

Through the Eyes of a Child: Exploring the Potential Role of Dolls in CultureWear

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CultureWear began as a project aimed at exploring how clothing can be used to educate children about other cultures. Given the unprecedented flow of immigrants worldwide and the effect of globalization, CultureWear recognizes the role that diasporas play in shaping notions of culture and aesthetic tastes in clothing. Thus, CultureWear considers the contributions of both diaspora and traditional cultures in its efforts to nurture children who will become global citizens – those who appreciate and can navigate multiple world cultures. Although CultureWear was originally conceived of as a project in which clothing would be refashioned to incorporate cultural motifs to educate the wearer about different cultures, at ERI we have been exploring alternative ways to extend CultureWear principles to other media. We have recently evaluated the use of dolls, and our experiences with adults strongly suggest that dolls may be effective educational tools that children will also enjoy.

Dolls play important roles in shaping the cultural and aesthetic values of children. While recent debates about the impact of dolls on the socialization of children have focused on the treatment of different racial or cultural groups through their doll representations, much less attention has been paid to the issue of how dolls can be used to achieve the educational goal of developing culturally competent, globally-oriented citizens. In our view, dolls often reflect, or even anticipate, fashion trends and cultural values. This presentation will explore the use of dolls as cultural educational tools. We will discuss modern cultural meanings and uses of dolls and consider strategies that educators may use to achieve desired multicultural education goals. We will also explore how the roles and uses of such dolls may vary depending on the social and educational context in which they are used. As much of the literature concerning dolls in the educational setting are from the anti-bias and from child psychology fields, we will review current trends in thinking regarding the use of dolls to combat discrimination and to monitor children's views of themselves and others. In addition, we will discuss how the cultural competency of educators themselves must be addressed in order to maximize the impact of such dolls. Finally, we will discuss how "anti-bias" goals in education may conflict with traditional multicultural educational practices. Ultimately, we hope to establish best practices for the use of dolls in multicultural educational settings, and it will be important to develop high-quality, detailed documentation to guide educators in their multicultural classroom pursuits.