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Empathy and the personal experiences of trainees in an emotional literacy persona doll training programme in South Africa.

Barnfather, Nikki

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Abstract

Many devastating problems face South Africa's young children that can hamper their emotional and social development. The Emotional Literacy and Persona Doll programme (Buchanan, 2007) attempts to intervene in the young child's emotional development. Persona Dolls are used to encourage emotional expression and management in young children. Previous research has indicated the positive effects of the Persona Dolls and Emotional Literacy programmes with children. However, the development in the trainees and practitioners who use these dolls has yet to be researched. This research study assessed the development of empathy, and the personal experiences of trainees who underwent the emotional literacy and Persona Doll training programme in South Africa. Participants included social workers, psychologists, and preschool and foundation phase teachers. Participants' empathy was assessed before the first training session, and at the end of the training through Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1980). Participants also documented their feelings, experiences, and thoughts while undergoing the training, in a journal. Process notes of persona doll sessions and evaluation forms were also used in the study.

Although the quantitative results did not show any significant results in terms of an improvement in empathy for the trainees, the qualitative results demonstrated that the participants found that they were more able to think and talk about their own emotions, and the emotions of others. This is a crucial aspect of emotional literacy, where one is able to identify and think about one's own emotions. Furthermore, the group of participants learnt important reflection and containment skills, which they believe they can and are using in their work with others, and with their families. While there is no statistically grounded argument for the improvement of empathy, and in extension emotional literacy, the participants in the training seemed to have developed their own emotional literacy skills, and found that they are better able to work with children and adults in the realm of emotional work. Implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Key words: persona dolls, emotional literacy, emotional intelligence, empathy and Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index