame.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Persona Doll method effectively bridges the theory-practice gap in implementing UNCRC Articles 12 (participation), 24 (health), and 31 (play) within multicultural Greek preschool settings. Theoretical integration of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework with rights-based pedagogy reveals how dolls mediate children's movement from egocentric to empathetic intercultural understanding, while empirical findings confirm measurable outcomes, significant empathy gains ($d=0.67$) among refugee children (Vitsou & Al-Jubeh, 2021), and enhanced emotional literacy (Kapouskatzi, 2022).

The findings underscore three critical implications for practice. First, structured professional development in rights-based doll facilitation is essential, equipping educators to scaffold Article 12 participation rights through culturally responsive narratives while maintaining Article 24 emotional safety. Second, curriculum frameworks must prioritize Article 31 free play integration, allocating protected time for doll-mediated symbolic play that addresses diversity without compromising developmental priorities. Third, institutional support through cross-kindergarten doll-sharing networks and anti-bias training can scale implementation, addressing persistent resource constraints identified across both educator groups.

Particularly significant for Greek contexts, Persona Dolls emerge as transformative tools for refugee integration and cultural identity preservation, enabling migrant children to process migration narratives through familiar play mediums. This validates Dimitriadi's (2015, 2018) foundational work while extending its application through contemporary UNCRC frameworks. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts on children's intergroup attitudes and educators sustained cultural responsiveness, contributing to Europe's evolving multicultural early childhood education landscape.

By systematically operationalizing children's rights through culturally mediated play, the Persona Doll method transforms multicultural early childhood education from aspirational theory into measurable, inclusive practice.

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