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## How to Deal with ‘Living in the Presence of the Other’ in Early Childhood Education: Workshop

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No one was born hating another because of his colour, past or religion! People learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, then we can teach them to love.

Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa (1994)

### **Abstract**

*This article is based on a workshop presentation: we seek here to present the educational context and conditions in which Persona Dolls gives opportunities to children in Kindergarten to live and to play in the presence of ‘the other’. This is not about an abstract and far-fledged other, as in the case of societal and political responsibility. This is about a tangible and near concrete other, a child, who in all his vulnerability imposes himself onto the educational environment. The point of view towards the other varies from one society and culture to another. A community like a class or a school which can introduce and later embrace “the different other” in itself, and make him or her a prolific citizen.*

### **Introduction**

In this article we want to present the dimensions of the educational context and conditions in which the application of Persona Dolls gives opportunities to children in Kindergarten to live and to play in the presence of the other. This is not about an abstract and far-fledged other, as in the case of societal and political responsibility. This is about a tangible and near, concrete other, a child, who in all his vulnerability imposes himself onto the educational environment.

The point of view to the other varies from one society and culture to another. A community like a class or a school which can introduce and later embrace “the different other” in itself, and make him or her a prolific citizen. When the community can not achieve that, it means that the society has got a lot of bleeding wounds (Aktan Kerem, 2005). Nowadays the preschool has the task to give children the possibilities to develop their senses and so their sense of who they are and what their relations to others means.

Our approach is fed by some philosophical thoughts: the difference between the other and me - expressed in the irreducible alterity of the other – is, ethically speaking, the appeal to the highest ‘non – difference’: proximity without absorption or fusion (Burggraeve, 2008). The otherness or strangeness of the other manifests itself as the extraordinary par excellence: not as something given or intended, but as a “*dérangement*” which puts us out of our common tracks (Levinas, 1985). Recently the Belgian moral philosopher Burggraeve introduced the concept of ‘ethical fraternity’, which expresses the solidarity with all people, including and especially with the ‘others’

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as *'the different others, the foreign others, the forgotten and excluded others'*. Ethical solidarity is primary not situated in the free initiative of the I, the active thinking and willing individuals (Burggraeve, 2008).

Precisely because the alterity of the other is not based on its difference - the difference in qualities, character, social and cultural differentiations - but on its irreducible separateness and infinite distance, the face of the other refers to all others.

It is only when we do not define the alterity of the other in terms of difference, but in terms of its radical and infinite irreducibility – to which the differences can then graft themselves – that Levinas declared that all humans are equal, in the sense that all of them are irreducible others who by means of their face make present the infinity of the other (Levinas, 1985).

An encounter with otherness – whether national, racial or ethnic – is experienced as a challenge to the existing values, beliefs and behaviours of young people and their educators. So in the background of our presentation there is the need for intercultural communicative competences focussing on establishing relationships rather than communicating messages (Guilherme, 2004).

### **The dimensions of the educational context in early childhood**

#### ***The learning dimension***

Today children live in a global society owing to the fact that their world is very much internationalized. They are surrounded by people, impressions and objects from all over the world. Internationalization includes the concept of multiplicity that covers language, gender, physical characteristics, social origin and religious beliefs.

Children in early childhood are able to interpret and record the information coming from the world in their environment. This is really an incredible event. The things they learn and how they learn, depend on their experiences. Research on early development in combination with the respect of the different other, suggests that human development is forged within an ethical, relational framework, with particular adults and children, embodied in daily, particular activities of giving care and exchange.

Young children observe how the people in their environment behave. Because children start to learn about colours at the age of two, they also learn about the colours of the people. As they grow up, they receive more and more verbal and non-verbal messages from the adults, other children, media and society. The influences depend on whether they are girls or boys; black or white; disabled or normal; having come from a family of upper or lower class (Aktam Kerem, 2005).

Besides, their own biography and personal experiences will affect the things they learn and interpret. What can we do, as educationalists in infancy, in order to help children to explore the differences that exist in the society and to enrich their lives with them? Especially in pre-school education, it can be extremely beneficent when the teacher comes together with the children and start a talk about what their perceptions of their

environment so that the children can express their feelings and opinions and have empathy for others (Aktam Kerem, 2005).

### ***The care dimension in early childhood***

In her approach of care Joan Tronto (1993) distinguishes four analytically different but mutually connected care phases, i.e. 'caring about', 'taking care of', 'care giving' and 'care receiving'. Care practice require specific moral qualities, which Tronto describes as 'attentiveness', 'responsibility', 'competence' and 'responsiveness'.

When thinking about early childhood, however, it is useful to further divide 'taking care of' into a continuing 'ultimate responsibility' for a person's care in all areas and at all times and a temporary bounded or flourished responsibility. The latter means a care for a child during a particular time or for a particular aspect of a child's care. Teachers have bounded responsibility for the safety of their children and to support children in their seeking for sense.

The question in relation to responsibility is who has or should have the task of seeing that care took place, and who has failed if care was absent or inadequate. Care giving is linked with the direct physical and interactional caring that one person does for another. Her emphasis on 'care receiving' and the corresponding ethical quality of responsiveness were viewed as an innovative impulse in the care debate. Responsiveness requires teachers to learn and see things from the specific viewpoint of the other person (child, parent, and colleague) and to take the other person's way of thinking and forms of expression completely serious. It is very difficult (Tronto, 1993).

Using Persona Dolls is a form of the bounded responsibility of the teacher but in the communication with the families this application refers to the parental ultimate responsibility. Care in this particular context does not only mean protection but also instruction. The explicit focal point on 'learning' outlines the space that 'care' can occupy.

### ***The ethical dimension***

The teachers in pre-school have the intention to establish a safety and wellbeing environment in which they support and moderate the children try to clarify their opinions or prejudice based on fear or lack of knowledge. There is the need to train teachers to become facilitators or moderator so that they can give the children true information and encourage them to ask questions and express themselves. Maybe the children think that the child in a wheelchair can not do anything for themselves. If they heard from the teacher or from pupils about the potential and the capabilities of a growing up in a wheelchair than they will look more to the boy or the girl in the wheelchair than at the wheelchair itself.

During the circle time they will discover that courage, love and self – esteem are very important in that case. Then, it may come to the fact that, disabled or not, adults and children get help and need people who can help them. Also, the children can be asked to think and talk about what kind of help they receive starting the time they get up until they come to the nursery school Working with persona dolls with children we can use

the 4 cornerstones for an ethics of relationship, namely responsibility, resilience, connectedness and trust (Dillen, 2008). The responsibility precedes the ethical choice and the concrete form of any relationship or engagement. People can decide to take up the responsibility or not. Responsibility refers to the ethical appeal of the other. The responsibility finds its source from outside, in the sense that it does not arise from nature or a complex of ethical norms given to an individual to be internalised but from the cry of the victims of the social exclusion. Resilience refers to the potential of teachers, parents and children to recover and to rebuild their lives after suffering or a bad experience of exclusion. People can show a high degree of resilience even if they live in peculiar circumstances. The idea of resilience portrays educators and their target groups not merely as passive victims, but shows them also as active subjects. The idea of resilience makes it possible not only to focus on what goes wrong in their situations and on irresponsible behaviour. Through projects it opens our eyes for the potential of the members, to secure a variety of stimulating possibilities for these people.

Responsibility and resilience are both ideas that form a broader theoretical framework about relations, a framework characterised by 'connectednesses (the original meaning of religion). Connectedness is different from cohesion and does not mean that people have to do things together nor must stay together. But the idea of connectedness forms the basis for a faith in our need of each other and that we should try to find solutions. Trust is the fourth main theme in this approach. One needs trust in order to prevent ethical or religious fanaticism and an excessively heavy burden of responsibility. The four cornerstones leave room for interpretation and an ethical response to concrete situations.

### *Narrative dimension*

Stories also have got an extremely important place for children's perceiving the differences. Stories enable children imaginatively to enter a social world shaped by values different to their own. The art of storytelling also manipulates time: not so much a way of reflecting as a way of taking it for granted (Ricoeur, 1981, 1988). A narrative initiation includes perceiving the world, sharing their cultural traditions, the shadows of life; at the same time to enjoy being a part of a group work which is creative and exciting. Furthermore, the reactions, questions coming from the children when teacher supported the stories with pictures, give us a clue for how they see the world. In addition, drama and role play are the activities which help them word that they feel they are in a warm, natural and safe atmosphere. A creative way of forming a critical sensitivity is to apply drama activities that include topics about equality and direct children to find out alternative and different conclusions (Verkest 2007).

Furthermore, stories provide an ideal way of planning and practising the aims of personal, social and emotional development of children that are planned to be personalized at early childhood.

## **The performance dimension with Persona Dolls**

### ***The founding Mothers***

Another practise that could help children know about the differences and enrich their lives in an intercultural perspective is working with Persona Dolls. The creator of Persona Dolls is Kay Taus who teaches in a pre-school in California. Taus, who did not have much material in his classroom. The group of children came from different cultures and ethnic groups. She made several dolls in order to make children initiate them the colourful composition of the group. She used the dolls to enrich the children with those differences and provide them to respect for each other. Those dolls were created and prepared so differently that they represented the children coming from different background and cultures. Taus designed clothes for the dolls and dressed them, and then she wrote stories about each doll and shared during several moments those stories with children.

It is the South African nursery teacher Babette Brown (2001) who introduces in after her political exile in England the Persona Dolls. Books, video, DVD's and games promote these days that the Persona Dolls are suitable to be used at the age 1.5 in early childhood education and provides an enjoyable and new view point for children to develop an identity and safety feelings, to cope with the biases in the society, to build relationships with other people based on empathy and respect.

Babette Brown (2001) supports the saying "people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel". So, who are those "different others"? The other who has got any mental or physical defectiveness, or has got some physiological diseases and has to live with it, who has got some psychological problems, visually-impaired ones, the ones coming from different cultures, the genius ones, the obese ones, the short ones, the ones that wear glasses, the ones that have a teething ring, the ones of a different colour and many others. She subscribes that the sense of identity is multiple since children belong to many groups, even if some groups are more important to them than others.

The preschool is the first group outside the family, in which each child has to take important positions and feel actively involved.

Persona Dolls is an application which aims children to express their emotions of being happy, angry or sad, to understand what other people feel, to respect for the people from different identities and characters; and used in several countries in the world like the USA, Australia, South Africa and England.

Pre-school teachers receive special methodology training, in the framework of which they become familiar with the theory and practice of Persona Dolls. Recently a special methodology book has been published under the title: *Citizenship for All: respect, rights, responsibility*.

### *General and specific features of Persona Dolls*

Persona Dolls encourage children to feel good about themselves and the culture they come from; and to respect for the other children coming from different cultures from theirs.

Working with Persona Dolls develops the sensitivity and understanding of children about the subjects like equality, justice etc. It also helps children have positive feelings about themselves developing a strong and positive identity.

Persona Dolls are very special dolls. These dolls have got their own characters, life stories, their preferences and aversions (see appendix 1). The hidden agenda is that the Persona Dolls represents the children who come from an ethnic group, a social class, a renewed family structure, a religious minorities or a disability. With Vanderbroeck (1999) we can say that today we are all immigrants, and each and everyone who works with children has to ask herself/himself, "how can we all adapt ourselves to the changes taking place all around us?"

### *The application*

In training sessions for Turkish trainee teachers and teachers Ebru Aktan Kerem and Isik Kamaraj worked out 5 stages in realising the application of Persona Dolls:

- 1) Introducing the Persona Doll to the class.
- 2) Telling about the features of the identity of the Doll.
- 3) Presenting a special event that the Doll has lived.
- 4) Discussion and closing the discussion.
- 5) Evaluation.

An important preparation step before the introduction of the story will be the observations of the children. The children need to be watched very carefully. Once the teacher creates the identity of a doll, it can be introduced to the group. The doll usually visit the class during circle time, free play time or the time of a group or individual work. Teachers confirmed that the children see the dolls immediately as their friends.

*Even though they knew that Peter was breathless, they cared about him when they took him into their arms. Although Peter was coming from a different culture, they easily accepted him. I think the role of having had children from different cultures in past years is very important in that. Children said that they wanted to draw pictures to make Peter happy and to prepare letters for him. (Teacher Duygu)*

Persona Dolls embedded in intercultural oriented stories can be used as a strong and useful tool against bias and discriminations and to create a comforting, warm and supportive climate.

*Peter is a German boy. Mother is a nurse working in the academic hospital. Father is a professor in the faculty of medicine  
He goes to a German school in Hamburg. In his class there are some Turkish boys and girls too.  
He learned from one of the Turkish boys some words like top, ip and at.  
He is alone at home. No brother and sisters. He likes football and playing with lego  
When his parents are absent he stayed with his grandparents. His grandfather picked him up from school.*

*So this year his father got a scholarship for the university in Canakkale and during the next holidays ( next week in Germany) he will come over with his family to be in contact with his new school ' Children's house. He will tell the children that he will miss his friends but that he is happy that he knows some Turkish expressions.  
After the visit he was very happy to in the children's house.  
He will miss his grandparents and his friends in Germany. The teacher was very nice and supported him.*

*His mother will take some extra holidays (3 month) to be with him during the second term.*

*But during their stay they hear the news that the grandmother had an accident and is in hospital.*

*The mother decided to go back to Germany and before Peter can start in the school in C. he leaves the city of Canakkale and goes back to Germany.*

*He wrote a small letter written by his mother to his friends in Canakkale to explain his situation...*

*Keywords: close relationship, sadness, emotions, suffering, to be guest, to be stranger, to trust, happiness, 'homeless'...*

The **stories** of Persona Dolls have got a plot like all stories; but they do not have a familiar ending. The applier draws a picture that Persona Doll wants to share a 'problematic' situation with them other than to present a scenario. Then it helps children during the process of understanding what Persona Doll feels, having sympathy and empathy with it, expressing what he / she thinks and solving problems.

While the story of a Persona Doll is being told, the children relate it to their own lives; develop a strong awareness about who they are, their identity, approach and where they come from.

The **role of the teacher** within that process is to prepare the performance. So the educator turns to the children with Persona Doll in his arms and says with an inviting voice that Peter has come to visit them to share their experiences. The role of the adult here is to be a facilitator, to simplify the situation. He needs to be sensitive, flexible, clear and creative to achieve that. The used words that are related to ethnic groups, races, cultures and physical discrimination carry a very critical importance. In this process, it is important to learn to make choices and to have a critical attitude. Educating young children needs that the teacher are going meta (Bruner, 1996); learning to take a meta-perspective. What would this demand in the work with our youngsters?

Regarding Persona Dolls, if the **children** play an active role during the narrative performance, that is, if they can express their feelings and opinions freely; then it means the aim is achieved.

**Teacher Duygu** – If you went to Germany due to your family's job, what would you feel about it?

**Oyku** – I would like to learn German from my parents.

**Janberk** – I would feel very good and make jokes.

**Teacher Duygu** - Peter said "I think my friends did not like me..." What would you like to say about it?  
**Group** – (saying) We loved Peter.  
**Teacher Duygu** – (asking again) What would you feel if you were the one having gone to Germany?  
**Sevval** – I would cry and miss Turkey so much.  
 (Children took Peter into their arms by turn and some of them expressed their feelings.)  
**Oyku** – (while giving Peter to Janberk) Do not hold him at his foot, you will hurt him.

The **open-ended questions** that the teacher asks lead children to express themselves comfortably while yes / no questions make the teacher feel strong. The discussion process in the end of the application is very important, especially to help children participate in the discussion actively and cope with their problems on their own. If the children are given a chance to speak about themselves and their families, they can have an opportunity to recognize the similarities and differences they have got. They will get informed by Persona Dolls about the concept of "difference".

Practises that are carried out in **small groups** are generally yield better results. Because the chance of being a part of a group is increased. With larger groups, children may be bored while waiting their friends to complete their words. For him applier it is a hard task following who has taken an active role and who has not.

After the story is told, the applier tries to remember who has given which response by revising the answers. A camera can also be used for the review. So, the teacher can review the responses that each child has given and see if he missed anything; he can also evaluate if he has shown interest in each child. In this situation the teacher become a practice –based researcher. The teacher needs to make an evaluation in the end of the application at any rate. Was the application carried out in accordance with the plan? Did something unexpected happen? Did the application satisfy your expectations? Those questions need to be answered anyhow.

In the **evaluation** with the children we used the 'presence' approach (Baart, 2001) that consists of 'one-to-one interviews. Through the children's eyes, feelings, words, thoughts, experiences and actions, all the imaginable and unimaginable ups and downs, joys and sorrows of the children involved in the application come flooding in. The following working principles underpin the presence practice: freeing yourself, opening up, getting involved, connecting, seeing things from someone else's perspective, making yourself available, controlling yourself, dedicating yourself (Baart, 2001).

The self-evaluation of the teachers was also an one-to-one interview based on these questions:

*Did you enjoy the Persona Doll session?*

*Did you like Persona Dolls?*

*In which cases/ situations would you like to use Persona Dolls in your group?*

*How did you feel while you are constructing his/her identity?*

*What are the obstacles/difficulties you might confront during the application?*

*Any questions, comments or ideas to share with us about Persona Dolls?*

That process can also be carried out with the participation of other colleagues and families. But to do that, Persona Dolls first need to be introduced to the parents and during a parental meeting the families need to be told how children benefit from those process.

### Conclusions

The application of Persona Dolls has got an extremely positive impact on the pre-school teachers' and child development specialists' to get a deeper understanding about biases, to have empathy with children and, to develop a personal sensitivity and change their approach, to express their feelings and opinions, to build up self-confidence... One participant in a workshop described the 'Persona Doll as 'a *silent citizen who gives children a voice*'.

If children comprehend that we are interested in what they do and say, they would feel more comfortable about searching and exploring the subjects. This way, it will be possible to build up trust between children and educators; everybody will feel being respected for his feeling and opinions. The aim here is to provide to have empathy by increasing the feeling of self-confidence and ego.

We should be aware as educators of early childhood that how children learn, how they are encouraged to learn is at least as important as what they learn. This principle should underlie all programmes that are prepared for children younger under the age of six. If it is started as quickly as possible, it will be more possible to create a society and a world with people who respect for differences, embrace differences, without biases and in peace and tolerance (Aktan Kerem, 2006).

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For more information about Persona Dolls

<http://www.persona-doll-training.org/pd/index.php>

• **Appendix: Create the context and the profile of your doll and a story with your Persona Doll . Integrate a problem, a situation linked with your practice.**

- Name:
- Gender
- Citizen:
- Country:
- Language:
- Family structure:
- Social Background ( refugee, immigrant, ...)
- Social class (lower, middle social class, ...)
- Member of.....
- Physical conditions
- Key - emotions
- Daily rituals
- Activities in leisure time
- Like/ dislike
- Food preference
- Values
- Virtues/ qualities

- Talents and gifts
- Problems with...
- Responsible for...
- Dreaming of...
- ,....