

How do preschool children in Croatian kindergartens perceive children that belong to different race?

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Abstract

The research about children's perception of children that belong to different race in Croatian kindergartens' environment aims to investigate on everyday kindergarten's practice, including children from Croatia as observers / estimators. In other words, in this research some aspects of the effects of contemporary kindergarten educational programs for improving children's competencies in field of human rights are estimated, especially the tolerance of differences among people. It is believed that the preschool period is important starting point for developing positive attitudes towards the differences between people. However, children are not color blind; they recognize differences and they develop racial attitudes based on their observations of their parents and society in general. Children are not racists by nature and discussions about race can change their attitudes. The objectives of this research were to determine the differences in preferences of selected characteristics for children who belong to different races, as well as to identify gender differences and preferences for children to be friends. Eighty children from three kindergartens in Zagreb and Zaprešić were examined. Children described the characteristics of the boys of different races on photos, expressing their preference for friendship. Qualitative answers were transformed in quantitative categories. The results showed that children perceive more socially desirable characteristics at Caucasians, who are chosen as more desirable friends, too. It's the simple consequence of children's preference to people who are similar to themselves. There were no gender differences in preferences of selected characteristics among children belonging to different races. These results don't mean that children are racists or that current preschool programmes about interracial tolerance are bad: children in Croatia very rarely have an opportunity to see the children that belong to different race. To avoid negative connotations of the preference for similarity, different additional types of education about tolerance can be desirable.

Keywords: *desirable characteristics, friend, human rights*

Introduction

Kindergarten is a place where children enjoy their rights in everyday life, but also learn about their rights, their protection and responsibilities arising from it. It is believed that during the preschool period can be done most to develop a positive attitude towards the different people and to accept the differences between people. Teaching about tolerance in the kindergartens means few things: understanding that each individual is especially valuable, that everyone is different and has different origin, different abilities, comes from different family and has a different culture and language. However, the important message is that all people (and children) are all equally valuable and have equal rights (it is the basis of the teaching for of tolerance). If a child is taught to respect diversity and be tolerant of others, it can be a good and lasting foundation for the development of pro-social behavior and responsibility towards their own behaviors and relationships with others. In the human species there are four basic races: Caucasoid/white, Mongoloid/Asian, Australoid and Negroid/black. Part of the child's identity consists of racial, ethnic and religious group to which child belongs.

From their infancy, human beings are naturally predisposed to recognize differences. The ability to discern difference served ancient societies by helping them keep their guard up against outsiders who might hurt or kill them (Fishbein, 2002). Research indicates that children (by the age of 3) develop a sense of people who are different from themselves: because of societal influence, they may target those outsiders for prejudicial behaviors (Sleek, 1997). Children are not color blind and they can notice and recognize racial differences. Most studies of this issue have included black children. At the age of 3, most children (white and black) people classified on the basis of skin color, the same as they are classified on the basis of gender, age, etc. Maybe the kids younger than 3 years can discern these differences, however, such research are not numerous (Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1995). The differences among children that belong to different races that are recognized by young children (around 6 years old) could be classified into two groups: skin color and specific (anatomical) facial characteristics. It is more likely that small children understand those ethnic differences which are prominent in their culture, as opposed to those that are not so important. Minority children were previously aware of ethnic differences from the "majority" of children. Such differences have a much deeper social consequences for them. In the formation of self-concept there is a general tendency to emphasize these distinctive qualities. For example, very short people are more likely to describe yourself to display its height in relation to people of average height. Even later in life, the fact that someone is black is more likely to be part of one's identity in relation to the fact that someone is white (of course, in the dominant white culture such as ours). This is well illustrated by the survey conducted among black adolescents. in answer to the question "Who are you?" 95% of them mentioned that the "I'm black." On the other hand, it would be very surprising if this question whites responded with "I'm a white guy." (Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1995).

Racism is defined as a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. Stereotypes are preconceived or oversimplified generalizations usually, but not always, involving negative beliefs about a particular group (Merriam-Webster Online, 2005-2006). A nonprejudiced person is an individual who perceives similarities rather than differences between self and

others (Phillips & Ziller, 1997). Children categorize themselves and others along racial lines, leading them to perceive members of other racial groups as different from themselves. Children develop racial attitudes based on their observations of their parents and society in general. Discussions about race do change their attitudes (Winkler, 2009). When preschool age children talk about race or express any racial bias, it is often either dismissed, blamed on parents or other adults or just indirectly addressed as general bad behavior (Winkler, 2009). However, current psychological research clearly shows that children can recognize race from a very young age and that they can also develop racial biases by ages three to five, simultaneously without necessarily resembling the racial attitudes of adults in their environment (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Contrary to popular belief, children have a keen inborn sense of justice. Children are able to retain their keen sense of justice if they are treated with respect (Wipfler, 2012). Five-to eight-year-olds begin to place value judgements on similarities and differences: during this age range, they often rank the things in their world from "best" to "worst", they like to win and hate to lose, they choose best friends and simultaneously they exclude others, sometimes because of race, ethnicity and religion (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, 1995). On the other hand, between five and eight children are old enough to begin to think about social issues and young enough to remain flexible in their beliefs.

Teaching children to decategorize their perceptions of people could help them to see more self–other similarities than differences. The study conducted by Jones & Foley (2003) demonstrates the benefits of teaching decategorization. Elementary school curricula including these lessons could reduce biased categorization and possibly promote the development of more nonprejudiced children.

The aims of this research were: first, to determine the differences in preferences of selected characteristics for children who belong to different races; second, to identify gender differences in preferences of selected characteristics for children who belong to different races; third, to determine the differences in preferences for children of friends from different races; finally, to determine the differences in preferences of desirable and undesirable characteristics for children who belong to different races.

The goals were associated with the related hypotheses. It can be expected that children, regardless of their gender, should attribute desirable characteristics to the members of their own race. Additionally, it can be assumed that gender differences in preferences for certain race should not exist.

Method

The participants were pre-school children (N=80) from Croatian kindergartens: Maslacak (Zapresic), Vrbik and Tresnjevka (Zagreb), 41 boys and 39 girls. The participants weren't classified according to their socio-economical status, or according to any other characteristics. Average children's age was 6.28 (range 5.7 to 7.1). All children were attendants of the regular 10-hour program in the kindergarten. Eight teachers in the kindergarten groups of the children asked questions about their attitudes on boys that belong to different races (researchers tried to choose similar face expressions that reflect similar emotions at all boys). Questions were asked individually to children, immediately after presenting photos of boys that belong to different races. Children had the task that among four boys with different colour of skin (white, black, red and yellow), choose the one that, in their opinion, has some characteristics (brave, coward, goog-looking, ugly, bad, good, happy, sad, stupid, smart, strong, weak, hardworking,

lazy). The children were also asked to express their preference for friendship about boys that belong to each of the available races, with the argument of their election.

All procedures of the data analysis were performed applying SPSS ver. 11.0. For general descriptive statistics, the frequencies of certain types of answers were calculated (Petz, 1997), while the Chi-square tests of differences between the variables were calculated for certain independent and dependent variables.

Results and Discussion

In Table 1 is obvious that children attribute statistically significant different characteristics to the boys that belong to different races in most of the characteristics (differences are not significant only for attributes: happy, strong and weak). Also, children prefer statistically significant different friends in relation to their race. By analyzing the differences between pairs of preferences for boys of different races, it was shown that the only preference of desirable characteristics of Caucasian boys differs in relation to the preferences of all other races. Participants prefer boys of white race, in all cases. This fact can be primarily explained by absence of direct experience of communicating “in vivo” with children who belong to different race. It’s the simple consequence of children’s preference to people who are similar to themselves.

Table 1: Attribution of selected pairs of bipolar characteristics of children who belong to different races

Characteristic	Answer	Race				χ^2 -test	p
		white	black	red	yellow		
brave	Yes	32	21	10	10	23,622	<,01
	No	48	59	70	70		
coward	Yes	15	27	27	12	12,348	<,01
	No	65	53	53	68		
good-looking	Yes	41	11	11	17	40,800	<,01
	No	39	69	69	63		
ugly	Yes	1	23	27	30	34,299	<,01
	No	79	57	53	50		
evil	Yes	10	36	21	12	28,287	<,01
	No	70	44	59	68		
good	Yes	46	11	7	14	65,166	<,01
	No	34	69	73	66		
happy	Yes	22	17	20	22	1,107	>,20
	No	58	63	60	58		
sad	Yes	6	25	30	19	21,467	<,01

Characteristic	Answer		Race			χ^2 -test	p
	No	Yes	Black	White	Other		
stupid	No	74	55	50	61	13,200	<,01
	Yes	8	23	26	23		
smart	No	72	57	54	57	70,000	<,01
	Yes	47	6	18	9		
strong	No	33	74	62	71	4,800	>,10
	Yes	22	26	16	16		
weak	No	58	54	64	64	4,757	>,10
	Yes	17	18	17	27		
hardworking	No	63	62	63	53	9,703	<,05
	Yes	27	12	25	17		
lazy	No	53	68	55	63	25,867	<,01
	Yes	6	28	15	30		
preference for friend	No	74	52	65	50	77,55	<,01
	Yes	65	21	33	65		

In general, there are no gender differences in attributions of personality traits to children who are members of different races. Of the 56 possible differences, only one is statistically significant: significantly higher proportion of the characteristic «stupid» to Caucasian child is attributed by boys, compared with girls. In other words, boys perceive white boy on the picture as more stupid, than girls did (the results weren't showed in details because of prolixity).

Children attributed to white children the most desirable traits (Table 2), and least desirable to black children. When individual comparisons of pairs of characteristics were performed (using Chi-square tests for pairs of races separately), can be seen that children attributed significantly more desirable characteristics to members of the white race, as compared with other races. Also, children are assessed Caucasian children significantly by less undesirable characteristics compared to other races.

Table 2: The differences in the attribution of desirable and undesirable characteristics of children who belong to different races

Race	Frequency of desirable characteristics		Frequency of undesirable characteristics	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
white	237	323	63	497

black	94	466	180	380
red	117	443	163	397
yellow	111	449	153	407
χ^2 -test	121.109 ($p < .01$; $df=3$)		76.989 ($p < .01$; $df=3$)	

The main advantage of this study is the fact that such problems are rarely studied in Croatia, at preschool children, especially in kindergartens. It can show the way of one possible method for evaluation the programmes about tolerance among people.

However, to the smaller possibility of generalization of the results there are at least two reasons that may affect: small and occasional sample of participants and the pictures of boys that can reflect different emotions (in spite of efforts of researchers to choose pictures of children who have similar facial expression).

To avoid dangers linked with racial bias and prejudice with children and help them understand race and inequity in the society, caregivers must first be comfortable with addressing racial issues themselves (Winkler, 2009). Educating children about these issues requires rethinking of ideas about several dimensions of everyday life (especially at adults): the nature of racial and ethnic oppression, the intellectual capacity of children, willingness to do changes in oppressive social conditions, along with considering the extent of children's social skills (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). The two most powerful purveyors of racism in children's lives are the media and the adults they know. Friendship, as relaxed, unguarded human contact, is at the essence of undoing racism and every other "ism" (Wipfler, 2012). By talking openly and listening without censure, parents and preschool teachers can learn about children's concerns and help them find connections between larger social issues and their own life experiences.

Conclusions

The results showed that children perceive more socially desirable characteristics at Caucasians, who are chosen as more desirable friends. These results can be explained with the simple consequence of children's preference to people who are similar to themselves. The gender differences in preferences of selected characteristics among children belonging to different races are minimal emphasized (just one single difference is found). These results can be explained in terms of the fact that children in Croatia very rarely have an opportunity to see «in vivo» the children that belong to different race. However, these conclusions suggest that different additional types of education about tolerance can be desirable.

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