

PERSONA DOLLS CONFERENCE  
Keynote Speech  
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Thank you for inviting me to talk to you today. I am very grateful to have the opportunity, not least because whenever you're asked to talk in public, you have to clarify your own sometimes rather messy thinking.

I've known Babette for many years: what's perhaps not obvious – we share a great deal in our personal histories. We are both South Africans and the experience of growing up there implanted in both of us not just rage against inequality and injustice but an absolute determination to do something about it.



*Cape Town, a view from Robben Island, where Mandela and other leaders of political resistance to apartheid were incarcerated under apartheid*

Babette brought that passion and determination to England, and Persona Dolls are part of the outcome. Persona Dolls have become known throughout the land as one of the most powerful ways to combat racism and discrimination, through the way you can work with personal stories to explore fears, hopes, deeply hidden emotions. I don't need to expound

the amazing power of the dolls – the rest of today will confirm that for you, even if you are not already convinced.



As one of the websites I looked at suggested, *‘The dolls help children to recognise and understand that words and actions can be hurtful, encourage empathy and to motivate them to want to stand up and show their support to people experiencing discrimination and unfairness. The dolls are an effective, stimulating and fun way to counter discrimination and raise equality issues with young children.’*

<http://www.telford.gov.uk/Learning/EarlyYears/PersonaDolls.htm>

I want to talk about recognizing the ways in which the dolls already meet the Citizenship Education agenda, how to make the links more explicit and how to take their work further. It’s quite a challenge for these little people, but I think that with your help they can take it on. They’ve taken on so much already.

PSHE and Citizenship Education are linked in the National Curriculum document for primary, and this is both a good and bad thing. It's a good thing because notions of a healthy society are built on characteristics and personal qualities which PSHE tries to build in children. It's a bad thing where we fail to recognize where Cit Ed is distinctive and so we don't actively develop the distinctive concepts.

Within PSHE we are concerned with children's identity, feelings, attitudes and values, mutual understanding, respect for one another.

### **SOME PERSONAL QUALITIES AND ATTITUDES FOR PSHE**

- That you are a worthwhile person
- That your ideas 'count' and are worth something
- That you will be listened to
- Other people also are worthwhile, they count and are worth listening to

### **KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

- What democracy means & what it means to behave democratically
- About different rights and responsibilities –one's own and other people's
- About values which underpin a democracy
- About global issues and connections – human rights and north/south connections through trade etc

Some of us distinguish between PSHE and Cit Ed by saying that one belongs in the personal sphere, and the other in the public domain of little 'p' politics. Now, unlike PSHE, there is an unavoidable dichotomy of views about what Cit Ed is about. Broadly, there's agreement which comes from the government agenda, that through Citizenship Education children learn about democracy, how to make it work, the law, how to participate effectively, how to see themselves as active participants in a well oiled society.

You'll probably notice that this is quite a static model of society, in which children are basically socialised and educated into the status quo. There's nothing there about change, how to deal with injustice or inequality or anything about a vision of an improved society.

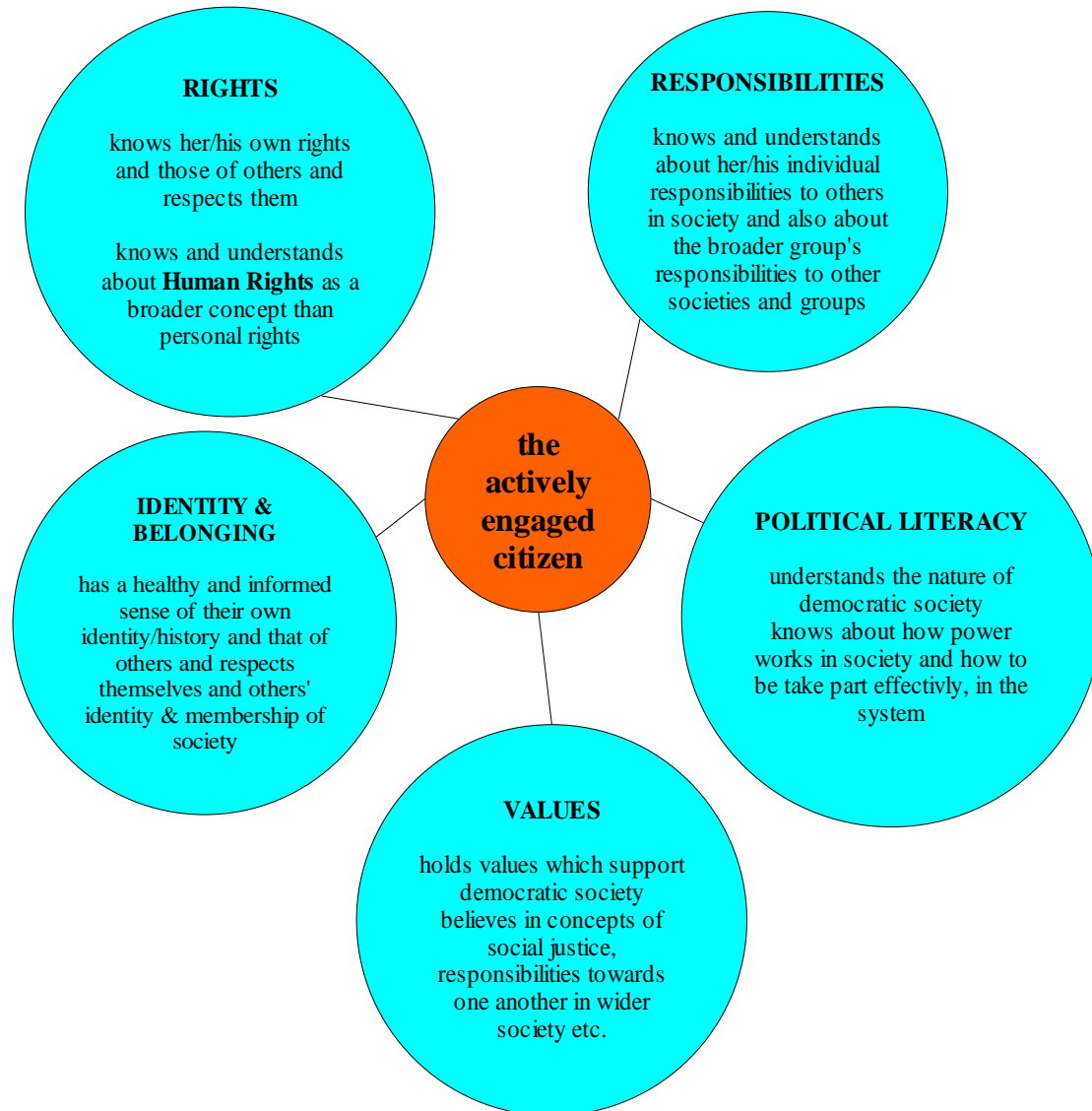
As an historian (which is my other hat) this doesn't make sense to me because though there are innumerable examples of people taking a very conservative position about their society, there are also many many narratives about resistance, and challenge and vision.

So we need a continuum to represent the possibilities - which some people have called minimalist and maximalist citizenship.

Minimalist citizenship	Maximalist citizenship
know and obey the law	have a vision of a better society and work towards it
know about voting and democracy and participate	be prepared to actively engage with projects which might transform society
get involved in various community projects eg through fund raising	be prepared to take risks, challenge, question the status quo

In other words, within Citizenship Education there is the possibility of a transformative agenda, where people have a vision of social justice and equality and work towards it. Can I spell out for you a bit more clearly my own version of what citizenship education looks like at the transformative end of the continuum –

## ACTIVE CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY



It's very clear from everything that Persona Dolls stand for that they are very much at the transformative end of the continuum, prepared to challenge injustice and concerned to implement social justice in order to achieve that kind of society. So one very important part of the work that the Dolls can do, and already do, is in place - since you have to

keep returning to the PSHE concepts of identity and respect for self and others, and the personal values that underpin a functioning healthy democracy.

From your own knowledge, you perhaps also have examples of work with the dolls going well beyond this and maybe that will emerge through our opportunities to talk to one another during the day.

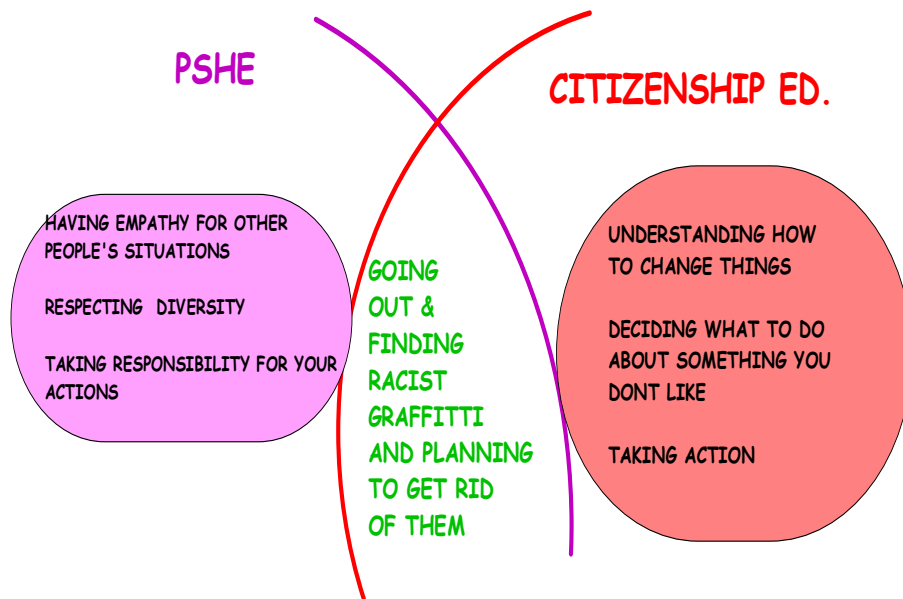
Now I see two different but related opportunities and challenges in extending the work into the KS1-2 or even Secondary age range, in which we hope to work not just within PSHE but Citizenship Education as I have outlined it above.

- KS1 and 2 children can handle more complex concepts than children in the Foundation years. So they might continue the existing work of the Dolls in areas of discrimination
- Citizenship Education in KS1 onwards is underpinned by PSHE but it goes further, into the public domain – working towards a democratic society not just with relation to discrimination, but in a variety of other spheres.

Though there are elements of Citizenship Education in the Foundation Guidance, the KS1 and 2 curriculum does take children further, and this is even more clear in secondary, where Citizenship Education is separate from PSHE and laid out in terms of specific concepts and behaviours, as follows:

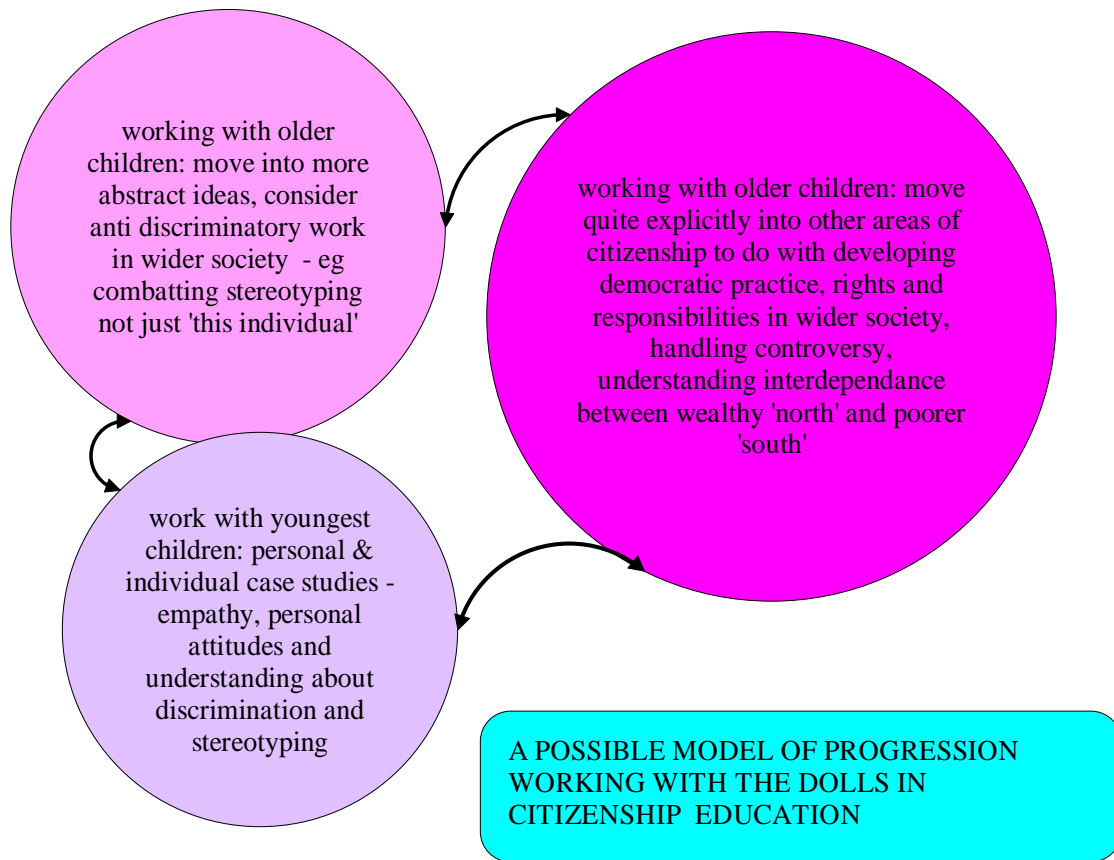
- Social and moral development
- Community Action
- Political Literacy.

The following diagram is intended to show how work which perhaps starts in PSHE becomes part of citizenship education, when children are encouraged to do something active to change the status quo. I have taken my example in the intersecting section of the Venn diagram below, from Hannah Thompson's work in Nottingham, which is shown on the video.



One of the most important things about Citizenship Education, and its relationship to democratic society, is that it explicitly makes space for children to collect information through research and argue particular positions. In other words, we recognize that in democracies there isn't necessarily the one and only right answer. A variety of viewpoints need to get heard before one decides what should now happen, probably drawing on human rights concepts and the existing law.

I think you can see for yourselves how the Dolls might be part of this important facet of their learning.



The question then becomes how might the dolls be used to take children beyond personalised representations and individual case studies, which largely ask them to have a personal and individual or small group response to issues?

This is not just a tremendous challenge for the Dolls, but it's also theoretically extremely interesting. The Dolls could find themselves at the forefront of moving ideas on in terms of practice and pedagogy.

I started to think about some of the issues about helping children generalise from personalised individualised stories to understand more abstract or much wider ranging problems. This of course is an issue for child development, and depends greatly on how we conceive children – whether we think they are somehow stuck in age related 'stages' or whether their capacities to think and understand are actually more dependant on the context, their experience and exposure in the world.

I've just come back from South Africa myself, where as part of an international research project, I was interviewing children aged between 9 and 12 about their hopes and fears for the future. I was struck that the difference from children of the same age in England (whom I had also been interviewing) was not in cognitive capacity but in the issues which they were tuned into. This represented what was around them and had to be

thought about. The same was true for the London children.<sup>1</sup> In other words, children are part of the wider society in which they live. There isn't a barrier – it is only in school situations that they are divided into age specific groups and not constantly witnessing and hearing what is going on in the adult world.

My experience of working with KS1 and 2 children has confirmed for me the depth and understanding that children are capable of bringing to issues which we sometimes think are too hard for them. History has been my main vehicle, but there is absolutely no reason why other curriculum areas should not do the same work of connecting children into the world they live in, and the issues which they must face. In the slide below you see Claudette Williams, one of my colleagues and an Early Years educator, talking to a group of Year 6 children as part of an oral History project within the 'Britain since the 30s' KS2 history unit. Claudette was interviewed by these children, who were extremely keen to know and understand her experience as a young girl from Jamaica, encountering racism and hostility. The letters they wrote to her afterwards indicated how she had touched on their own experience and how far they had identified with her.

The picture below that shows three boys in a 'freeze frame' – also part of a History project within 'Britain since the 30s'. They had learned about the Kindertransport which brought children out of Nazi Germany/Austria in 1938 and were re-enacting the scene of a child saying goodbye to his parents at Vienna Station. They would never see each other again. This connected up with the children considering the experience of contemporary children forced out of their countries because of war.

The bottom picture in this set shows Year 3 girls in role as a young woman and her children in the years of the Famine in Ireland. Again, in this project, we moved from learning about the history to considering contemporary instances of poverty and famine, and what we might do about them.

The point is that if we can do such work through role play, in this case in the context of History, should we not be thinking about working in similar ways with the dolls, in Citizenship Education.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is '10 years on' from original research reported in Hicks, D and Holden C 1995, *Visions of the Future: why we need to teach for tomorrow*, Trentham. The ten years on research is being written up and will appear in print and on the web in due course.

## What do we think children are capable of?

- Our model of childhood will determine what we are prepared to engage with.
- Are they stuck in age related 'stages' or are their capacities to think and understand actually more dependant on the context, their experience and exposure in the world?



A few of the children who talked to me in South Africa -  
bottom - 9 year olds in Johannesburg, Gauteng (top); 11 year olds in  
the Bokaap – Cape Town.



Just like the impressive children in the video  
....qualities these children showed....

- *maturity and insight*
- *ability to reflect on all the main issues in the adult society around them..*  
violence, crime, HIV/Aids, poverty, economic growth, affirmative action, progress towards equality and democracy in their society; *at home & abroad-* terrorism & suicide bombing, global warming, environmental problems



And some of the children from the  
London cohort (2004)....

- *maturity and insight*
- *ability to reflect on issues in the adult society around them –*  
racism, bullying, the plight of refugees, British involvement in the Iraqi war, global warming, environmental issues....etc etc



I think the message for us is clear. We need to trust and respect the ability of primary aged children to handle what adults think are difficult concepts. Our concern to protect or hold off till they are older is often misplaced in that they are already thinking about these issues and talking about them to their parents or their peers.

So with that aside, let's go back to where the dolls might go now....

### **stereotyping**

We all know the 'X's and Y's are this or that sort of people. OK my best friend's an X but she's an exception, she's different.' In other words, people don't necessarily shift their stereotypes because they encounter one or two individuals who don't fit, despite the cognitive dissonance this entails.

So I see the process as progressive. With the younger children, the dolls can introduce ideas, and can be protagonists in the debate, but teachers who work with older children probably need to see their work they do as extending beyond the dolls' own stories.

So with children in KS1 onwards I think we have to take on the generalisations, the nature of stereotyping, how it works to 'other' some groups, and protect egos and identities. The dolls might actually be the ones who argue a case, and challenge and take a part in explaining, but its unlikely that in KS2 at least, that this would be sufficient. This isn't the place for me to give lectures on tackling stereotyping but enough to say that it might involve maths, and literacy, and history and art.

### **controversy about issues**

The sorts of controversies that we're interested in, in Citizenship Education, are to do with human activities, decisions, beliefs and attitudes. So there is clearly a role for dolls both to introduce and take a position in a particular issue, and take it further into the realm of active citizenship.

Let's for argument sake consider the treatment of asylum seekers (an issue which I know the dolls have already been used to explore). Let's imagine the asylum seeker is from Zimbabwe. For work about asylum seekers to move from PSHE to Citizenship Ed requires that the children do something active to challenge something that they see as unjust. The first stage will be doing some research, so that they have a body of knowledge to inform their views and decisions. Next, they will need to consider what they might do. This will be controversial – views will not all coincide, and the dolls might help them work through the controversies in a rational way, with ground rules about behaviour and so on. The dolls might model debate and conflict resolution.

Suppose the children decide to write letters, or make posters, or start a file or a petition, or find out from Amnesty International or the Refugee Council what would be helpful. Now the dolls can lead on this, and be the vehicle for introducing the 'yes buts' and 'what

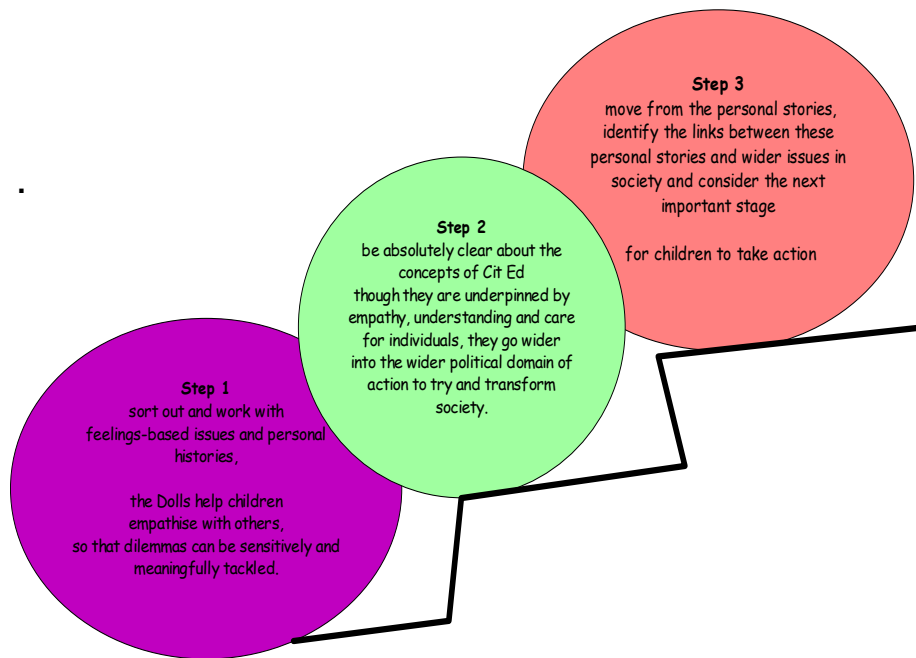
about' and 'we really ought to find out about... so that if someone says that... we know different' that are essential to take decisions forward. This may not seem very different from conventional teaching strategies, but I think we are forgetting that the dolls' personae have been shown to be extremely powerful ways of taking children away from their own personal position, and allowing them to take different perspectives, without losing face (for instance).

What was taken on, would really depend on whether Persona Dolls trainers, and teachers working with them wanted to move into the wider agenda of Citizenship Education, or whether there's a preference for consolidating the current position with respect to discrimination and extending it outwards.

Thinking about this, it seemed to me that as long as one could imagine a 'person' whom the doll could 'be' then more or less any issue could be tackled - whether its killing small furry animals for fashion, or trialling beauty products on animals, or polluting the rivers, or increasing the congestion charge.... None of these are about discrimination, but they are about ethical choices and action... and they are about citizenship education.

It's a bit like the way television dramatises important issues in society using characters to explore the positions and possibilities. I'm not saying this is necessarily something you could take straight into a primary school though it might well be, and I have witnessed excellent and imaginative KS2 work which does draw on the soaps to get children thinking about issues. The other day, I was watching an episode in the series 'The Brief' which dealt with blame and compensation after a rail disaster, exactly at the same time as the newspapers were publicising the contentious concept of corporate manslaughter in the Hatfield Rail disaster. I saw the film 'The Constant Gardener' the other day (about how drug companies can exploit people in developing countries) – another issue that is definitely part of citizenship education, and thus potentially something that the dolls could play a part in debating. The possibilities of taking roles and dramatising issues allows you to make ideas accessible and explore different positions, and this connects up for me, with powerful opportunities for the work of the dolls to go further than it currently does.

So, let me summarise: If the dolls are to move into the challenges of working in the area of citizenship education with older pupils we need to do several things



For children to take action and for citizenship education to be centred in a transformative vision:

**1. We need to be absolutely clear about the concepts of Citizenship Education are – and how, though they are underpinned by, empathy, understanding and care for individuals, they go wider into the wider political domain of action to try and transform society.**

**2. We still have to sort out and work with the initial feelings-based issues and personal histories, so that we can use the amazing power of the Dolls to help children feel with others, and their dilemmas can be sensitively and meaningfully tackled.**

**3. BUT we have to move from this to identifying the links between these personal stories and action in society and see how to set this up with children, so that they can become active citizens. The Dolls may well play an integral part in this next stage, but it will depend on teachers and educators own understanding of what comes next.**

So let me finish with the slide that I started with – I hope that you will be the people who will turn Citizenship Education in schools into transformative education - and I hope that you will enlist the help of the dolls to do this.

*Read all about it.... Read all about it.....  
(continued from page 1)*



**Dolls take lead in empowering  
children to speak up for their  
beliefs AND TAKE ACTION ....**



A spokesperson for the Persona Dolls told our  
reporter..

- **'Never underestimate the power of dolls or the power of  
children– we may be little, but we are principled,  
courageous, clever, well organised and know what we  
want.'**



Thank you!