

Creating Harmonious Communities: Improving Young Children's Views of Other Groups: In-depth Report

A project funded by Harborne Parish Lands:

Project co-ordinators:

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Canterbury

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Information about the project

This project was collaboration between Race Equality Sandwell and the Psychology Department at the University of Kent. The project was unique in that it brought together academic and practical expertise, as it was a cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Belinda Blake works for Race Equality Sandwell as the Community Justice and Policy Manager. In this role Belinda has a special interest in working toward to the elimination of unlawful discrimination as well as promoting good relations between persons and communities of different racial groups that will have a lasting effect for future generations.
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Dr Lindsey Cameron has been conducting research examining ethnic identity and ethnic attitudes in children for 9 years. During this time she has worked on numerous projects examining ethnic and national identity and well-being in children, developing materials to change children's views of stigmatized groups. Lindsey has also worked as a consultant with the BBC for TV programme 'Child of Our Time'.
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Overall aim of the project: To develop effective classroom materials that can be used with nursery school children to promote positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups and help to create more harmonious communities.

Project background: Why did Sandwell need this project?

Summary of background:

- Evidence that children prefer their own ethnic group from a young age (3 years and up, Rutland et al., 2005): need to tackle young children's views of other ethnic groups
- Teachers now have a Duty to promote community cohesion and promote positive views of other ethnic groups.
- Teachers report lack of confidence in dealing with diversity issues and lack the training opportunities to improve in this area (Diversity & Citizenship Review, DCFS, 2007).
- Need to evaluate techniques continually to develop effective tools (Diversity & Citizenship Review, DCFS, 2007). This involves piloting and evaluating materials before rolling out to other settings.

Project background: Why is it important to tackle young children's views of other ethnic groups?

- **Evidence that racial bias can exist in children as young as three years old.** Research suggests that children as young as three years old show a preference for their own ethnic group over others, and hold more positive views of people belonging to their own group and more negative views of people belonging to other ethnic groups.
- **Inter-ethnic attitudes influence children's behaviour towards members of other groups.** Psychological research suggests children's attitudes towards other ethnic groups influence their behaviour, in terms of playmate preference and friendships.
- **Important to tackle these attitudes in both diverse and mono-cultural settings.** Our research suggests that negative inter-ethnic attitudes can occur in diverse communities, as well as in areas where there is little contact between different ethnic groups, i.e. mono-cultural communities (Rutland, et al., 2005). This suggests that children can hold negative views of other ethnic groups even when they are in mono-cultural communities and they have never met anyone from that ethnic group. Therefore, it is important to tackle the issue of negative inter-ethnic attitudes in both diverse and mono-cultural societies.
- **Children's inter-ethnic attitudes predict later behaviours in adulthood.** Research suggests that children's views of other ethnic groups are associated with their inter-ethnic attitudes and behaviours in adulthood, for instance their willingness to work with and live next door to members of other ethnic groups.
- **Easier to change inter-ethnic attitudes in young children, than older children and adults.** Research suggests that younger children's views of other ethnic groups are more malleable, that is they are more easily influenced and changed.

The connection between children's views and their later attitudes in adult life, and also the ease with which young children's attitudes can be changed suggests that one way in which we can create more harmonious communities, with more positive inter-ethnic attitudes, is by tackling racist bias in young children.

Project background: Schools role in creating harmonious communities

The Education and Inspections Act (2006) means that schools now have a statutory duty of care to promote community cohesion. However, the recent Curriculum Review of Diversity & Citizenship (2007) concluded that:

- there is wide variation in the quality and quantity of diversity education across schools
- some teachers lack confidence in engaging with diversity issues (e.g. issues concerning ethnicity and religion, discrimination, respect)
- both multi-ethnic and mainly white schools could benefit from greater support and training in dealing with diversity issues

Teachers are keen to deliver multicultural or 'global education' but we need to develop materials and provide training for nurseries so that they are better equipped to do this. This will allow schools to meet the new Duty and promote positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups, helping to create harmonious community relations.

Project background: Need for evaluation and development

- The DCFS ‘Diversity & Citizenship’ review concluded that education around diversity issues should be evaluated in every school in order to identify the particular training and curriculum needs of individual schools.
- They point to the need to evaluating techniques to determine if they are effective and how they can be improved.
- Prejudice-reduction techniques that are based on Psychological theory are more successful (Paluck, 2008).
- Social sciences can also contribute to the development of classroom-based ‘global education’ materials by helping to execute evaluations that lead to findings that are reliable and useful.
- This evaluation could take the form of a pilot study where a small number of schools participate in the first instance, and the materials can be evaluated in that setting before rolling out to more settings.
- The evaluation will highlight any changes needed in the technique in order for it to be as effective as possible.
- This will be cost-efficient as it will ensure a technique is effective before preparing materials. The evaluation findings can also be used to convince more reticent teachers to use the technique.

Need to evaluate classroom materials to ensure that they having desired effect and to improve the materials for optimal effectiveness. Social science can help develop materials and run evaluations that yield reliable and useful findings.

Summary of classroom techniques introduced

Persona dolls:

Background:

Persona dolls are child-sized dolls from a variety of different backgrounds and, as you can see from the picture below, include children from Black, Asian and mixed parentage families, but also include children from Traveller, or refugee families or with families in which adults or children are disabled. Persona Dolls are given their own names, age, family (e.g. brothers, sisters), homes, friends, pets, likes and dislikes and customs. This information forms the 'persona' of the 'persona doll'.



The premise of the persona dolls is that it is particularly difficult for nursery teachers in low-diversity settings to teach children about equality, prejudice and stereotyping. Persona dolls enable nurseries to challenge racism and stereotypes, and deal with diversity and equality issues even if children have no opportunity for contact with that particular group e.g. Black children, Traveller families, refugee families.

Interacting with persona dolls from different backgrounds is thought to help teachers **address diversity and equality issues:**

- To deal with prejudice and discrimination
- Dismantle negative attitudes and promote equality
- promote respect for people from different backgrounds and
- encourage children to challenge discrimination and unfairness

Persona dolls are also a mechanism for addressing **more general issues** facing children in this age groups;

- empathy,
- listening and turn-taking
- communication,
- understanding of emotions,
- major events such as a new addition to the family or transition to Primary School
- teasing/excluding children in the nursery
- promote pro-social behaviours such as sharing

(see www.wedg.co.uk and www.persona-doll-traing.org)

How are the dolls used?

The WEDG (World Education Development Group), with whom Dr Cameron also collaborates, has developed a training manual for teachers to help them use the Persona dolls effectively. This can be accessed at : <http://www.wedg.org.uk/documents/handbook.pdf>

According to this handbook, the doll should be treated as though they are a ‘real’ child. The doll should be used infrequently and come out on special occasions only. They should not be treated like another toy. The handbook outlines the different ways in which the doll could be used, and the elements of the curriculum that are addressed through this activity:

1. Introducing the doll and the persona, build up a positive picture of the doll’s family, home life, likes, dislikes etc. Keep it positive, informative and enjoyable.

EXAMPLE		
<u>What elements of the curriculum is targeted</u>	<u>Classroom activity</u>	<u>How the children responded</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of others in relation to self • Listening to others 	Practitioner relates details about doll’s home life and a visit she made to a theme park	Children remember all the details they are told about doll and relate it to their own experiences

2. Promoting pro-social behaviour and interaction. Use the doll to introduce a topic, provide example/role model of pro-social behaviour.

EXAMPLE		
<u>What elements of the curriculum is targeted</u>	<u>Classroom activity</u>	<u>How the children responded</u>
Sharing	Eddie, a traveller doll, has pictures in a bag of things he likes to do, many of which involve sharing, which he shares with the group	Children discussed what they liked to do and make connection between playing and sharing. Some verbalised the difficulty of learning to share when they come to school

3. Develop empathy and social interactions, deal with real-life experiences of children in the nursery using the dolls.

EXAMPLE				
<u>What elements of the curriculum is targeted</u>	<u>Real situation</u>	<u>Parallel scenario</u>	<u>How the children responded</u>	<u>Resulting behaviour</u>
Empathising and responding to the needs of others	2 new children entering class half way through the year	Change gender and make it the persona doll entering a Beavers group	Children had good ideas about how Eddie would feel (both positive and negative feelings)	Improved social interaction amongst children around issues raised through Eddie

Why use the dolls in Sandwell?

It was expected that the dolls would be useful in Sandwell, where in some areas there is limited opportunity to interact with children from other ethnic groups (e.g. Black, Chinese). The host nursery, like many nurseries in Smethwick, is attended mainly by Asian children, with small numbers of other ethnic groups. It was expected that the persona dolls would expose children to children different backgrounds to their own.

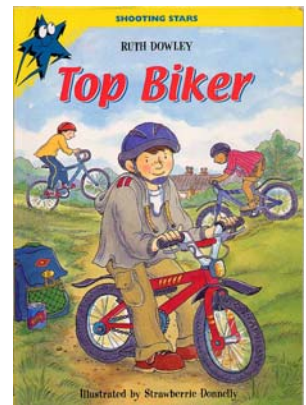
'Big Picture story-building'©

Background:

Research in psychology has shown that children who have meaningful interactions with children from backgrounds different to their own are more positive towards, for instance, children from other ethnic backgrounds.

However, in some contexts it is not possible to have meaningful interactions with children from different backgrounds.

Research has shown that when children read stories that feature friendships between a child from the same ethnic background as them, and a child from a different background (e.g. refugee, disabled) this makes children more positive towards that group e.g. breaks down stereotype, playmate preference.



We adapted the above technique for young children by moving away from story reading, and focussing on 'story building'. Children are encouraged to 'build their own story' using pictures. The stories feature photos of the children themselves, their classmates and unknown children from different backgrounds. The stories are about a friendship between children from different backgrounds. The use of pictures avoids problems with reading ability and attention span and engages the children in the activity. Children are provided with a number of options for each of the elements of the story: e.g. pictures of different children, different activities, different setting, different props, different adult characters. The nursery teacher works with the children in small groups to build the story.

'Big Picture story-building'© gets children to create their own stories/pictures in different locations e.g. park, home corner, shops, birthday party. The stories also feature photos of the children themselves, their classmates, and unknown children from other backgrounds.

Potential effects of the technique

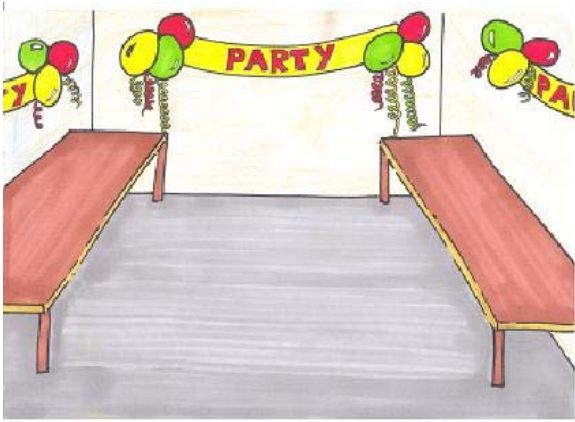
- Promote more positive views of children from different backgrounds
- Break down stereotypes
- Promote pro-social behaviours

- Promote friendships within the setting
- Develop language and communication
- Develop listening and turn-taking skills
- Increase confidence, as children contribute their own ideas to the story

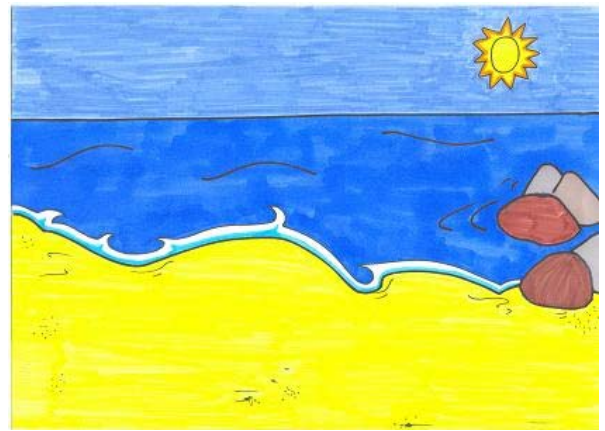
This technique is original, and has not been used in nurseries before. This project is the first to introduce this technique in a nursery and evaluate it, therefore the findings of the evaluation aspect of this report have important practical implications.

Examples of materials:©

There were 7 possible locations for the story:



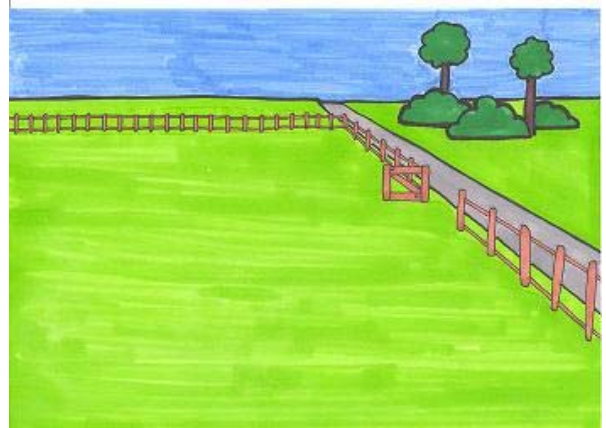
“Birthday party”



“the beach”



“the nursery”



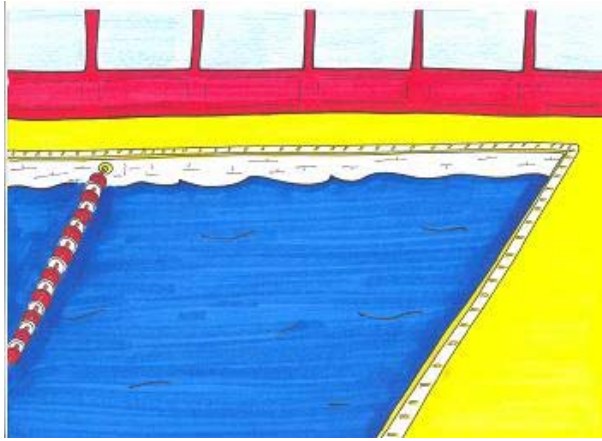
“the park”



“the pond”



“the highstreet”



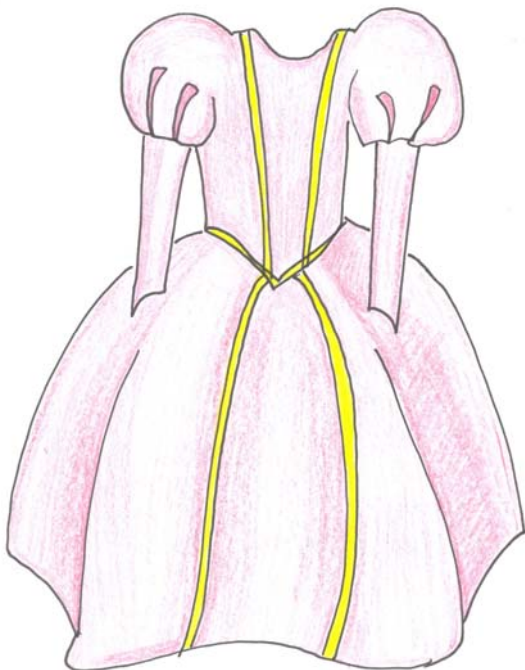
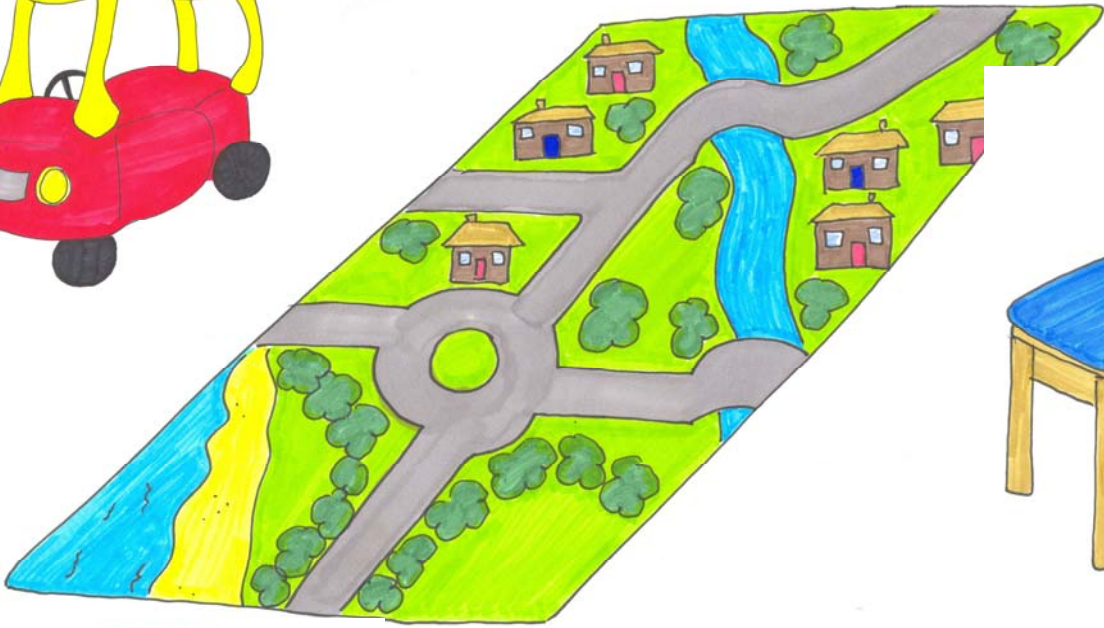
“swimming pool”

Children were provided with A0 sized laminated backgrounds with the above images. They were then given other pictures or ‘props’ to add into the picture, and photos of themselves, their classmates and other unknown children that they could add in too.

Examples of other pictures:

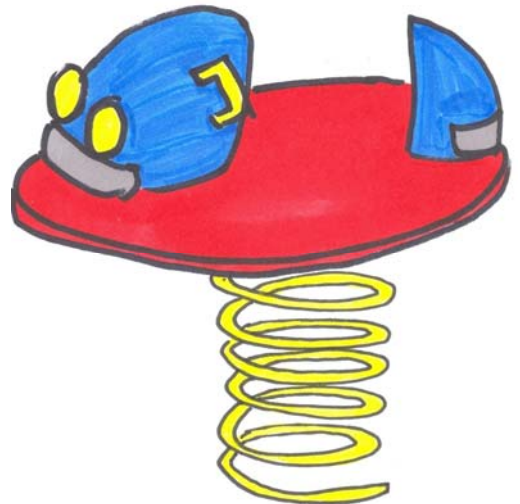
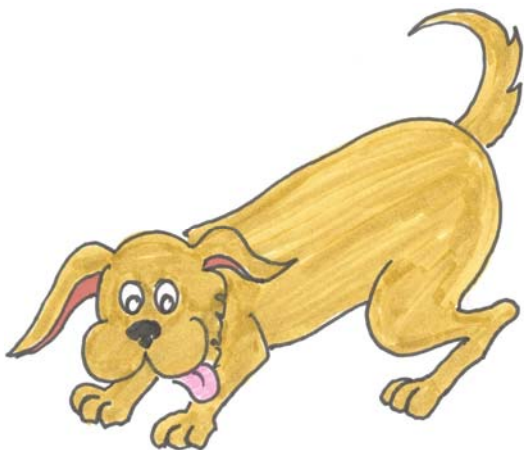
Indoor play:

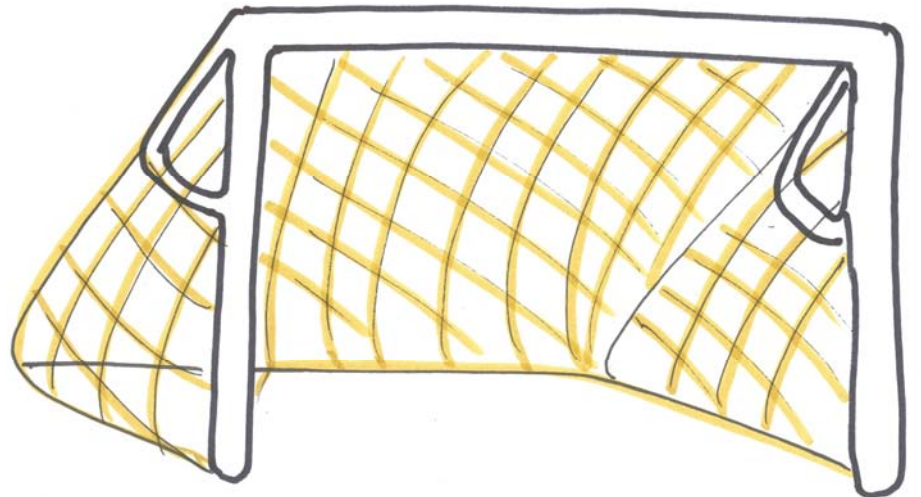
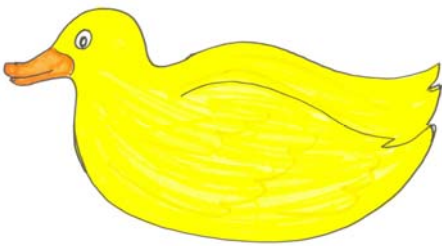
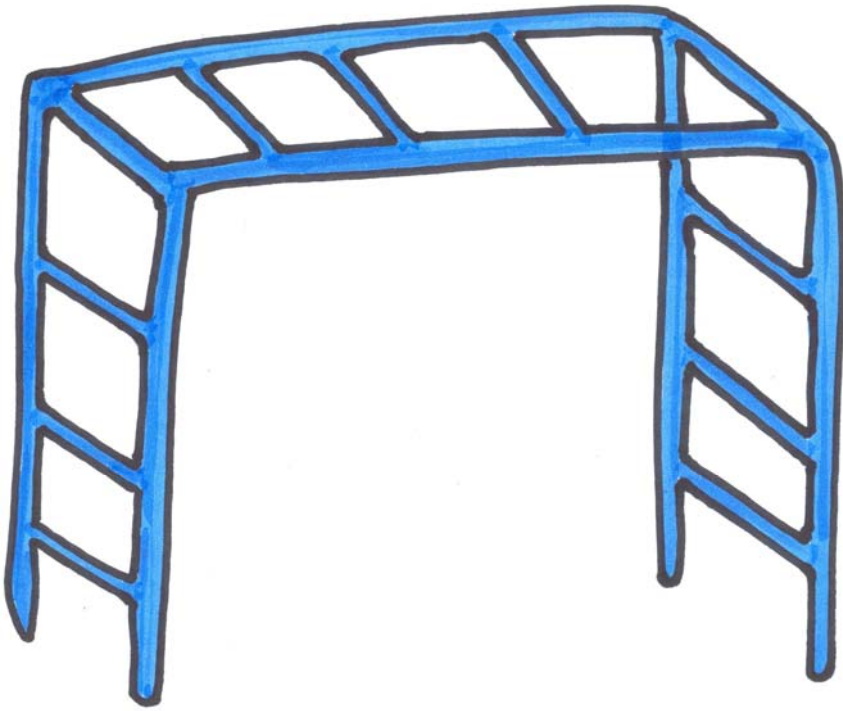


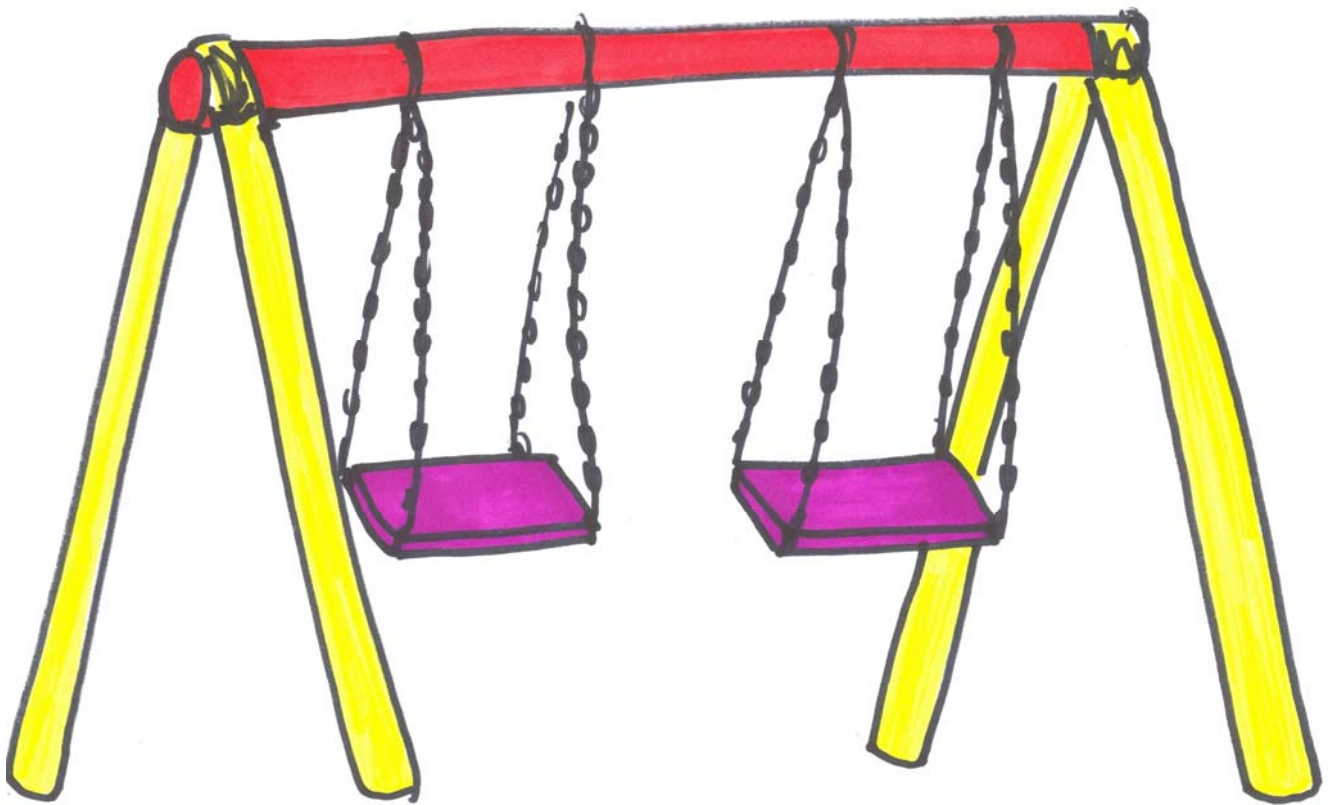
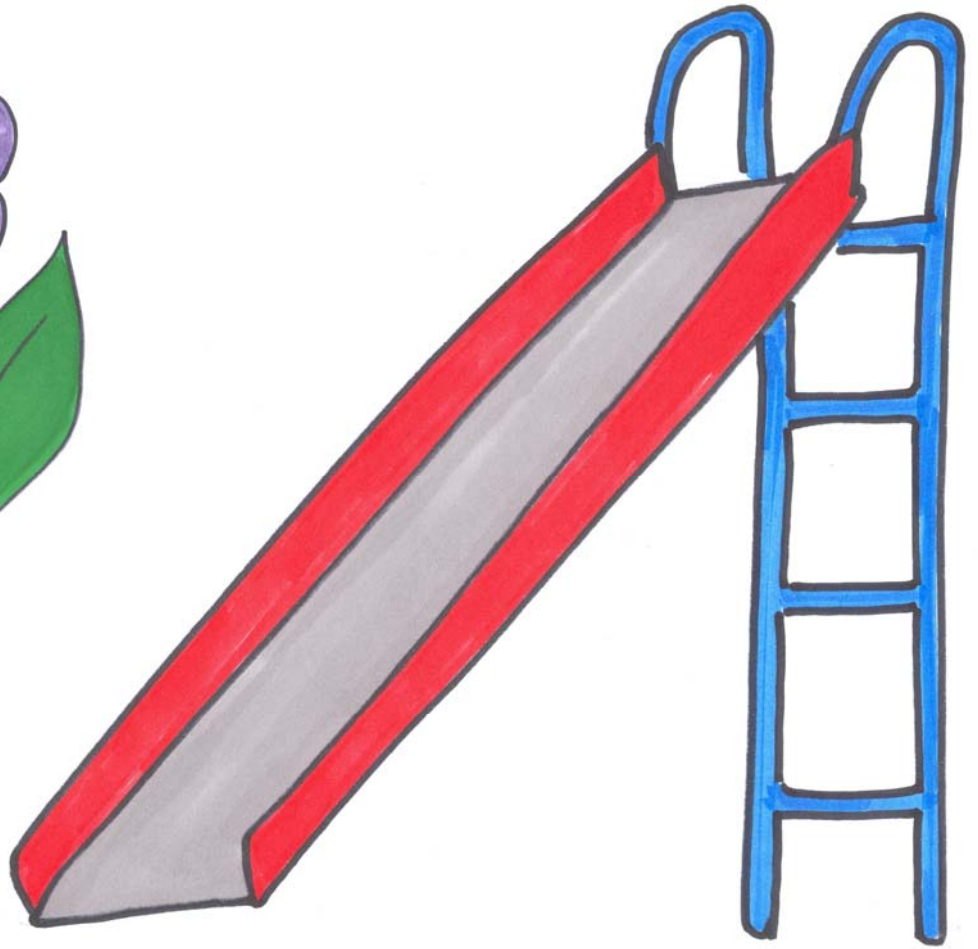




Outdoor scenes







Pictures created using these techniques

Unfortunately it was not possible to get photos of the pictures created by the children in the host nursery, but to give you an idea of the technique, and the pictures that are created, below are some examples of pictures created by children at other schools using a similar technique.



Evaluation: Interviews with children

Interview questions:

Children were interviewed:

- Pre-intervention: at Time 1, before the materials were introduced in the nursery (this provides a baseline of attitudes)
- Post-intervention, at Time 2, a year after the materials have been introduced
- different children interviewed at each time point, creating a snapshot of views and behaviours in the nursery pre- and post-intervention
- comparing responses in the interviews pre- and post-intervention allow us to detect any change in attitudes that could be a result of the materials

Interviews consisted of measures of:

- self-esteem
- perceptions of children from different ethnic backgrounds
- pro-social behaviour towards children from different ethnic backgrounds
- preferences about teacher ethnicity

Child interview questions

Self-esteem:

Children were given a series of pictures to measure their self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured by asking children whether they thought they could 1) tie their own shoe laces and 2) complete a puzzle. This was done by showing children two pictures: a child tying their shoelaces, or not, and a child completing a puzzle, or not. The child then chose the picture that matched up with what they are like. Social self-esteem was also measured by showing children two pictures: a child on swings with other children, or a child on swings on their own.

Responses on these questions indicate levels of self-esteem.



Perception of children from different ethnic backgrounds:

Children were presented with photographs of four children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Girls were shown pictures of girls, and boys were shown pictures of boys.



They were then asked if any of the children would be:

- happy
- good
- bad
- clever
- silly
- sad

The traits were defined and examples given to ensure comprehension. Children could assign the adjective to as many of the four children as they liked, or could assign the traits to none of them.

Pro-social behaviour towards children from different ethnic backgrounds:

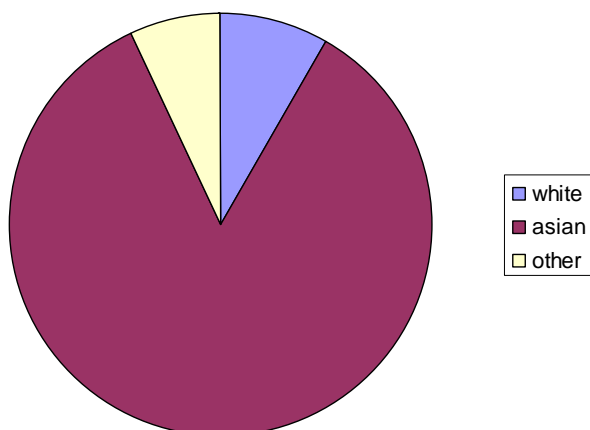
Using the same photos as above, children were asked which of the children in the photos they would like to:

- play with
- share toys with
- sit next to at snack time

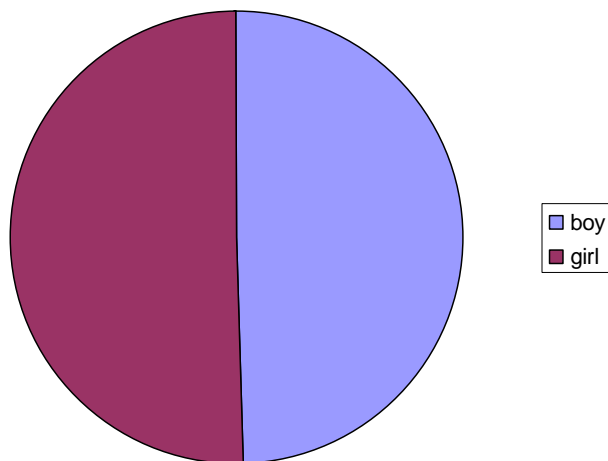
Who completed the evaluation?

These were **64 children** aged 3 and 4 years who attended the host nursery nursery. These children were from a range of ethnic backgrounds. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls.

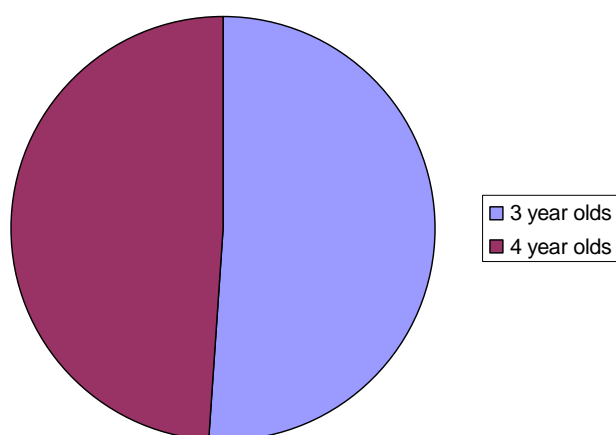
Ethnic break-down of children who took part in evaluation:



Gender break-down of children who took part in the evaluation:



Age break-down of children who took part in the evaluation:



Child interview findings

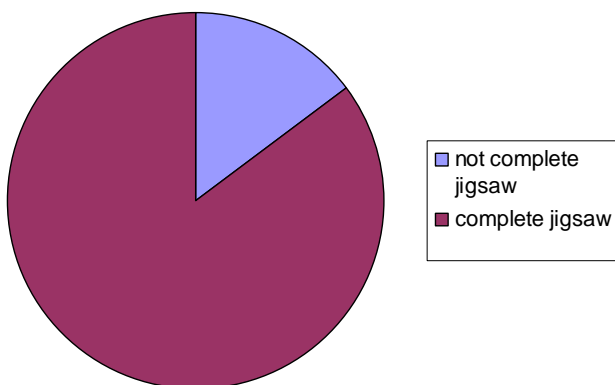
Pre-intervention (baseline) interview responses:

Here we examine children's self-esteem, views and behaviours pre-intervention, before the materials were introduced.

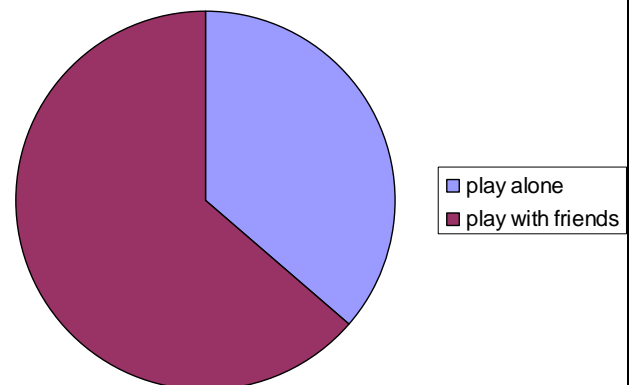
Self-esteem:

Children reported to have very high self-esteem. Over $\frac{3}{4}$ said they would complete the jigsaw, would be able to tie their shoelaces and would be playing on the swings with friends.

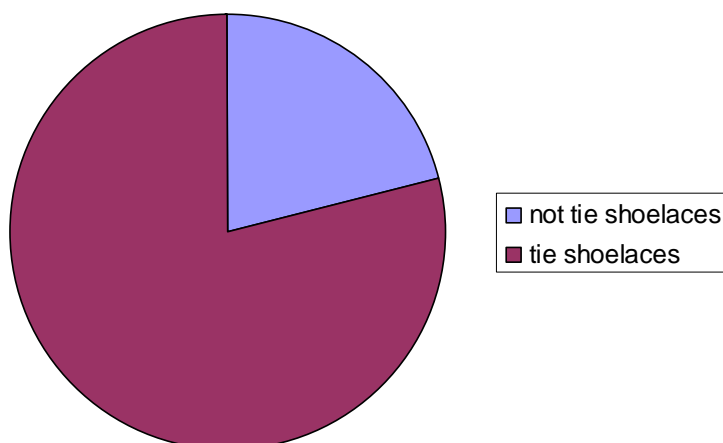
Complete jigsaw:



Play on swings:



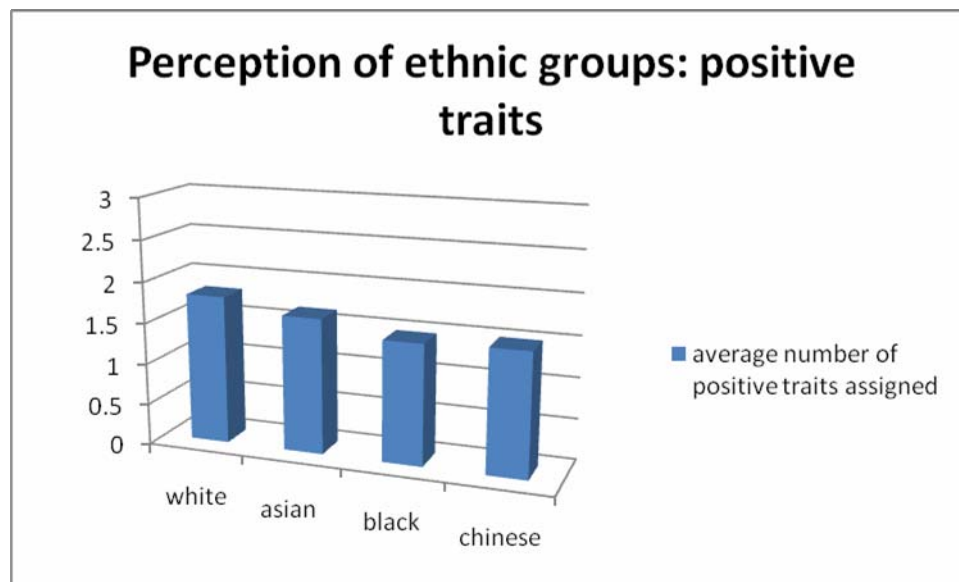
Tie shoelaces:



Perceptions of children from different ethnic backgrounds:

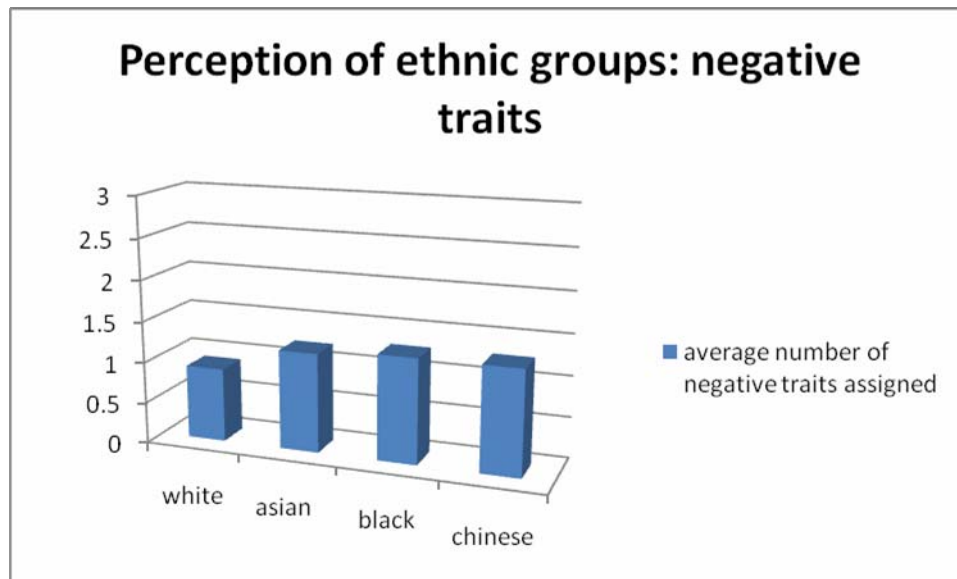
Positive perceptions: Children held relatively positive views of all the ethnic backgrounds represented in the photos: they were more likely to assign positive adjectives such as happy, than negative adjectives like sad and bad.

Children were more likely to assign positive traits to the White and Asian children, than Chinese or Black child. This suggests children had a more positive view of White and Asian children than children from Black and Chinese ethnic backgrounds.



Negative perceptions: Children were very reluctant to assign negative traits to any of the children in the photos, and the average number of negative traits assigned for every ethnic group was very low. This indicates that children had very low negative perceptions of children from other ethnic groups.

Children were more likely to assign negative adjectives to Black and Chinese children. They were less likely to assign negative adjectives to Asian or White children. This suggests that of the ethnic groups represented, children were most negative, and least positive about children from Chinese and Black ethnic backgrounds.



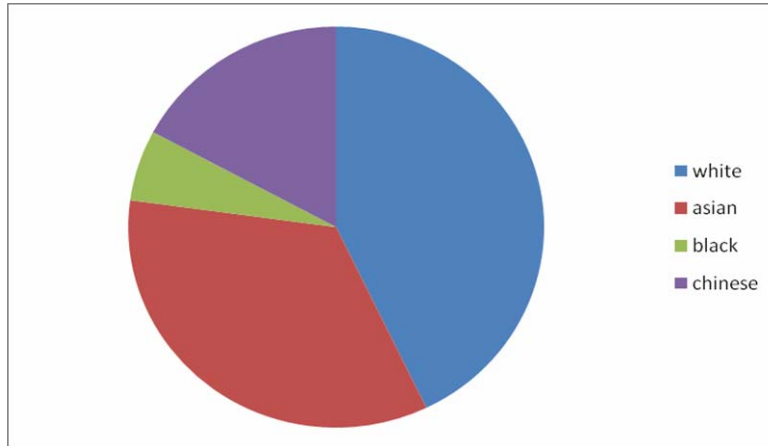
What does this mean?

Children had the most favourable perceptions of children from Asian or White ethnic backgrounds, and were less favourable in their views of Chinese and Black children.

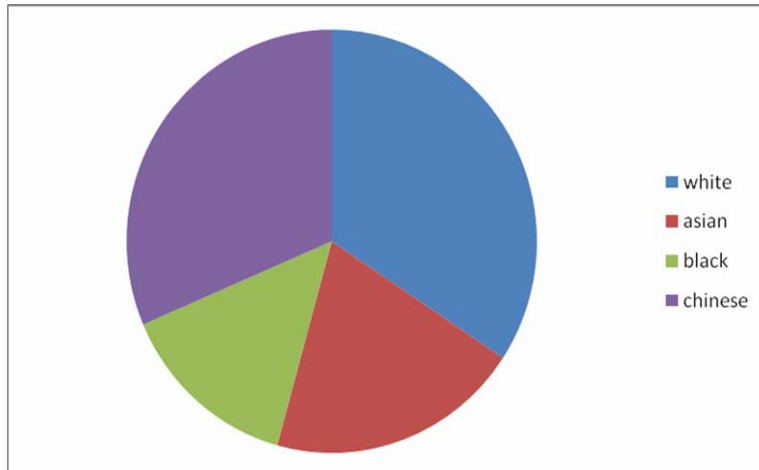
Pro-social behaviour towards children from different ethnic backgrounds:

As with the perception indicator, children's preference for who they want to interact with, their pro-social behaviours, appear to depend on ethnic background to some extent. Children were more likely to want to play with and share their toys with children from Asian or White ethnic backgrounds, but interestingly they have no preference regarding who they will sit next to at lunchtime. Their responses were as follows:

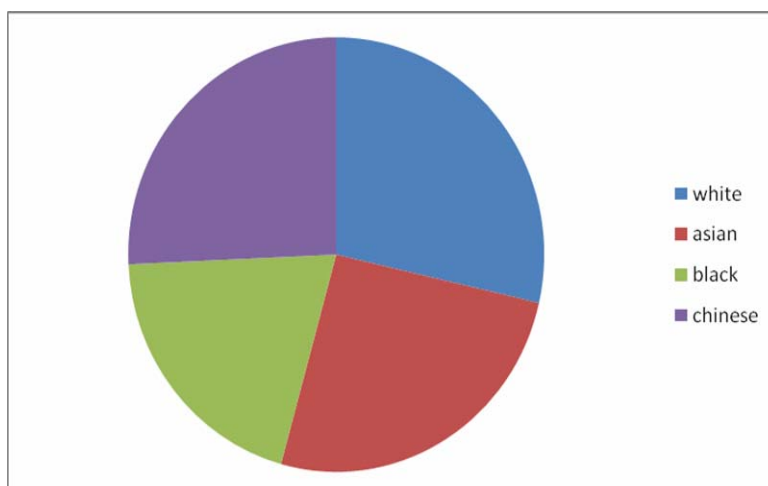
Which child would you like to play with?



Which child would you like to share your toys with?



Who would you like to sit next to at snack time?



What does this mean?

Overall, children were most likely to want to interact with children from Asian and White ethnic backgrounds, and were less likely to select the Black or Chinese child to interact with. This is the same pattern of responses as was found in the measure of ‘perceptions of children from different ethnic backgrounds’.

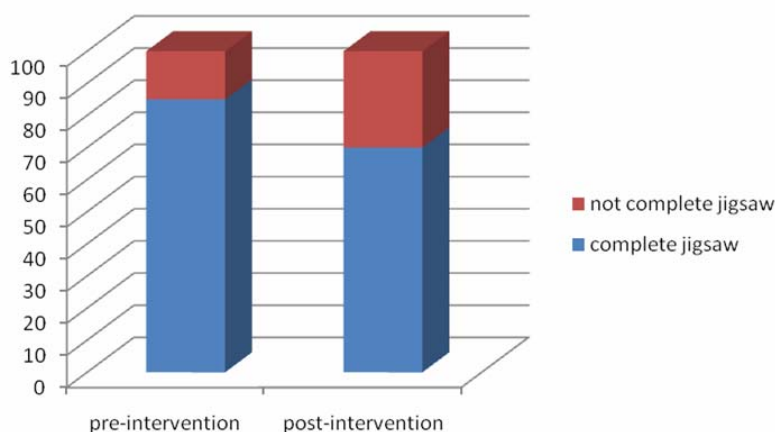
The effect of the persona doll and story-building technique

In order to test the effect of introducing the materials in the nursery, a statistics package was used to compare scores on measures of self-esteem, and views of other groups at Time 1 (pre-intervention) and Time 2 (post-intervention). This would give an indication of the difference made by the new techniques introduced in the setting and tell us whether it changed children’s minds about children from other ethnic backgrounds. Statistical analysis allows us to check whether, statistically speaking, the difference between children’s pre-intervention and post-intervention responses is greater than what we would expect by chance i.e. there whether there is an actual difference in responses as a result of the intervention. Use of the statistics package allows us to make reliable conclusions about the data that we can be confident in.

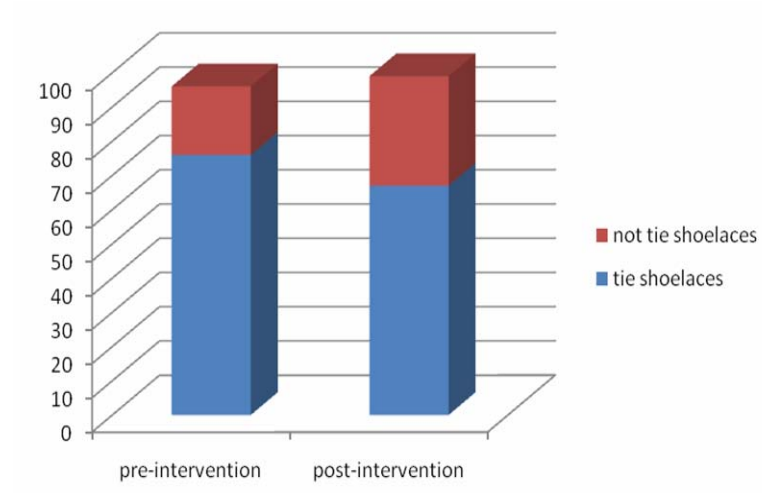
The effect of story-building and persona dolls on self-esteem:

There was no difference in children’s pre-intervention and post-intervention. This means the materials did not increase self-esteem. Self-esteem levels were already very high at Time 1 and the materials maintain the levels of self-esteem in children.

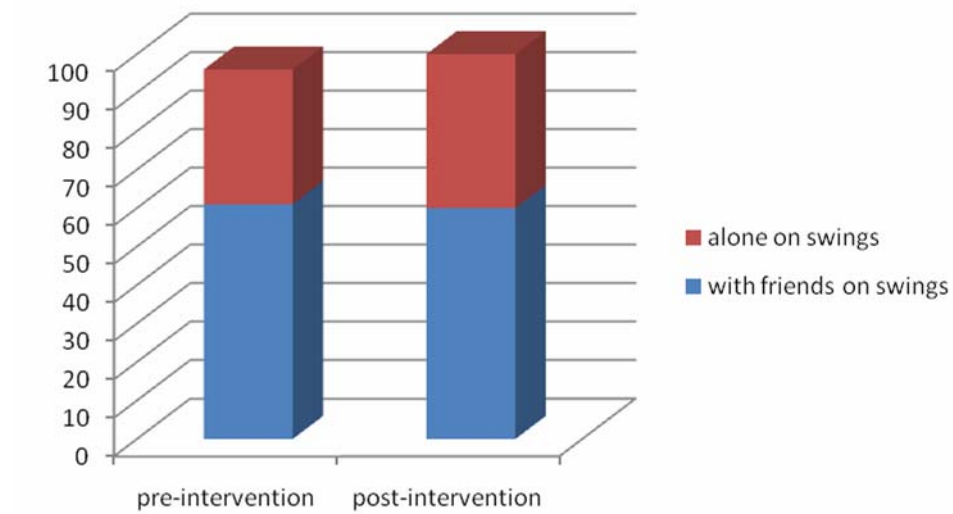
No significant effect of the new techniques on confidence in completing jigsaw.



No significant effect of the new techniques on confidence in tying shoes.

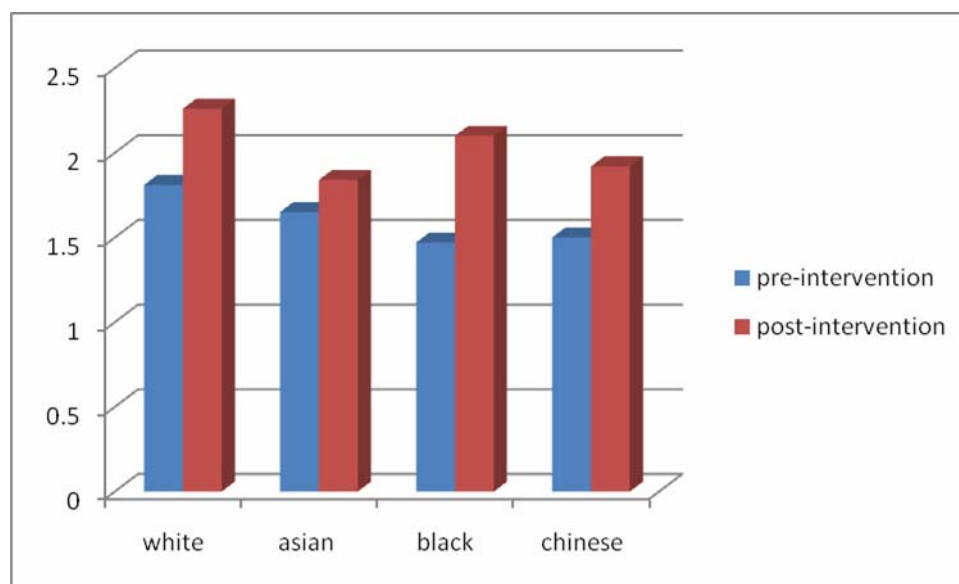


No significant effect of the new techniques on playing with friends on swings.

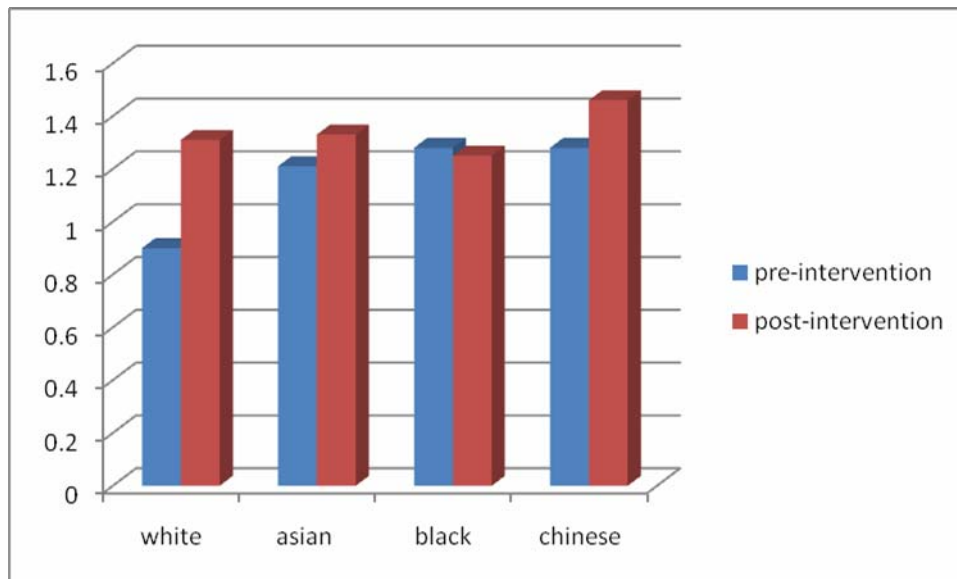


The effect of story-building and persona dolls on perception of other ethnic groups

Positive perception: **The new materials had a significant effect on children's positive perception of children from different ethnic backgrounds.** Children were significantly more likely to assign positive adjectives to children from White, Black and Chinese ethnic backgrounds following the introduction of the materials in the nursery. There was no change in the assignment of positive traits to Asian children.



Negative perception: The materials had no effect on children's negative perception of children from different ethnic backgrounds, but few children assigned negative traits at Time 1 therefore it is less likely that this would change.



What does this mean?

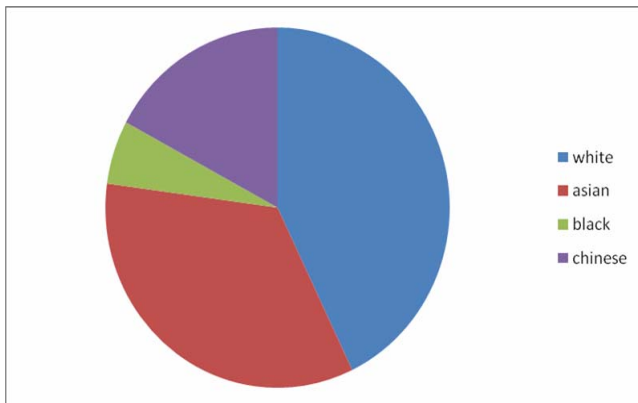
Following the intervention, children held significantly more positive views of children from Black, Chinese and White ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the children participating in the evaluation were Asian.

Effect of story-building and persona doll training on children’s pro-social behaviours towards children from different ethnic backgrounds

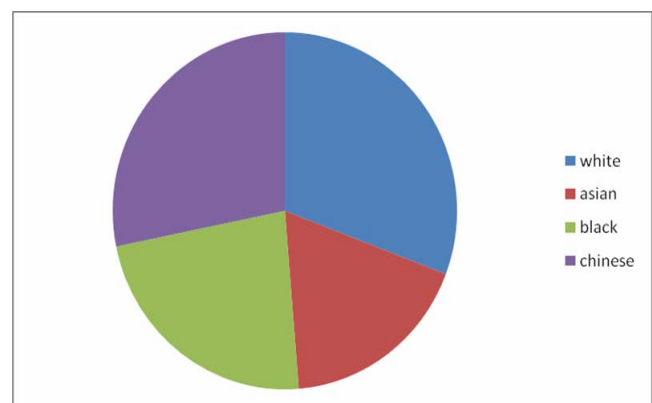
There were no significant changes in children’s pro-social behaviours towards White, Asian and Chinese children, but there were significant improvements in children’s pro-social behaviours towards Black children. Compared with pre-intervention responses, in the post-intervention children were significantly more likely to choose the Black child to play with.

Who would you like to play with?

Pre-intervention



Post-intervention



What does this mean?

Children's pro-social attitudes towards the Black child improved, however responses on other indicators of behaviour towards children from other ethnic backgrounds did not change as a result of the intervention.

This is consistent with psychological research which has shown that it is harder to change behaviours, as opposed to attitudes.

However the findings suggest the intervention is changing some behaviour. This is encouraging as it suggests the persona dolls and story building are having an effect of behaviours, which are more difficult to change.

Evaluation: Nursery staff interviews

Two members of staff at the host nursery were interviewed one year after the materials were introduced to get their insights about the persona dolls and the story-building activity. The interviews focused on the following:

- general opinion of the techniques
- benefits of training
- how the techniques were embedded in the setting
- how often they were used
- what issues were the materials used to address?
- the way in which the techniques were used by the nursery staff
- children's reaction to the dolls and story-building activity
- the effect of the materials on children: were there any benefits?
- which technique was preferable?
- possible pitfalls in using these materials
- ideas for the future

The staff at the host nursery were very enthusiastic, highly motivated and creative, and their efforts ensured this project was successful. The following are a summary of their experiences in using the dolls and the story-building materials in their nursery.

General opinion of the techniques

The nursery was generally very positive about the persona dolls and the story-building materials. They thought both techniques were very versatile and can be used help children develop in a number of ways. The techniques cover a number of learning outcomes. The nursery staff said the dolls could be used “for absolutely everything”. And the story-building technique was “absolutely brilliant”.

Benefits of training

Persona dolls:

The majority of the nursery staff attended professional training on using the persona dolls. Staff were happy with the training and thought it was very useful, in terms of increasing knowledge, providing ideas on how to use the dolls, giving them an opportunity to practice using the dolls and increasing confidence in the technique.

“[the training consisted of] just telling us how to use [the dolls] and giving us techniques on how to use them, and just practising with them really; and feeling comfortable with them.”

“The training was good, yeah. It gave you an insight on how to use them [the dolls] effectively for the children. So yes, she answered all our questions that we had.”

Story-building:

The staff were given brief training on using the story-building technique by Dr Cameron. The nursery then adapted the technique to suit their needs in their setting, and to use it in the way that was most beneficial to them and their children.

How the techniques were embedded in the setting

It was a while before both techniques were introduced into the setting, as the staff had to consider how they could be used to help them achieve

their learning outcomes. It took longer for the dolls to be introduced into the setting, but the pictures seemed to be easier to adapt to the setting.

“at first we thought, you know, we’d got the tools, and you didn’t use them [the dolls] to the best of our ability to begin withThen I started to think more about the curriculum and the planning and took a closer look and then we adapted how we use them for us”

To start with, the pictures were laid out for the children to play with and interact with, and then the staff could observe how the children used them. The nursery staff then thought about how the activity could be used in a more focussed way. This was an effective approach and meant that the activity could be adapted to suit the needs of the nursery. It also increased the nurseries sense of ownership over the activity and made ensured it was fit-for-purpose.

“we did start very, very simple, in fact we used to have them up here, just on the table and we put whatever out um, they’d always go for the pictures of themselves; pictures of the children, pictures of the children they think they know. Then we would start looking at that and sort of, just talk to them generally about it and then it would start making the bigger picture into a sort of scenario or something and that’s when we decided then to maybe use it more as an actual focus, as a communication and language focus really.”

The nursery is in the early stages of adapting the persona dolls for use in their nursery: this technique was more difficult to adapt to the nurseries needs. However, the nursery was confident that they would be able to do this, given time:

“I think they could be even more of a useful tool to us. I think we’ve just got to adapt them a little bit more”

More generally staff appreciated having the additional materials and techniques being made available to them, as often they have to cover a certain area, and need stimuli in order to deliver that lesson. Having the story-building and persona dolls in the setting means this is an additional tool to use to deliver high-quality nursery education.

“Because so often it can be ‘what shall we do, what shall we do?’ This gives us something, even sometimes if you think you know, you’ve got your planning and your planning isn’t quite, isn’t something you can fall back on as well, there’s something there that you can always use.”

How often the techniques were used

The dolls were used occasionally, whilst the story-building technique was used every week.

What issues were the materials are used to address?

Persona doll:

The dolls were used to encourage empathy, understanding of feelings and emotions, and to promote pro-social behaviours.

“we bring them out to use them as an example. Like, if there’s negative behaviour in the setting and we needed to use the doll, the children are aware of the dolls, and we’ll make-believe a scenario that’s happened and how it’s upset this doll.”

“Yeah it can be anything: hitting, bullying, fighting; you know - if the little girl or the little boy’s gone home upset. We emphasise this doll’s feelings and what impact the children have had to this little girl, for being negative towards them [the doll].”

The dolls were used mainly to promote pro-social behaviours. The dolls could be referred to when subsequent incidents of anti-social behaviours arose, such as fighting. Nursery staff would use the dolls to evoke empathy in understanding when such incidents arose:

“We tend to use it more to promote positive behaviour....So we might have an instance where this little girl’s not happy...and you know [we ask the children], ‘What do you think could make her happy?’ And then later on in the session or 2 or 3 days later an incident occurs where there’s been a bit of fighting, we could say ‘Do you remember so and so? Oh do you remember how sad she was when that happened to her? What do you think A’s going to feel like now?’”

The dolls were also used to deal with major events in young children’s lives that they may feel anxious about, such as the transition from nursery to Primary school, or a new addition to the family.

“We used the little girl last time when we started the children going into new settings? Going into mainstream school? We’ve done a scenario about a little girl and her anxieties and excitement and things like that. So, we’ve got, I think we’ve got one in uniform, or two in uniform, and then 2 other dolls.”

The dolls were used both reactively and proactively: nursery staff used the dolls reactively to deal with situations as they arose in the setting, but were also used in a proactive way to address issues/events that children will face in the future e.g. transition.

More generally, the doll is used for social, emotional and language development:

Story-building:

This technique was used to promote communication, increase vocabulary, promote understanding of emotions, learning about the world around them, encourage children to use their imaginations, and also to encourage pro-social behaviours such as listening, turn-taking and sharing.

“and there’re some children who’ve never been to the seaside you know, you’ve got to try and get that imagination. And by using pictures it’s giving the children pictures to see in their mind rather than them just saying ‘sea’ and things like that. And then we discuss *all* what the children’s done, all their experiences, and we bring it all in.”

The way in which the techniques are used by the nursery staff

Persona dolls:

Staff tended to keep the dolls in the office, out of sight of children, and as recommended they used the dolls infrequently, only to address specific topics, and they were not left in the setting for children to play with. This kept the dolls in good condition, but also meant that when the doll was used, it was a ‘special’ activity.

Staff at the nursery outlined an example of how they would use the persona doll to discuss feelings about transition to primary school:

“One of us, we would plan the background of the doll, so...we are ready to answer questions...for instance again, going to school. We knew it was an area that children was moving on to, some children have got anxieties about it, some children are excited...what we do, we bring this doll in, we introduce the doll, tell them a little bit about their background, siblings, mum and dad and so on, and then we [tell children] that they’re going to school, and how do you think she might be feeling? We’d get all the feelings back [from the children], and it is often how all the children are feeling, or how the children think some people may be feeling. And then we talk about school, what they need for school, like the uniform they wear, about making new friends if she’s [the persona doll is] a little bit frightened what can she do? What

happens if someone's not kind to her? And we get all this information....we get negative as well as positive information off the children and we try to turn it around so it's all positive what they [the children] get back."

Staff generally used the doll in pairs, so that one operated the doll, or 'talked' for the doll, whilst another member of staff sat with the children and prompted and fed questions in. This was useful as meant the discussion was kept lively, maintained children's interests and the activity could be sustained over longer periods of time.

The dolls were incorporated into circle time and used with the whole nursery session at the same time.

"The one that we use the most is Lucy because she's got her school uniform on and they really identify with that, she goes to Devonshire school, but they haven't seen her there they say! I'll say, silly things like 'Oh Lucy's going home for her dinner now, Lucy what are you having for dinner? Shall we ask the children to guess what you're having for dinner?' You know it's just a way of getting the circle time to be a bit more interesting really."

The dolls were not used to deliver global education when teaching children about religious festivals or customs. This is because the nursery uses other techniques to teach this. However, the staff did believe the dolls could be used to teach these subjects:

Story-building

The nursery worked hard to develop their own way of using the technique that was effective, engaged the children and was suitable for their context and goals.

Nursery staff typically worked with children in groups of 8 in a quiet area. Children enjoyed having time with their teacher in a smaller group and responded to the individual attention and encouragement they received.

The big picture is laid out in front of children as they sit in a small group. They are then encouraged to take turns choosing objects and pictures out of a bag, and placing them on the picture. In this way the picture or story is built up. Children have a choice of pictures to add: there are photos of children in that group, other children in the nursery, and unknown children. These can be put into the picture, as well as other 'props'. Children are encouraged to move the objects around in the

picture. For instance, a child might move children in the picture around so that they are on swings together, and then on the roundabout.

The pictures are used as a prompt for children to talk about their own lives, their likes and dislikes, their family and so on. The activity is also used to develop children's language e.g. positional language. All children are encouraged to contribute to the discussion:

Children are involved and active in this activity, and it is led by their own ideas, with support from the nursery teacher:

“your leading it [but it's also] child led as well, there's a balance there between the practitioner led... a lot of activities, the practitioner does most of the talking and the leading, and that doesn't let children give their ideas and promote free choice.”

“Sometimes we go off on a tangent, the ambulance comes and you have to have stitches and things like that, and then we try and bring them back a little bit and focus more! Yeah and then other sessions it's just, whatever, they go and talk about ambulances all day, as long as we've got communication and the children are involved and active, that's fine.”

Children's reaction to the dolls and story-building activity

Persona dolls:

The practitioners felt that children really engaged with the doll, were attentive and were happy to 'pretend' it was real, and this was due in part to the realistic appearance of the doll. Because the doll looks so real, children can identify with it, and can empathise more readily with the persona doll compared with another toy e.g. a teddy.

“the persona dolls are so much more realistic. You know, the children can act...the children know it's a teddy bear, but with the persona doll it's so...like themselves or like another child they're playing with. So – the majority of the children *know* it's a doll but then we say (whispers) “but we're just pretending” – the littler one's are absolutely, they're really taking it all in, and if you tell them a sad story then you can see their faces when they know, and they get happy when there's a happy ending or whatever that we have with the dolls.”

Children were excited to use the dolls, and enjoyed the quiet activity. They responded to the doll and join in discussion readily:

“And it’s like a quiet activity when the dolls come out, we’re like (whispers) ‘everybody sit down’ and they’re quite excited to see them.”

“they do tend to really, to really participate and listen, and join in with the background story of the doll, tell their own views they do.....they do warm to her.”

Story-building:

The practitioners reported that children love the story-building technique. They all want to do it and enjoy taking part. Part of the success of the materials is due to the size of the pictures, and bright colours, which appeal to young children. Children enjoy physically picking the pictures up and placing them on the picture and moving them around.

“Yeah. What I tend to do – they tend to be the pictures of children. That’s what I tend to pick – because they’re bigger....they love it. They enjoy it.”

Children also love the fact that there are photos of themselves in the story that they create. They recognise themselves from the photos and get a real thrill from being included in the picture.

The effect of the materials on children: were there any benefits?

Persona dolls:

Persona dolls are a fun and exciting technique that can be used in circle time that engages and interests children. The dolls were used less frequently by this nursery, but were used to model pro-social behaviour, discuss feelings and share experiences. It encourages children to communicate and empathise. The practitioners thought it was also beneficial in helping develop children’s memories and recall, as they often remembered details about the dolls persona weeks after they last saw it.

Story-building:

“it promotes really all the areas of learning”

The benefit of this technique is that it allows practitioners to discuss the outside world with children using pictures to illustrate the objects or

locations they are discussing. The pictures make the objects and places being discussed more concrete, as opposed to abstract, and this was thought to encourage engagement and discussion.

Some children had never been to the locations that were discussed, so using the pictures helped to stimulate their imaginations, and helped them to learn about the world around them.

“children who’ve never been to the seaside you know, you’ve got to try and get that imagination. And by using pictures it’s giving the children pictures to see in their mind rather than them just saying ‘sea’ and things like that.”

The technique also allows children to learn from one another, and encourages pro-social behaviours such as turn-taking, listening and empathy.

“cause what they’re learning, they’re learning off one another; so they’re learning how to sit, sit and listen, and they’re expecting to be listened to when they speak, they’d like to know that they can be heard. They like to know that people are interested in what they have to say. And by encouraging turn-taking it’s exactly what I think the child will promote.”

The technique is also thought to build children’s confidence and help to develop friendships within the nursery. Children are encouraged to tell other children about their lives, not just the teacher. And they enjoy the attention they receive, and learn to be respectful of their friends in the nursery:

“we’ve had training that [encourages us to ask the children to] ‘turn around, tell your friends’ cause ours is just one way communication, so we encourage it throughout. And you know, by asking the children to be respectful, to listen, that child feels more comfortable and more confident – it’s all about getting the children to have a go, and having a little chat, trying to give them the confidence to talk and things like that.”

Nursery staff also thought that the story-building technique was a useful mechanism for extending children’s vocabulary:

“extending their vocabulary; discussing about slides and how you use them, and then you can have like positional language - would go up the slide and down. So you’re bringing in quite a range without the children realising what they’re actually learning.”

Staff gave one example of a ‘success story’ where the story-building made a real difference to the child in question:

“one of our little boys, he had quite complex needs and the biggest one was language and communication – that was sort of where he was really struggling. And we take him down [to use the story-building technique] as often as we can because he really, really benefited, he really talks about what’s in the picture, and then he carries it on. He’ll come straight up here and tell whoever’s up here, the other practitioner. He’ll go home and tell them, and then weeks after he’s still saying ‘B was on the swing with me at the park’, linked to the activity that we did. So his memory recall has been developed, his speech, his vocabulary, you can really extend the vocabulary through using these pictures, so, yeah, it really, really has worked for him.”

This suggests that this technique might be particularly beneficial for children with particular language and communication difficulties.

Both the persona dolls and the story-building techniques help improve children’s memory recall: children can be asked to remember details about the persona doll, or the stories they created. Some children show excellent recall of information about the persona doll. Children will also spontaneously relate information about the stories they created in the nursery to friends whilst playing, to nursery staff and at home with parents. This suggests both techniques are grabbing children’s attention, and helping improve their memory recall.

Which technique was preferable?

The nursery staff thought with the story-building children engaged and benefited from this technique as ‘there’s so many different scenarios the children can relate to’ and it could be adapted to their setting, and their needs, more easily. Children engaged with both activities, but the practitioners felt that the story-building technique was an ‘all-rounder’ that helped to improve and develop a number of abilities and skills in children.

Possible pitfalls in using these materials

The nursery staff interviewed believed that in order to use the dolls successfully, staff must be confident in the technique, but also they must be enthusiastic, motivated and be able to engage the children in the dolls activity. The opinion was that some of these abilities can be developed through training, but in the end some members of staff are better suited to delivering similar lessons using different techniques.

“You have to have something about you [so you are able] to use them [the dolls], to make them real sort of thing for the children.... You need to be quite enthusiastic, you need to be quite...hands on with the dolls,”

“it’s more about using your staff with the strength that they have...another staff member, they might still get the same objective across but in a different way.”

It can be difficult to keep track of the doll’s persona. The nursery staff found it useful to keep notes about the dolls persona, so that they could keep track of what the children were told and ‘keep the story straight’.

“We have to write it down, we have to get some sort of scenario about their background and keep it, you know, if we forget we have to quickly look at them to see what we said about this doll and things like that”

The story-building technique is successful, in part, due to the use of pictures of the children. However, nurseries have little spare time to take these photos and laminate them. It is important that they should be given help to do this.

The nursery staff also warned of feeling like you are repeating yourself when using the dolls and the pictures, but stressed that this should not be a worry for nursery staff.

“one of the drawbacks could be that you feel like you’re repeating a lot. But, and a lot of practitioners do have difficulty with that, especially with this age, but this age is all about repetition - because that’s how they learn. I mean you think ‘I did that before’ but they want that, that’s how you develop their memory recall and I think that’s educating practitioners who work with this age, that it’s ok to keep repeating things that that is how this age group learn.”

Ideas for the future

The nursery staff indicated that they would welcome new ideas on how to use the dolls and the pictures, perhaps in the form of a website or resource book, or further training days where they can meet other practitioners using persona dolls to exchange ideas:

“I think fresh ideas is always something that we can all learn from...they [another practitioner] have got different ideas, and we always learn from each other...‘Oh that’s brilliant oh I’ll do that next time’ so to have a little bit of help from others, we’re always encouraging it. Because at the end of the day we’re all in it for the same things, the best we can for our children”

In this nursery, the staff like to talk about their home-life and their families, pets and so on. One idea would be to include photos of teachers family and pets in the story as well. The nursery staff thought the children would really enjoy this, and this could be incorporated into the technique in the future.

Conclusions & recommendations

The staff at the host nursery were very enthusiastic, highly motivated and creative, and their efforts ensured this project was successful.

Training was successful and useful. The nursery was careful to adapt the materials to suit their setting and goals. The nursery found this process easier with the picture-building than the persona dolls.

The persona dolls were used to:

- promote pro-social behaviours
- encourage children to discuss feelings,
- to discuss potentially stressful events for children e.g. transition to Primary school.
- develop memory recall

The story-building technique was used to:

- develop vocabulary
- improve communication
- practice pro-social behaviours such as listening and turn-taking
- improve memory recall
- expand their imaginations
- increase confidence
- increase self-esteem
- encourage friendships

Summary of Evaluation:

The practitioners used both the persona dolls and the story-building technique and thought both were beneficial.

Story-building appears to be an ‘all-round’ activity that can be used to develop a number of skills and abilities. Children engage with story-building and enjoy playing with the big colourful pictures and using photographs of themselves.

Persona dolls are used less frequently, but children also engage with this activity and enjoy interacting with the doll. They show excellent memory recall of the persona.

Interviews with practitioners suggested that the dolls were more useful for modelling pro-social behaviours, and the picture work was important for developing language skills and encouraging friendships.

The interviews with **children** showed that the interventions:

- Promote more positive views of children from different backgrounds
- Break down stereotypes
- Promote pro-social behaviours

Whilst the interviews with the **practitioners** suggested they thought the techniques could be used successfully to:

- Promote friendships within the setting
- Develop language and communication
- Develop listening and turn-taking skills
- Increase confidence
- Promote pro-social behaviours
- Develop vocabulary
- Develop children’s imagination

Recommendations:

We recommend that other settings be encouraged to use both techniques in their nursery.

However, from the practitioners evaluation it appears that for some settings, the 'Big Picture story-building' technique is more suitable.

It is important that nurseries adapt any materials provided to them for their own setting, in order to develop a sense of ownership and to ensure the materials are optimal for that setting.

Additional resources that would be helpful include a website where practitioners can share ideas and resources, and a training day where ideas can be exchanged in person. A resource book of ideas would also be helpful for practitioners.

Further funding is required to provide nurseries in Sandwell with the 'Big Picture Story-building' materials and the persona dolls.