

A *Barbie* girl

in a *Biased* world

LINDSAY AUGUSTINE

“Does anyone even like Barbies anymore? Am I even relevant?”

This trend, found on TikTok, is answered with, “Of course I am, I’m Barbie.”

However, Barbies haven’t been relevant for everyone. Millions of little girls and boys have grown up with dolls that didn’t reflect who they were.

“Most of the time we see white dolls. That’s what we see... It’s kind of disheartening to see dolls that do not look like you,” said Bobby Jones, the founder of the Facebook group Black Dolls Rule.

Nothing made this more apparent than “The Doll Test” of 1947. In this study, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark gave African American children four dolls, two black and two white. They then asked the children to place the dolls in categories:



which doll was nicer, which doll they would rather play with, and which doll was most like them.

Black children disproportionately chose the white doll, becoming upset when they would have to choose the black doll when asked which doll was most like them.

The Clarks believed this was due to the segregation black children faced at the time.

“We found the children really didn’t want to be black or even brown,” said Mamie Clark in an oral history interview in 1976. “Then you began to wonder about the whole field of education, and what did it mean that all these children were in one place? You know what kind of situation this is – that they’re isolated from whites and they can never learn that they’re just as good as whites, they’re just as bright as whites. They’ll always think they’re inferior. They’ll always think that whites are superior to them.”

The Clarks testified about their findings in one of the five cases comprised in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court case that outlawed segregation. Their contributions were vital to the case, as the Supreme Court quoted the Clarks’ paper in their final statement.

“To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race

generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone,” Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote.

Unfortunately, black children’s feeling of inferiority didn’t end with the Supreme Court’s decision in 1954.

Toni Sturdivant, an assistant professor at Texas A&M University, recreated The Doll Test for herself. She reported her findings in her article, “What I learned when I recreated the famous ‘doll test’ that looked at how black kids see race.”

“Without asking specific questions as the Clarks did, I still found a great deal of bias in how the girls treated the dolls. The girls rarely chose the Black dolls during play. On the rare occasions that the girls chose the Black dolls, they mistreated them,” Sturdivant wrote. “The children were more likely to step over or even step on the Black dolls to get to other toys. But that didn’t happen with the other dolls.”

However, when Good Morning America recreated the test in their segment, *Black and White*, they found more positive results. Only 32% of children had preferred playing with the white doll, compared to 63% in the original study. The percent that thought the white doll was

nicer decreased from 56% to 32%. Black children were also much more likely to identify with the black doll now, increasing from 56% to 88%.

This may be due in part to Barbie changing their approach to diversity and using their dolls to teach children that people of color are beautiful.

“Whether it be in the aisles of the beauty section of a grocery store, the main characters selected for a children’s movie or the conversations parents have at the dinner table, Black children need spaces that tell them they are perfect just the way they are,” wrote Sturdivant

in the conclusion to her article.

Avantika Swaminathan, a junior at Carlmont, also thinks that representation is an important step to take.

“[My sister] had a doll that kind of looked like her, not all the way, of course, but it kind of looked like her. I was very jealous that she had gotten to have that experience,” Swaminathan said. “I don’t know how that might have affected her positively or negatively, but I know that in general with the things that I’ve been told - I don’t live in India, so I’m not the beauty standard - there’s a lot of stereotypes that are put on [people of color], and that can be really harm-

ful. So representation isn’t the only step to take, but it can be helpful for younger kids to see that.”

Recently, Mattel Inc. tweeted that Barbie is “the most diverse doll line,” adding dolls with vitiligo (a condition causing patches of skin in different tones), dolls in wheelchairs, and dolls of different races.

“As far as the diversity that they’re expressing now, I think it’s great,” Jones said. “I think it’s really awesome that they’re finally reaching out to different cultures, different people, and showing people that they can find dolls that look like them.”



ART BY LINDSAY AUGUSTINE