

Honoring Diversity: Inclusion through Puppets and Dolls

— Chris Shaw



In our Goldfinch early childhood class at the Hartsbrook School in Hadley, MA, puppet making has become the culminating project for the rising first graders. These older children often grow restless at the end of the year, becoming distracted, chatty, and sometimes a bit silly or mischievous.

In Waldorf education we want the children to be fully ripe and ready for first grade before moving on. Expressions of boredom signal this readiness. This is a good sign but means that teachers have to meet those children with projects and activities that challenge and keep them engaged. They want something new and more complex which the younger ones don't get to do. Puppet-making fills this bill.

For the past few years the Goldfinch children have made their own table puppets during these final

kindergarten weeks. It is a bittersweet time because, as their teacher, I get to invite those oldest children to sit and sew with me during play time each day. I get to listen in on their conversations, which often turn to next year, their new teacher and first grade. I get to joke with them and express that I will miss them. These are special intimate moments of contact with each child.

The first year we made table puppets like the ones I use for puppet shows. I let the children choose the skin tone they preferred. I offered them peach, tan, and a deep brown. As most of the children in the class had peach colored skin, it made sense that they all chose that fabric. But I said most, not all of the children had peach or "white" skin. For the one child in the class with beautifully brown, glowing skin also chose the light color.

This did not add up. Why would he choose to make a puppet that looked like his friends and not himself?

In my own ignorance, I assumed that children would be attracted to skin tones that matched their own and that of their parents and caregivers. Research shows that babies show preference for faces with skin tones that match that of their caregivers. But once they are exposed to dominant culture with different skin tone, preference changes and the children become attracted to the skin tone presented in dominant culture. In the United States and other western countries, dominant culture means white. In fact, studies show that when children are exposed to dominant culture, their preference for whiteness increases and preference for brown and black faces decreases, regardless of their own skin tone or that of their family members and caregivers. And, most disturbingly, all of this is imprinted into children before they turn seven. That means that a child of color in my class will most likely learn to prefer white skin over brown.

This is a weighty and disturbing observation. How can a white teacher with a predominantly white class welcome black and brown children into the classroom, knowing that this environment will probably disrupt the children's preference for their own physical characteristics? Being in my class would be harmful to a black or brown child's self-esteem. And, as a white teacher of white children, how was I to help expand the choice for brown and black skin tones when dark skin remained a minority in the classroom?

What I realized could be done was to offer images of people with a variety of skin tones in other ways. Picture books, toys, and the artwork hanging in our classroom are all good places to start, but puppet shows are offered all the time with our own hand-made puppets. Making changes with the puppets has

been an easy solution. Since that time, I have created many puppets of as many varied skin tones as I can find. When the children make puppets, they are all given the same rich, chocolate brown skin cloth and crown the head with black hair. Their choice comes in deciding the color for the clothing and hair length they want.

The children love these dolls. In fact, the first year of making this change, I overheard a white child in my class say to another white child, "I love my puppet. I am going to pretend it is my baby." And the other child replied, "You can't have a baby that color. You have to have a baby that looks like you." To this the first child wisely replied, "No. If I marry someone with brown skin, my baby will have brown skin". "Right," replied the other child. "I forgot."

This example reveals that children do love all skin tones and need to experience them from a very young age. Attitudes and judgments against differences develop much earlier than we have realized. The world is not all white. White dominance is a social construct that we want to disempower. Children will recognize the goodness in all expressions of humanity if given the chance to experience differences in a mood of celebration. Through these adored puppets, children showed that they are happy to see the variety of skin tones and love them all. ♦

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