

CHILDREN GROWING UP WITH BIASES

by,

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ABSTRACT

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Our nation's schools are becoming very diverse, with estimates as high as one-third of our school's population being labeled ethnic minority students in the year 2000. Changes need to be made in our society to help the students in our schools become more accepting of minority students. Parents and the schools play a major role in developing a peaceful and harmonious school environment.

The research has shown all children are subjected to racial and gender biases through their family, media, school, and community. All children react to these biases, some form their own negative attitudes and others remain positive. It is imperative that school systems learn how these cycles of negative attitudes and biases are continued, and at what age these biases truly influence the child's perception of other races and genders.

This report presents the results from a recently completed study which investigated the level of racial and gender bias found in children ages five to six, who attended a public elementary school in Glenwood City, Wisconsin. In the Fall of 2000, a

cluster sample of 32 kindergartners were surveyed using a visual discrimination survey designed by the researcher.

The researcher individually interviewed the students. The student was asked to point to the picture that he or she felt was right. Each child's interview lasted approximately five minutes. The results of the research were used to examine the current kindergarten curriculum and make appropriate changes, based on the level of racial and gender biases in kindergarten students presented through this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter One	
INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Research Objectives	2
Definition of Terms	3
Assumptions	3
Limitations	3
Chapter Two	
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Racial Diversity	5
Gender Bias	6
Parental Role in Bias of Children	7
Role of Teachers and the Curriculum in Bias of Children	8
Chapter Three	
METHODOLOGY	11
Introduction	11
Description of Subjects	11
Instrumentation	11
Data Collection	12
Limitations	13

Chapter Four

RESULTS	14
Introduction	14
Objective #1: Identify the Amount of Gender Bias in Kindergarten Students	17
Objective #2: Identify the Amount of Racial Bias in Kindergarten Students	17
Summary	18

Chapter Five

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	19
Introduction	19
Discussions	19
Conclusions	20
Implications	20
Suggestions for Further Research	21
Bibliography	22
Appendix A: Parental Consent Letter	23
Appendix B: Instrument	24

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Mommy, I want to be white,” says a three-year-old African American girl. When a four-year-old boy is leaving the child care center he tells his father, “Dad, I’m tired of being black.” A mother asks her little girl what she wants to be when she grows up? Her daughter replies, “A nurse because girls are nurses and boys are doctors.” These are some powerful statements made by the youth in our country which illustrate that racial and gender bias still exist in our society.

In theory it should now be easier for children to develop a healthy sense of black pride and gender equity than during segregation and before the Civil Rights movement. Developing a healthy self-image is difficult for children who are faced with the daily real-life reminders that blacks and women are treated differently (White, 1993). Growing up in this pervasive white, male-orientated society can be exhausting for black children and girls just as they begin to figure out who they are.

All children are vulnerable to racial and gender biased messages. Their reactions can range from a false sense of superiority to a false sense of inferiority. Once implanted in a child’s mind, teachers and psychologists say, such misconceptions can blossom into a full-blown racial identity crisis during adolescence, affecting everything from performance in the classroom to a youngster’s susceptibility to crime and drug abuse (White, 1993). These false perceptions of students can be addressed and reduced through a curriculum which promotes intergroup harmony (Isamat, 1994). T. Berry

Brazelton, author of *Infants and Mothers* and other child-care books (cited in White, 1993) stated:

Racial and gender biases are very serious issues that this country hasn't faced up to and unless it does, the U.S. runs the risk of rearing another generation of white children crippled by the belief that they are better than blacks and males who believe they are better than females, and as equally devastating, black and female children who agree (p. 51).

The goal of this study was to identify if kindergarten children in Glenwood City, Wisconsin have developed any gender or racial bias. Research was conducted via a children's visual discrimination survey, developed by the researcher in the Fall of 2000. This study was based on a previous study looking at bias in pre-school age children conducted by Brom-Pierzina in 1998.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the level of bias in kindergarten children ages five and six that attended a public elementary school in Glenwood City, Wisconsin. Data was gathered through the use of a visual discrimination survey during the Fall of 2000. Results will help determine whether classroom and guidance curriculum changes need to be addressed.

Research Objectives

There are three objectives for this research. They are:

1. To identify the amount of gender bias in kindergarten students.

2. To identify the amount of racial bias in kindergarten students.
3. To determine the effectiveness of the current classroom and guidance curriculum regarding gender equality and racial sensitivity and appreciation.

Definition of Terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms need to be defined.

Bias: A tendency or inclination that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question or issue.

Discrimination: Making a distinction in favor of or against a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs, rather than on individual merit.

Gender Equity: Greater freedom for individuals, both boys and girls, to be themselves.

Multicultural: When people from many cultures share a common living place, but not everyone takes part equally.

Pluralistic: All people have the opportunity to contribute and participate without sacrificing their language, ethnicity, or culture.

Assumptions

One assumption of this study is the kindergarten students participating in this study will honestly answer the questions to the survey. Another assumption of this study is that generally, the parents of these kindergarten students will have passed on their beliefs regarding race and gender before these students even entered school.

Limitations

The researcher has identified several limitations.

1. The use of a cluster sample for this survey will greatly reduce the ability to validly generalize the results.
2. The small sample population will reduce the ability to validly generalize the results of the study.
3. The use of human subjects for the study provides for unpredictable responses.
4. The short attention span of the kindergarten children involved may interfere with the validity and reliability of the results.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides information regarding racial diversity and gender bias. The role parents play in the development of racial and gender biases in children is also included in this chapter. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the role of teachers and of the curriculum in development of racial and gender attitudes in children.

Racial Diversity

In the year 2000, over one-third of the children in our nation's schools will be labeled ethnic minority students and in many school districts the majority of the students will no longer be caucasian (Matiella, 1991). In the year 2000, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget will allow individuals to identify themselves with as many racial designations as appropriate. By 2003, schools will also have to change the ways in which students report race, and this may affect the way in which multiracial students see themselves (Schwartz, 1998). This expansion of our nation's diversity creates a greater need for educating our nation's child population about the positive differences which exist and how they make each culture unique.

As early as age two, children begin to develop and construct their gender and racial identity (Derman-Sparks, 1987). At this early age, the stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices which exist in our society also influence children. Our children are psychologically developing in a polluted environment. The increasing negative developing attitudes towards themselves and others reflect this poisoning effect (Derman-

Sparks, 1987). These children are growing up exhibiting prejudice, erroneous beliefs, and fears that reflect adult bias which, if left unchallenged, will continue the devastating cycle of racism that faces our country.

Gender Bias

The formidable words from America's most trusted childhood expert, Dr. Benjamin Spock (cited in Crawford, 1996, p. xxi) stated, "By far the most prevalent crippling disease- for both boys and girls- is sex stereotyping."

Boys face many gender biases. The birth of a son is celebrated with the expectation that he will grow up to be a successful breadwinner, as or even more successful than his father. This is the legacy of the "boys are bigger, stronger, smarter, and tougher"; they need to provide for their weaker female counterparts. Boys are often not free to decide if they want to live up to this challenge of being the family provider, it is simply an expectation.

Boys are also raised to live up to the expectation that they need to be competitors. Winners are congratulated, encouraged, and expected to continue on and face their next challenge. Losers are pitied or sometimes even considered "unmanly". Boys are expected to face their challenges head-on, and win.

Boys are also often cheated of their own emotions by parents who are afraid they will become "too sensitive" if they are allowed to openly show their emotions. In our society it is so common to hear the comment, "Big boys don't cry" or "Crybaby" when boys show their emotions through crying.

Gender stereotypes and bias hurt boys who like to read, who don't like hunting, fishing, or mechanics, and who don't like sports (Crawford, 1996). Girls are also hurt by gender stereotypes and bias when they are not shown positive female role models in textbooks. They are also hurt when they are discouraged from excelling at traditionally male-dominated sports and careers (Crawford, 1996). Girls are also traumatized when they try to achieve impossibly ideal body images.

Girls are socialized to be good, nice, and perfect. By the time they reach their teenage years, they have internalized these messages (Crawford, 1996). Girls learn early on that if they quit or say they are not able to do something, an adult may come along and do it for them. This teaches girls learned helplessness, it depletes their confidence in their own ability to solve their problems. Girls' confidence has also been sapped in the computer areas. They have been led to believe that computers are male orientated and that only males can be successful with them.

Gender bias hurt everyone. It's time to expand society's code of conduct to be more fair to provide gender equity, freedom for individuals, both boys and girls, to be themselves (Crawford, 1996).

Parental Role in Bias of Children

Parents are our student's first teachers who instill their children with their attitudes, either positive or negative. Children learn in their homes about animosity toward another group (Carter & Rice, 1997). Research has shown that children as young as two years of age begin developing discriminatory perceptions of bias and prejudice (Derman-Sparks, 1987). It has been proven that children are aware of

differences in skin color by the age of four, with initial awareness probably beginning with two-year olds (Thomson, 1993). Children begin to develop biases and prejudices long before they reach our schools and as Matiella (1991, p.5) explains, “By teaching young children that differences are good, we help them celebrate differences from the beginning. We invite them to discover uniqueness and all the gifts that come with that discovery.”

When parents perceive their race and cultural identity to be superior to others, their children tend to develop the same perceptions (Marby & Rogers 1991). Beliefs of cultural superiority tend to be more prevalent among parents who are culturally isolated, with little or no professional or social interaction with people from diverse backgrounds. However, when parents involve themselves and their children with people of other races, ethnicities, or cultural traditions, positive attitudes develop as misperceptions are replaced with human understanding and acceptance (Barta & Winn, 1995).

Role of Teachers and School Counselors and the Curriculum in Bias of Children

Parents are not the only educators of children, teachers and school guidance counselors play a critical role as well. Children do spend the majority of their time with their parents but they are in the school system for 13 years, therefore, greatly influenced by educators. In order to capitalize on the time children spend in the school system, we need to start when the child first enters kindergarten. Kindergarten may be the first experience children have learning about the differences among people in society. Educators need to be aware of the stereotypes these children have grown up with and

then promote the exploration of the facets of racial and gender difference. School is an environment where learning is taking place, so lessons about difference can easily be integrated into the core curriculum.

Our western society has tended in the past to define being different as something negative. This negativity promoted a sense of "sameness," which resulted in feelings of exclusion and inadequacy by all children, but especially in children from differing ethnicities. Consciously or unconsciously, we have taught, and sometimes continue to teach, that western civilization and culture are superior and dominant and this is most effective when everyone is the same.

When the curriculum and teachers ignore differences and pressure children to conform to prescribed mainstream identities, the results are extremely detrimental to the development of the child. Prejudicial influences play a role in developing children's self-concept or esteem, their socialization with peers, and ultimately their confidence to perform and be successful in the classroom (Carter & Rice, 1997). Ignoring differences denies the emergence of self and inhibits positive self-esteem and positive self-identity. It also does a great disservice to children because they are taught to ignore the differences and therefore lack the skills needed to live in today's multifaceted and diverse world. Promoting positive self-esteem in children has been proven to be an integral part of enhancing the learning environment (Grumet, 1998). Self-acceptance and acceptance of others is cyclical: the more children's esteem and confidence in themselves increase, the easier it is for them to become accepting of others, including those who are different (Matiella, 1991).

Ramsey (cited in Thomson, 1993) sums up the curriculum issue so precisely, stated:

We need to let go of the myth that children are colorblind and untouched by prevailing social attitudes. As study after study has shown children's awareness, identification, preferences and assumptions do reflect the attitudes of the adult world. Because of their level of cognitive development, their attitudes may be even more contradictory, global and rigid than those of most adults. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers help children to articulate their ideas about race, in order to find effective ways of challenging their misconceptions and expanding their understanding (p.42).

The question remains, when do children begin to express bias?

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the subjects who participated in the study and the process used for their selection. The instrument used for information collection will be discussed, specifically its content, validity, and reliability. The procedures used for data collection and analysis will also be provided. The chapter will conclude with the methodological limitations of the research study.

Description of Subjects

The subjects for this study were all enrolled in an elementary school in a public school district in Glenwood City, Wisconsin during the Fall of 2000. The participants ranged in age from five years to six years.

Sample Selection

The subjects were selected from a population of children ages five to six who attended a public, elementary school in Glenwood City, Wisconsin during the Fall of 2000. The sample was a cluster selection of subjects based on their attendance at the school.

Instrumentation

The instrument used for this study was created exclusively for the purpose of measuring bias in children ages five to six. The instrument constructed was based on a

previous instrument used by Brom-Pierzina in her 1998 study of bias in pre-school children. Both research projects used visual discrimination instrumentation, utilizing pictures of people of different races and genders. As in the Brom-Pierzina study, there were a number of situations posed to the children and after each they had to choose the person or object who they felt would fit that situation when based on a choice of three pictures of people of differing races and genders. Brom-Pierzina used nine different situations in her study whereas the researcher of this study used ten different situations. The brevity of the survey is due to the limited attention span of these young school age children.

The instrument measured the bias of the children with the assumption their preconceived biases based on familial and school experiences played a role in the choices they made for each situation presented. The instrument appears to have validity, but the reliability of this instrument is unknown because it was created exclusively for this research project. The researcher for this study based the instrument on Brom-Pierzina's instrument, but changed some aspects in order to make the instrument more valid.

Data Collection

The sample study was conducted at the site where the researcher was performing a guidance and counseling internship. Permission was granted to the researcher by the school and parental permission was received from all of the students who participated in the study. The parents received a letter which explained the study to them. It was explained that total confidentiality would be maintained, both during the study and after its completion.

The visual survey was administered on a one-to-one basis and the students' responses were recorded on a tally sheet. The students were surveyed in a quiet corner of the room during their rest time. This allowed each student to answer the survey in confidence and without being bothered or pressured by the other students. It took approximately 5 minutes to survey each student.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the statistics. The researcher tabulated frequencies and percentages.

Limitations

The methodology may contain the following limitations:

1. The subjects used for this study were taken from one elementary school and therefore may not be representative of the entire population.
2. The involvement of human subjects allows for unpredictable responses.
3. The limited attention span of children in kindergarten may make data collection complex.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the current study according to responses obtained from a sample of thirty-two, five to six year old kindergartners enrolled in a public school district in Glenwood City, Wisconsin. The instrument used for this study designed by the researcher, was adapted from a previous study conducted by Brom-Pierzina. A copy of the survey is located in Appendix B.

The goals of this research were to identify the amount of gender bias in kindergarten students and to identify the amount of racial bias in kindergarten students to determine the effectiveness of the current classroom and guidance curriculum regarding gender equality and racial sensitivity and appreciation.

A permission letter was sent to all of the parents of the thirty-five kindergarten students enrolled in the public school district in Glenwood City, Wisconsin (Appendix A). Two of the students were excluded from the study at their parents' request and one student was absent the day the study was conducted. Of the thirty-two students surveyed, 14 (44%) were girls and 18 (56%) were boys.

The survey consisted of ten questions with three pictures following each question (Appendix B). The children were asked to listen to the question and then point to the picture or say the letter next to the picture, which correlated with their feelings.

In the first question, when asked to point to the picture of the person he or she thought was a doctor, 50% of the girls (n=7) and 39% of the boys (n=7) chose a black

man, 14% of the girls (n=2) and 17% of the boys (n=3) chose a white female, and 36% of the girls (n=5) and 44% of the boys (n=8) chose a white male.

The second question showed the pictures of three children and asked the question, “Whose house would you rather play at?” The majority of the girls (64%, n=9), while only 17% of the boys (n=3) chose the white girl. The white boy was the most popular choice of the boys surveyed at 55% (n=10), and was the second most popular choice of the girls surveyed at 36% (n=5). The black boy was the choice of 28% of the boys (n=5) and was never chosen by the girls, (0%, n=0).

When asked to select the person who looked most like a school principal, 29% of the girls (n=8) and 67% of the boys (n=12) chose the white man. Fifty-seven percent of the girls (n=8) and 33% of the boys chose the black man, and 14% of the girls (n=2) and 0% of the boys (n=0) chose the black woman.

The fourth question showed pictures of three adults and asked, “Who do you think is a nurse?” The majority of the girls (64%, n=9) and 33% of the boys (n=6) chose the black man. The white woman was the most popular choice among the boys surveyed at 50% (n=9) and 36% of the girls (n=5) also chose her. The white man was the least popular choice with only 17% of the boys (n=3) and 0% if the girls (n=0) choosing him.

When asked to chose the person who they thought had a million dollars, 57% of the girls (n=8) and 55% of the boys (n=10) chose the black woman. Twenty-one percent of the girls (n=3) and 17% of the boys (n=3) chose the white woman. Twenty-one percent of the girls (n=3) also chose the black man, as did 28% of the boys (n=5).

The sixth question asked the students who they thought the owner of the telescope was? The black boy was the most popular answer, being chosen by 50% of the girls

(n=7) and 67% of the boys (n=12). The white girl was the next most popular answer with 36% of the girls (n=5) and 22% of the boys (n=4) choosing her. The white boy was chosen by 14% of the girls (n=2) and 11% of the boys (n=2).

When students were asked, if they got lost who would they ask for help, more than half of the girls (57%, n=8) and 11% of the boys (n=2) chose the black woman. More than half of the boys (61%, n=11) and 21% of the girls (n=3) chose the black man. Twenty-one percent of the girls (n=3) and 28% of the boys (n=5) chose the white woman.

The next question asked the students, which person is in jail for stealing? The majority of the girls (71%, n=10) and the majority of the boys (66%, n=12) chose the black man. Twenty-nine percent of the girls (n=4) and 17% of the boys (n=3) chose the white man. None of the girls (0%, n=0) and 17% of the boys (n=3) chose the white woman.

The ninth question asked the students to choose the person they thought was homeless. The girls selected the white woman most often (42%, n=6), the boys also selected her most often (55%, n=10). The girls (n=4) selected the black man 29% of the time and the boys (n=6) selected him 33% of the time. The girls (n=4) selected the white man 29% of the time and the boys (n=2) only selected him 11% of the time.

The final question asked the students, which child would ask to play with you? The majority of the girls (71%, n=10) and 28% of the boys (n=5) chose the black girl. Twenty-nine percent of the girls (n=4) and 39% of the boys (n=7) chose the white girl. None of the girls (0%, n=0) and 33% of the boys chose the white boy.

Objective #1: Identify the amount of gender bias in kindergarten students.

All ten questions in this study gave the children people of both genders to select from. To compile the results of this objective, the researcher tabulated the percentages of the responses to each question. Eight of the questions were phrased positively (#1-7, 10) and in 6 of those 8 questions (#1, 2,3,6,7, and 10) the boys surveyed selected a male, while the girls selected a female choice in 4 of the 8 questions (#2,5,7,and 10). There were two questions which were phrased negatively (#8 and 9). The boys were split on those questions, choosing a male most often for one (#8) and choosing a female most often for the other (#9). The girls also were split choosing a male most often for one (#8) and a female most often for the other (#9).

Objective #2: To identify the amount of racial bias in kindergarten students.

The issue of race was addressed in all 10 questions. Each question pictured people of different races for the students to select from. Out of the 32 children surveyed, only 6% (n=2) of the children were minorities.

Of the ten questions, taking into consideration that eight were phrased positively (#1-7,10) there was only one question (#2) where the girls chose a white person significantly more often than a person of color. The boys chose a white person significantly more often than a person of color on three questions (#2,3,4). All of the other questions revealed an evenly dispersed percentage for each choice or a majority of the children selected a non-Caucasian choice for both boys and girls.

Looking at the two negatively worded questions on the survey (#8-9), the percentages were relatively evenly distributed in both with one question having a minority selected most often (#8) and the other having a Caucasian selected most often (#9).

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the survey conducted by the researcher given to a cluster sample of 32 kindergarten students. The next chapter focuses on the interpretation of these results, conclusions, and implications.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussions, Conclusions, and Implications

Introduction

This chapter will discuss purposes of this study, review the methodology used, draw conclusions, and summarize the findings of this research. This chapter will conclude with implications of the current research and suggestions for further research.

The objectives of this study were: 1) to identify the amount of gender bias in kindergarten students, and 2) to identify the amount of racial bias in kindergarten students. The goal of this study was to determine whether or not students ages five to six who attend a public school in Glenwood City, Wisconsin have a predisposition to gender and racial bias.

The researcher individually administered a visual discrimination survey to each student which measured the students' bias. The researcher created the survey for the sole purpose of this study.

The review of the literature looked at racial diversity, gender bias, parental role in bias of children, and role of teachers and guidance counselors and the curriculum in bias of children.

Discussion

All children are vulnerable to racial and gender biased messages. Our children are psychologically developing in a polluted environment. The increasing negative developing attitudes towards themselves and others reflect this poisoning effect (Derman-Sparks, 1987). There is hope however, these false perceptions of students can be

addressed and reduced through a curriculum which promotes intergroup harmony (Ismat, 1994).

The students who took part in this research study showed a low amount of racial bias, therefore leading the researcher to believe they are being exposed to different cultures and races in a bias-free environment or they completely lack any exposure at all. The researcher of this study did find some gender bias to be prevalent in this group of students, implying that changes need to be made to the current classroom and guidance curriculum in these areas.

Conclusions

The researcher of this study believed the results adequately measured the objectives of the research. Based on the data collected, some conclusions may be made.

The first conclusion that may be made based on the responses of the students surveyed, is that a significant amount of gender bias does exist. The boys (n=18) answered the questions (#1-10) on the survey in a gender-biased manner 75% of the time. The girls (n=14) answered the questions (#1-10) on the survey in a gender-biased manner 50% of the time.

The second conclusion appears to be the students that were surveyed do not seem to be racially biased. The students' answers to most questions were relatively evenly distributed in their choices of caucasian and minority people.

The overall conclusion that could be drawn is the students at their age are not racially biased, but do appear to be predisposed to gender bias.

Implications

It was the goal of this research to examine the effectiveness of current classroom and guidance curriculum and determine if changes needed to be made to address the bias-free learning environment of the kindergarten students at Glenwood Elementary School. In the opinion of the researcher, this study showed the children are being exposed to and are comfortable with cultural differences, but a gender equity component appears to be missing from the current classroom and guidance curriculums.

The suggestion for improvement is that the current classroom curriculum is examined for material showing children and adults of both genders in all occupations. It is also suggested the guidance curriculum be reviewed to ensure that students are given the opportunity at the kindergarten level to begin exploring men and women in the same and different careers.

Gender and racial biases hurt everyone. It's time to expand society's code of conduct to be more fair to provide gender equity, freedom for individuals of all races, both boys and girls to be themselves (Crawford, 1996). Changing our current classroom and guidance curriculum is just one way of helping expand society's code of conduct.

Suggestions for further research

Further research should be done in this area. Below are suggestions:

1. Correlational studies could be conducted between children in rural and urban school settings to determine if biases exist by geographic location.
2. Older students could be surveyed to determine more precisely at what age racial biases begin to occur.
3. Parental and teacher surveys examining biases could be added to determine levels of bias in school and at home.

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Dear Parents,

Hello, my name is Brenda Brewer and I am the new 10-12 High School Guidance Counselor. I am actually finishing up my last year of graduate school at U.W.- Stout so this school year is my internship. Also, during this school year I will be finishing up my thesis and this is where I need your help.

My thesis topic is racial and gender biases of kindergarten children. Another graduate student did a similar topic last year in the Eau Claire area with pre-school children and I really found the topic to be fascinating. The other student did not find any significant biases in the pre-school children she surveyed. But unfortunately, racial and gender biases do exist in our society and I feel that it is important to pinpoint the time in life where these biases begin.

I am asking your permission to let your child participate in my study. I have developed a visual survey with 9 questions that each child will answer. An example is; which one of these people do you think is a doctor? The child will point to the picture of a person who they would associate as a doctor. I will be personally administering the survey, which will take approximately 5 minutes.

I will be using the results of the children's answers to determine if racial or gender bias exist in these children. The results will help determine if changes should be made to classroom curriculum. Your child's name and individual answers will remain confidential. I will only be including the results of the group's answers in my thesis.

I plan on surveying the kindergartners on Wednesday, November 29th and Friday, December 1st, so if you could please have these permission slips back by Wednesday it would be greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at 715.265.4266 ext. 6180. Thank-you in advance for helping me with my thesis work!

Sincerely,
Brenda Brewer
High School Counselor

Child's Name _____

Kindergarten Teacher _____

Yes, my child may participate _____

No, my child may not participate _____

Parent (Guardian) Signature _____ Date _____

1. Which of these people do you think is a doctor?

A.



B.



C.



2 Whose house would you rather play at?

A.



B.



C.



3 Which one of these people do you think is a school principal?

A.



B.



C

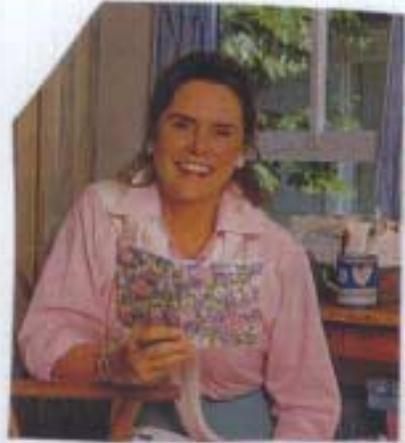


4 Who do you think is a nurse?

A.



B.



C.



5 Which one of these people do you think has a million dollars?

A



B



C



6 Who do you think this telescope belongs to?



7. If you got lost, which of these people would you ask to help you?

A



B



8 Which one of these people is in jail for stealing?

A



B



C



9 Which one of these people do you think is a homeless person?

A



B



C

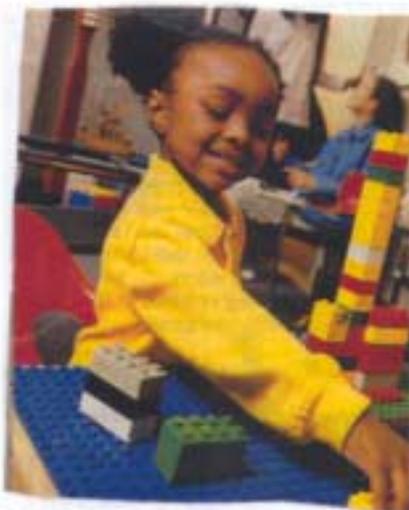


10 Which child would you ask to play with you?

A



B



C

