Self-identification and Racial Preference in Urban and Rural Primary School Children from Southern Peru

José Carlos Arévalo Quijano, Carlos Fernando Truyenque Cáceres, Abel Isaías Barrial Lujan

Universidad Nacional José María Arguedas

Abstracts

Objective: This study aimed to understand the dynamics of self-identification and racial preference in urban and rural primary school children in southern Peru, and to discern the underlying causes of discrimination and racism in these contexts. Materials and Methods: The research adopted a naturalistic paradigm with a qualitative approach and a case study design. Participants included 24 students from urban and rural educational institutions in the southern highlands of Peru. Data was collected using the "Doll Test" questionnaire, based on the original "Doll Test" designed in the 1940s in the USA. Re-sults: The study revealed a concerning trend in students' perceptions of beauty related to the skin color of dolls. Stereotypes were evident in students' perceptions, associating the black doll with "bad" and the white doll with "good". A marked preference was identified for the blonde doll, but a majority identified with the black doll in terms of similarity. Most students anticipated an economically disadvantaged future for the black doll and a privileged one for the blonde doll. Discussion: The findings unveil the palpa-ble presence of racial stereotypes and prejudices in students' perceptions and preferences regarding skin color. This underscores the urgent need to promote a culture of inclusion and respect from childhood and the importance of implementing educational and cultur-al interventions to eradicate these stereotypes.

Keywords: Self-identification; Racial preference; Primary education; Racial stereotypes; Culture of inclusion

Introduction

Self-identification and racial preference are complex conceptual categories that have captured the attention of scholars, educators, and mental health professionals for decades. These terms refer to how individuals, from an early age, recognize and categorize their own racial identity and how they develop inclinations or preferences toward certain racial groups. Therefore, these notions are not only fundamental for the formation of individual identity, but also play a crucial role in the dynamics of social interactions and in the perception of the "other" (Itzigsohn et al., 2005).

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From birth, children are immersed in a world full of visual and social stimuli. As they get older, they begin to notice differences in skin color, hair, and other physical characteristics, both in themselves and in the people around them. These initial observations can lay the groundwork for how children see themselves and how they see others. Racial self-identification, therefore, is not simply an internal process, but is deeply influenced by the child's environment and interactions (Stokes-Brown, 2012)

In parallel, racial preference can emerge as a natural extension of self-identification. Children may develop affinities towards those they perceive as similar to themselves and, in some cases, may show reservations or prejudices towards those they consider different. These preferences are not innate, but are shaped by a combination of family, cultural, and social influences (Newheiser et al., 2014).

The aforementioned suggests the need to approach the subject under study with sensitivity and understanding, since they have profound implications for the socio-emotional development of children and for the cohesion of increasingly diverse societies. By recognizing and understanding the complex nature of racial self-identification and preference in childhood, we can work toward a world where every individual is valued and understood beyond racial categories.

1.1.   Literature review

Children's self-identification and racial preference are a key area of study to achieve happiness and personal fulfillment for children; Therefore, investigating how children perceive and relate to their own racial identity, as well as their preferences towards different racial groups, is essential to understand the development of racial attitudes and prejudices during childhood. In that sense, racial self-identification addresses a child's ability to recognize and label themselves as belonging to a specific racial group. As children get older, they begin to develop a greater understanding of their own racial identity, influenced by various factors such as family, social environment, media, and personal experiences. Understanding how children racially self-identify can provide a better understanding of how racial identity is formed and how it influences self-perception and social interactions (Abramo, 2019; Adamovsky, 2021; Blanco Bosco, 2020; Cerda Lizama, 2022; Ferreira et al., 2020; Mena García, 2020).

Racial preference, on the other hand, refers to those attitudes and preferences that children may have towards different racial groups. Research has shown that, even in early childhood, children can show preferences and biases toward certain racial groups. These preferences can be the result of a variety of influences, such as family socialization, exposure to racial stereotypes in the media, and interactions with other children and adults (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2021).

Recent studies in the areas of self-identification and racial preference indicate that children from racially diverse backgrounds tend to identify more with light skin tones, especially whites (Sacco et al., 2019). This self-perception could be influenced both by the predominant media exposure and by cultural perceptions deeply rooted in their sociocultural environment.

In the USA, a research that sought to examine the ethnic identity of white, Latino and African-American children and adolescents, focusing on the ethnic labels used by white children to

describe themselves and how they relate to their intergroup attitudes; It found that white children who identified with a minority label had more positive ethnic identities and were less likely to show biases in their perceived similarity to their peers in and out of the group. These findings indicate that the ethnic identity chosen by children is as important as the ethnic or racial identity attributed to them in predicting their intergroup attitudes (Brown et al., 2010).

In Brazil, a study analyzed how skin color and age influence the racial identity and preferences of children aged 5 to 10 years, considering aspects such as racial categorization and self-identification. The results showed that most of the children could correctly identify the race of their peers. Black and mulatto children tended to have a biased racial self-categorization. Black children ages 5 to 8 generally identified as black, while older black children identified as mulattoes and showed a preference for this identification. In terms of social preferences based on skin color, white was the most preferred, followed by mulatto, and black was the least preferred (França & Monteiro, 2002).

A longitudinal study conducted in children of U.S. immigrants found significant changes in ethnic self-identification and inherited language use from early to late adolescence. It was determined that there had been an increase in ethnic self-identification and a decrease in preference for using the inherited language over time. The study revealed that self-identification and language use influenced each other, and differences were identified between adolescents from Latin American and Asian immigrant families. In the Asian group, ethnic self-identification and preference for inherited language were more pronounced. While, in the Latin American group, self-identification had had an impact on language preference, in the Asian group, language preference had been a predictor of ethnic self-identification (Geerlings et al., 2014).

In the USA, researchers focused on changes in racial self-identification over time and the underlying mechanisms highlighted that, although sociologists have identified various contextual factors associated with racial belonging, little attention has been paid to specific factors. These include self-perceptions, socioeconomic incentives, and family pressures that affect such changes, particularly among children of immigrants. The study's findings revealed a relationship between self-esteem, self-worth, and family cohesion with changes in racial identification. However, neither socioeconomic status nor depression were shown to influence these changes (Mowen & Stansfield, 2015).

In a study of children aged 3 to 8 years, it was investigated whether biracial children (black/white, Asian/white) showed preferences in learning and relating to their own racial group compared to monoracial children (white, black, Asian). The goal was to understand how racial identity influenced their decisions. The results revealed that although biracial children showed flexibility in their racial identification, their group preferences were contextual and not necessarily aligned with a single racial identity. This finding provides a new perspective on how biracial children perceive and relate to different racial groups (Gaither et al., 2014).

In Brazil, the development of racial attitudes was studied in 542 children and adolescents from Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul, regions with different racial diversities. The aim was to understand how the regional context influenced these attitudes. It was found that, regardless of the region, racial biases existed in favor of higher-status groups. In Bahia, the most diverse region, children

tended to identify with lighter skin tones. These findings underscore the importance of considering regional differences in research on racial attitudes (Sacco et al., 2019).

A study conducted in Canada set out to examine the development of racial and ethnic identity in a little-studied group: native Canadian children in middle childhood, aged between 6 and 11 years. Over five years, these children completed measures related to racial and ethnic identity. The findings suggest that the formation of this identity begins at an early age and that there are multiple paths to affiliation and identification with a racial or ethnic group (Corenblum, 2016). It is worth noting that this research takes an innovative approach with models of latent class growth to identify different trajectories in the development of racial and ethnic identity.

In Australia, indigenous self-identification was explored in triads of biological mothers, fathers, and children. The study sought to determine whether children selected the same indigenous identification as their parents and what factors influenced the coincidences or discrepancies. Mixed responses from parents were found to lead to more indigenous identifications in the children. The identification of the mother had a significant impact on the child's self-identification. These findings contributed to discussions about ethnic and indigenous identity in families and generations (Corenblum, 2016).

According to what has been analyzed so far, it is confirmed that the problem of self-identification and racial preference in children is deeply worrying. These perceptions and attitudes, formed from an early age, can have lasting repercussions on an individual's self-esteem, well-being, and social interactions throughout their life. The preference for certain skin tones or physical features, influenced by entrenched stereotypes and prejudices, can perpetuate cycles of discrimination and exclusion. These biases, which manifest themselves in preferences and attitudes, can lead to the marginalization of certain groups, affecting their access to opportunities and their sense of belonging in society.

This disturbing reality is not alien to Peru, being a nation with vast ethnic and cultural diversity, the complexities of racial and ethnic identity are deeply intertwined with its history and social structure. Over the years, colonial history and socioeconomic dynamics have influenced racial and ethnic perceptions in the country. It is common to find prejudices and stereotypes in Peru that favor certain appearances over others, which can have a significant impact on how Peruvian children and young people see themselves and how they relate to others. The influence of media, education, and everyday interactions can reinforce or challenge these preconceived notions (Turpo-Gebera & Gutiérrez Gala, 2019).

Specifically, in the southern region of Peru, characterized by its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, primary schools house children from diverse backgrounds, including mestizos, quechuas, aymaras, among others. Despite the cultural richness, a worrying phenomenon has been observed in the educational field: self-identification and racial preference in primary school children (Pazos, 2015). In this sense, during recess and group school activities it has been noted that children tend to group according to physical and cultural characteristics, sometimes avoiding interacting with classmates from other ethnic groups. In addition, in pedagogical activities where they are asked to draw their families or themselves, it is notable that many children represent lighter skin tones or features different from their own, suggesting a possible preference or

idealization towards certain racial characteristics. Informal conversations between children also reveal comments and questions about skin color, the language they speak at home, or the traditions they practice. While curiosity is natural in childhood, the way these topics are approached may reflect outside influences and deep-seated perceptions about the identity and value associated with certain racial or ethnic groups.

The present research aims to review self-identification and racial preference in primary school children in urban and rural areas in three regions of southern Peru, using the Doll Test as a tool. This entails valuing and respecting the different cultural expressions, which encompass both ancestral and contemporary knowledge, and which have often been relegated in the Peruvian context, particularly in the urban and rural areas of the Andean region. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the causes and practices that perpetuate inequality, discrimination, racism and symbolic violence towards individuals perceived as "different". It is intended, therefore, to discern the conditions and practices that foster inequality, discrimination and racism, and at the same time, to highlight the importance of accepting and valuing common characteristics, as well as to develop effective communication and interaction skills with those who are perceived as different.

The central objective of this research is, therefore, to understand the dynamics of self-identification and racial preference in urban and rural primary school children in southern Peru, in addition, to discern the underlying causes of discrimination and racism in these contexts, proposing strategies to foster a culture of inclusion and respect. In this sense, it is proposed as a research question to understand: How are the dynamics of self-identification and racial preference manifested in urban and rural primary school children in southern Peru, and what are the underlying causes of discrimination and racism in these contexts that can be addressed through strategies to promote a culture of inclusion and respect?

Materials and methods

2.1 Research Design

This research responds to a naturalized paradigm, with a qualitative approach and a case study design that sought to understand the dynamics of self-identification and racial preference in primary school children in certain regions of southern Peru and to discern the underlying causes of discrimination and racism in these contexts.

2.2 Case Selection

The participants were 24 child students from urban and rural educational institutions in the southern highlands of Peru, distributed as follows: three from the department of Apurimac, four from Ayacucho and five from Huancavelica. A selection was made for convenience, according to the characteristics of the participants' criteria and the consent of the parents for the participation of their children.

2.3   Context of the study

The research was carried out in three departments of the southern region of Peru: Apurímac, Ayacucho and Huancavelica. The unit of analysis was composed of students from the selected educational institutions at the urban and rural primary education level in the aforementioned departments.

2.4 Data collection tools

The instrument used in this study was the "Doll Test". This questionnaire is based on the "Doll Test", a psychological experiment designed in the 1940s by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the United States. The original "Doll Test" was conceived to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of African American children towards race in a context of prejudice, discrimination and racial segregation. In the experiment, the children were presented with two identical dolls, one white and the other black. They were asked a series of questions related to their preferences and perceptions about dolls, such as which one they considered "good", which one they preferred and which one was most similar to them. Initial results revealed that the majority of African-American children showed a preference for the white doll and attributed negative characteristics to the black doll. These findings were interpreted as a manifestation of the harmful effects of segregation and discrimination on the self-esteem and self-image of African-American children (Bergner, 2009; Christensen & Wilson, 2018).

2.5 Data processing

The data collected during the study were subjected to a rigorous process of empirical interpretation. Rather than relying solely on quantitative analyses, the researchers immersed themselves in the data to extract meanings, patterns, and trends through a qualitative approach. This empirical interpretation allowed for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of children's responses and behaviors, considering the cultural and social context in which they find themselves. Coding and categorization techniques were employed to organize and synthesize the information, and multiple reviews were conducted to ensure accuracy and consistency in the interpretation of the data. The triangulation of the data, by comparing the interpretations of several researchers

2.6   Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting the study on self-identification and racial preference in primary school children in southern Peru, informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of the participating children. This consent was clear as to the objectives, methods, and possible implications of the study. The identity of children and their families was guaranteed to be protected at all times, ensuring that the data collected did not contain personally identifiable information and that it was stored securely (Merz, 2018; Miranda-Novales & Villasís-Keever, 2019; World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, 2013).

Given the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region, special emphasis was placed on the training and cultural sensitivity of researchers to avoid any form of bias or prejudice. We sought to ensure that the study did not cause psychological or emotional harm to the children, especially considering the post-assessment reactions observed in some of them. In addition, the importance

of feedback was taken into account, ensuring that the results were communicated appropriately and respectfully to the participants and the educational community, in order to generate understanding and awareness about the implications and findings of the study.

Results

We present the information collected through the information collection instrument applied to 24 students of urban rural primary education in the southern highlands of Peru, through the Doll Test, analyzed and interpreted based on the objectives set.

Figure 1. Student's perception of aesthetics by skin color. In original language Spanish
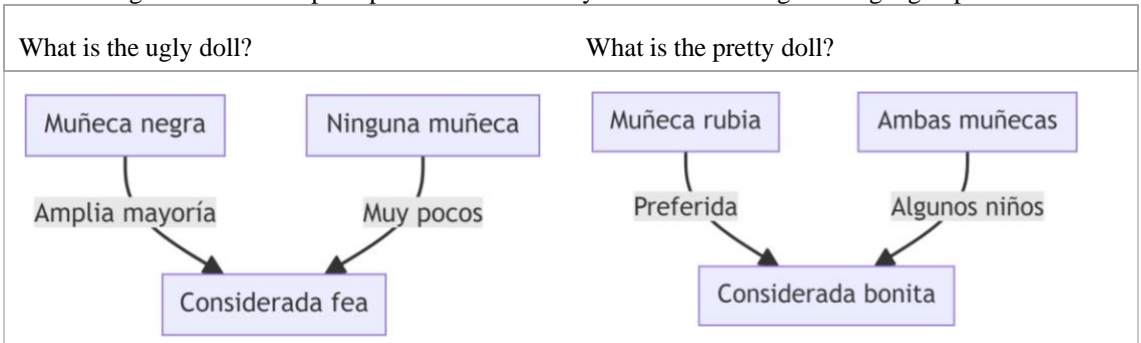
Figure 1 presents the results on questions 1 and 2. In question 1 (What is the ugly doll?) it is observed that a large majority of students chose the black doll as the "ugly" one, while a small percentage considered that neither of the two dolls is ugly. Question 2 (What is the pretty doll?) shows that the blonde doll was preferred by most of the students as the "pretty one". However, there is a notable proportion of children who consider both the black and the blonde dolls to be pretty.

Figure 2. Student value judgment by skin color. In original language Spanish
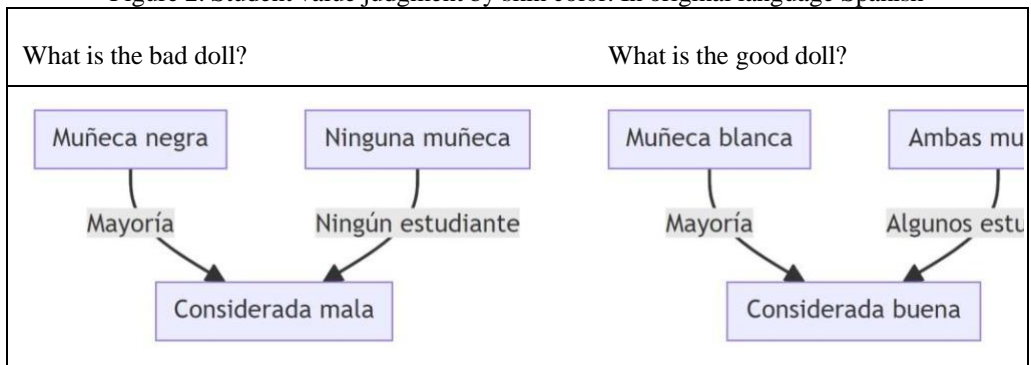

Figure 2 presents the results on questions 3 and 4. In question 3 (What is the bad doll?) it is noted that most of the students identified the black doll as the "bad" one. It is notable that neither student considered both dolls to be bad. In the question. Question 4 (What is the good doll?)

shows that the white doll was preferred by most students as the "good" one. However, there is a notable proportion of children who consider both black and white dolls to be good.

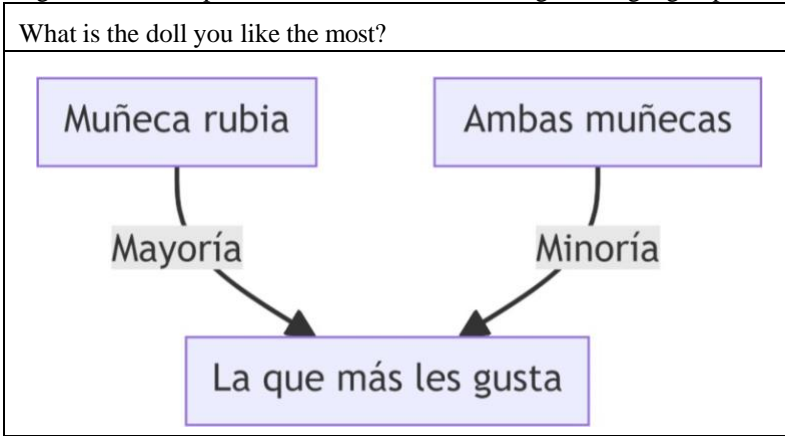Figure 3: Student preference for skin color. In original language Spanish

Figure 3 shows the results of question 5 (What doll do you like best?). Most of the students preferred the blonde doll. Likewise, the minority of students pointed out that they liked both dolls equally.

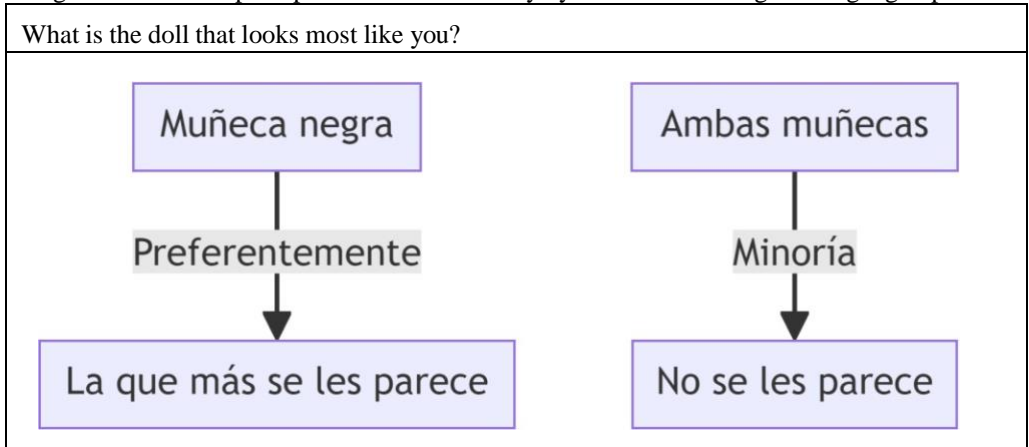Figure 4. Student's perception of their similarity by skin color. In original language Spanish

Figure 4 presents the results on question 6 (What is the doll that most resembles you?). The results show that most students feel that the black doll is the one that most resembles them. This perception is represented by a dominant bar that reflects the high percentage of students who chose this option. On the other hand, the minority of students considered that neither of the two dolls, neither the blonde nor the black, resembles them.

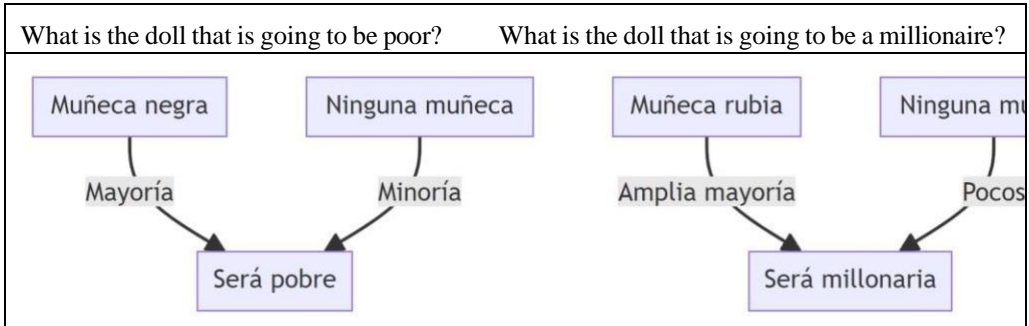Figure 5. Student's perception of economic position by skin color. In original language Spanish

Figure 5 presents the results on questions 7 and 8. In question 7 (Which doll is going to be poor?) it is observed that most students consider that the black doll will be the one with a disadvantaged economic situation in the future. This perception is represented by a dominant bar. On the other hand, there is a smaller bar that reflects the opinion of the minority of students who consider that neither doll will be poor. Likewise, in question 8 (What is the doll that is going to be a millionaire?) a large majority of students consider that the blonde doll will be the one with a privileged economic situation in the future. However, according to the opinion of the few students, neither of the two dolls will be millionaires.

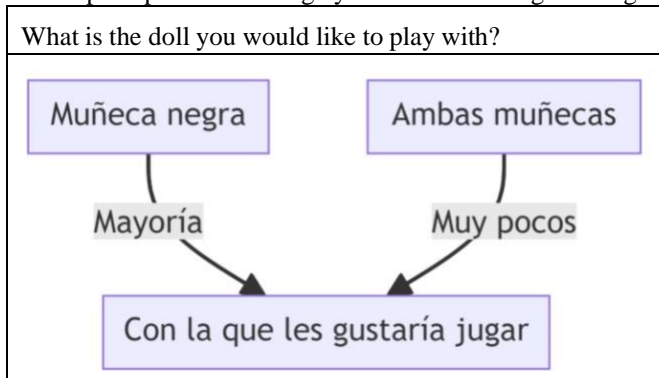Figure 6. Student perception of relating by skin color. In original language Spanish

Figure 6 shows the results of question 9 (What is the doll you would like to play with?). Students prefer to play with the black doll. This preference is based on the fact that most students chose this option. On the other hand, a smaller bar is observed that represents the opinion of the minority of students who indicated that they would like to play with both dolls.

Figure 7. Student opinion on having previously seen a black fur doll. In original language Spanish

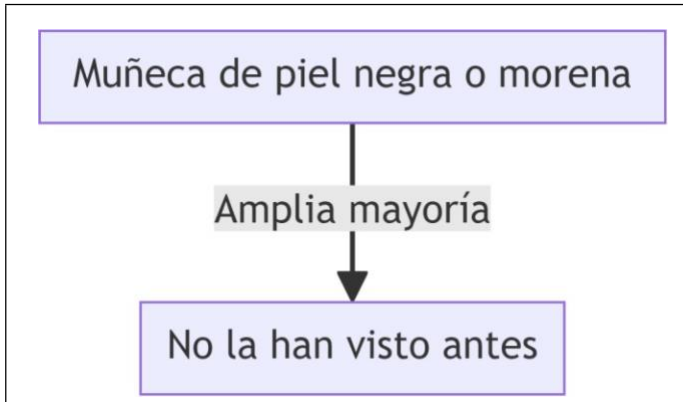Have you seen a black or brown skin doll before?
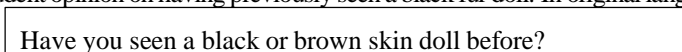
Figure 7 presents the results of question 10 (Have you seen a black or brown skin doll before?), which shows that a large majority of students have had no previous experience or have not seen a black or brown skin doll before. This perception is reflected in the high percentage of students who chose this option.

Discussion

The present research sought to understand how the dynamics of self-identification and racial preference are manifested in urban and rural primary school children in southern Peru, and what are the underlying causes of discrimination and racism in these contexts that can be addressed through strategies to promote a culture of inclusion and respect.

In relation to the student's perception of aesthetics by skin color, a worrying trend is revealed in students' perceptions of beauty in relation to the skin color of dolls. This trend is consistent with previous research that indicated that children from racially diverse backgrounds tend to identify more with light skin tones, especially whites (Sacco et al., 2019). It is possible that the predominant media exposure and cultural perceptions deeply rooted in their sociocultural environment could be influencing this self-perception. It is encouraging to note that a proportion of students recognized the beauty in both dolls, indicating a more inclusive perspective. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown that multicultural intervention can have a positive impact on children's racial and gender attitudes (Maciej Serda et al., 2013). However, it is essential to consider that racial discrimination and socioeconomic factors, such as educational attainment, can influence how racial discrimination affects health and self-perception (Allen et al., 2019)

Regarding the category "Student value judgment by skin color", racial stereotypes are evident in the perceptions of students. These perceptions, which predominantly associate the black doll with the label of "bad" and the white doll with that of "good", reflect a problem rooted in society that has been the subject of study in various studies. In this regard, a study that investigated how to reduce implicit racial and gender bias in children showed that, after an intervention, children reduced their implicit negative biases (Maciej Serda et al., 2013). This finding is relevant to our

research, as it suggests that educational interventions can be effective in combating racial stereotypes from an early age. Similarly, in Brazil, a study showed that black and mulatto children tend to have a biased racial self-categorization, and that white was the most preferred skin color (França & Monteiro, 2002). These results reinforce the idea that racial stereotypes are present in different cultures and contexts, and that they can manifest themselves from an early age and must therefore be monitored and corrected in time.

Related to the category "Student preference for skin color", a marked inclination of students for the blonde doll was identified. This preference may be indicative of cultural or media influences that favor certain physical traits. However, it is encouraging to note that a minority of students showed a more inclusive perspective, showing no preference for either doll. This inclination toward specific physical traits, particularly lighter skin tones, has been documented in previous studies. For example, recent research has indicated that children from racially diverse backgrounds tend to identify more with light skin tones (Sacco et al., 2019). This self-perception, consistent with our findings, may be influenced by both dominant media exposure and deeply rooted cultural perceptions in their sociocultural environment. Our results are also consistent with research conducted in Brazil where black and mulatto children tend to have a biased racial self-categorization, showing a preference for lighter skin tones (França & Monteiro, 2002). This reinforces our thesis that preferences and perceptions based on skin color are present in different cultures and contexts, and are consistent with our observation.

Regarding the category Student's perception of their similarity by skin color, most identified with the black doll. This result could reflect the demographic composition of the interviewed group, the way in which students interpret and relate to certain physical traits. It is interesting to note that there was a minority who felt that none of the dolls resembled them, which may indicate a diversity of identities and perceptions within the group. Recent studies show that children from racially diverse backgrounds tend to identify more with light skin tones. This trend contrasts with our finding because most of the students identified with the black doll (Sacco et al., 2019). Likewise, the study in Brazil on how skin color and age influence children's racial identity and preferences shows that black and mulatto children have a biased racial self-categorization. These findings partially coincide with our results, where most students identified with the black doll (França & Monteiro, 2002).

Similarly, in the category Student Perception of Economic Position by Skin Color, the majority of students anticipated that the black doll would have a disadvantaged economic future, while the blonde doll would be economically privileged. These perceptions could be indicative of racial stereotypes and prejudices rooted in society, which associate skin color with socioeconomic status. It is worrying that, from an early age, students already have these preconceived notions. However, it is relevant to note that there was a minority group that did not associate the future economic situation with the skin color of the dolls. In this regard, research carried out in San Francisco highlights the relationship between racial discrimination and health, suggesting that socioeconomic position, such as educational level, can influence how racial discrimination affects health. Although this study does not directly address students' perception of economic position by skin color, it highlights the importance of considering socioeconomic factors in racial perception (Allen et al., 2019).

When addressing the category Student perception of relating by skin color, The results revealed a notable preference of the students to play with the black doll. This result is interesting and could reflect a variety of factors, from personal identification with the doll to the influence of external factors such as culture, family, or media exposure. Students may be more attracted to specific characteristics of the black doll or simply seek diversity in their toys. Although most showed a clear preference, it is relevant to note that there was a group of students who expressed a desire to play with both dolls, suggesting an openness and lack of prejudice in their choices. When contrasting these results with the scientific literature consulted, we found that children from racially diverse contexts tend to identify more with light skin tones, which is in line with the result of our research where students preferred the black doll (Sacco et al., 2019); however, our results do not coincide with research carried out in Brazil, where black and mulatto children tend to have a biased racial self-categorization, and white was the most preferred skin color. This could contrast with the result of the research, where the black doll was preferred by the students (França & Monteiro, 2002).

Finally, the Student Opinion on Having Previously Seen a Black Skin Doll category, revealed that most students have had no previous experience or have not been exposed to black or brown skin dolls. This finding could be indicative of a lack of diversity in the supply of toys in the market or in the purchasing preferences of caregivers. The absence of representation of dolls of different skin tones in children's play experience can influence how they perceive and value diversity in their environment.

Conclusions

Regarding aesthetics by skin color, it is highlighted that students associate beauty with light skin tones, possibly influenced by media exposure and deep-rooted cultural perceptions. However, hope emerges when it is observed that a proportion of students recognize the beauty in both dolls, suggesting a more inclusive perspective.When we delve into the value judgment by skin color, racial stereotypes are revealed in the perceptions of students, who tend to associate the black doll with negative connotations and the white doll with positive ones. Despite this problem, early educational interventions are emerging as a promising tool to counteract these stereotypes. In relation to the preference for skin color, although an inclination towards the blonde doll predominates, a minority of students demonstrate a balanced vision, without opting for any of the dolls, reflecting a more open perspective. This trend, which manifests itself in different cultures and contexts, highlights the universality of preferences based on skin color. Regarding the perception of similarity by skin color, it is notable that most of the students identify with the black doll, which could be a reflection of the demographic composition of the group reviewed. However, a minority does not see themselves reflected in any of the dolls, evidencing a rich diversity of identities and perceptions. When reflecting on the students' perception of the economic position associated with skin color, a worrying trend is revealed: they anticipate a disadvantaged economic future for the black doll and a privileged future for the blonde doll. This association highlights racial stereotypes and prejudices rooted in society. Despite the trends observed in other categories, in the field of relating to skin color, students show an inclination to play with the black doll, which could reflect both an openness in their choices and the influence of various external factors. In addition, when considering previous experience with black leather

dolls, it is revealed that most have not had contact with dolls of this type, which could indicate a lack of diversity in the toy offer and in shopping preferences. Finally, this research reveals the palpable presence of racial stereotypes and prejudices in students' perceptions and preferences regarding skin color. These findings highlight the urgent need to foster a culture of inclusion and respect from childhood and the relevance of implementing educational and cultural interventions to eradicate these stereotypes.

Contributions to scientific knowledge

The fundamental contribution of this research lies in unraveling racial perceptions and prejudices in primary school students in specific regions of southern Peru. By identifying troubling trends, such as beauty's association with light skin tones and entrenched racial stereotypes, the study provides a primary empirical basis for early educational interventions. In addition, by highlighting the presence of more inclusive perspectives in some students, it offers a glimmer of hope and a starting point to foster a culture of respect and diversity that accompanies people throughout life. Finally, this research brings to the surface critical areas of intervention and contributes significantly to the dialogue on racial inclusion in educational contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. Study sponsors had no influence on the study design; the collection, analysis or interpretation of data; the writing of the manuscript; or the decision to publish the results.

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