No Place for Hate® Activity Library
Representing Me: Diversity, Visibility and the Media

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters

In September 2019, Kodi Lee won *America's Got Talent,* which was a groundbreaking and emotional victory. Kodi Lee is a person who is Asian-American, blind and has autism. Our country is becoming increasingly diverse in many ways, but the books we read, the television and movies we watch and the games we play do not reflect that diversity. The 2019 annual Hollywood Diversity Report found that among film leads, women and people of color made up only 32.9% and 19.8% respectively. Across the 100 top-grossing movies of 2018, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reports that only 1.6% of characters were depicted with a disability, a four-year low. Of the same 100 films, only two portrayed a gay protagonist. Clearly, there is more progress needed to ensure the stories told in our society reflect all people.

Grade Level

Grades 6–8

Learning Objectives

- Students will explore the extent to which the television shows and movies they watch portray a diversity of characters.
- Students will consider the importance of representation and visibility in movies and television.
- Students will learn about and reflect on the history of and trends in diversity in movies and television.

Materials Needed

- Video: Blind Singer with Autism Wins 'America's Got Talent' | NBC Nightly News
- Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows
- Article: Why it's so important for kids to see diverse TV, movie characters
- Data Collection: Television and Movie Analysis

Words You Might Use

Diversity: Different or varied. The population of the United States is made up of people belonging to diverse groups characterized by culture, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.

Represent: To stand for a group that shares similar identity characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Stereotype: An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences.

Core Activity

Show the video, Blind Singer with Autism Wins 'America's Got Talent' | NBC Nightly News. Explain that in 2019, Kodi Lee won *America's Got Talent.* Explain that Kodi Lee is a person who is Asian-American, blind and has autism. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- How did you feel while watching?

- Why is it significant and noteworthy that Kodi Lee won?

- What do you think it means to people who share Kodi Lee's identity characteristics?

- Why do you think it's important that people like Kodi Lee are visible to the public?

Next, explain to students that they are going to examine the diversity in television shows and movies. Have students write down three TV shows and three movies they watch, like or know about. Then, have students each select one of those and complete the Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows. Review the questions so students understand what is being asked. After completing their worksheets, have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby. Each student should take two minutes to summarize what they wrote on their sheets and to share any thoughts they have about it. Then place all the worksheets around the classroom (or eventually, around the school) and have students move around gallery-style to look at their classmates' information.

Reconvene the class and engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:

- Would anyone like to share their movie or television program and how it is or is not diverse?

- What thoughts do you have after reflecting on the diversity of the movies and TV shows on the worksheets?

- Did you notice any patterns in what our class watches?

- What is the impact of seeing diversity? What is the impact of not seeing diversity?
- What did you learn by doing this?
- What more would you like to know?

Finally, have students read the article "Why it's so important for kids to see diverse TV, movie characters."

Engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:

- Why does the author think movies like "Black Panther" and "A Wrinkle in Time" are important?
- What research (from the 1970's to present) did the author share in her essay and what did it reveal?
- Were you surprised by what the research showed about race, ethnicity and gender diversity in movies and TV? Please explain.
- What are some of the reasons the author suggests for why diversity is important?
- When characters of color are portrayed, how does the way they are depicted lead to or perpetuate stereotypes?
- What does the writer say about why those stereotypes persist? Why do you think they continue?
- Why do you think it's important or relevant?
- Are there other things in your life where you feel there's not representation of different identity groups? Please explain.

Optional culmination: Have students create a poster that provides an illustration and answers this question: *Why does diversity in entertainment matter?* Hang the posters around the school.

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- With the No Place for Hate Committee (or a separate committee that includes students, staff, administrators and parents), conduct an annual school audit that examines the extent to which the school's curriculum, imagery, literature, technology, etc. reflects the diversity of both the school population and society at large. Have the committee present their results to the rest of the student body, as a schoolwide presentation or classroom-by-classroom. Facilitate follow-up discussions about strategies to enhance diverse representation at school.

- Have students do their own content analysis research on diversity and television and movies. Have students watch a week of different television shows or a few movies (define time and number

parameters in advance). Give each student several copies of Data Collection: Television and Movie Analysis. They will need one sheet for each TV show or movie they watch. Explain that as they watch the programs or movies, students should record their findings directly on the worksheet. After completing their data collection, have students compile all the information they collected and write up their results in an essay or PowerPoint presentation to share it with the class and eventually shared school-wide. Their project should include their answers to these questions: *What conclusions did you come to by collecting and analyzing this information? What did you learn by doing this?* As a class or a school, you can create a bar graph or pie chart based on their findings.

- Have students identify a television network, movie producer/ production company, advertising company or book publisher to share their thoughts about diversity and representation. Have students write to the company and either share their (1) concerns opinions the lack of diversity in that media outlet or (2) commend a company where there exists diverse representation.

Home Connection

Share ADL's Table Talk: Diversity in Media and Why Visibility Matters with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about identity, the importance of diversity of movies and television, and representation in general. This will contribute to a school and classroom environment where discussing identity and the importance of diversity are encouraged.

Virtual Variation

Have students watch the Blind Singer with Autism Wins 'America's Got Talent' video on their own or with a family member. After watching, have them respond to the four questions in writing or by making an audio recording of their responses. For the next part of the activity, have students select a favorite TV program or movie and complete the *Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows* handout; then engage students in a virtual classroom conversation using the discussion questions. Students will then read the article, "Why it's so important for kids to see diverse TV, movie characters." After reading the article, have students write and submit a response to one of the discussion questions. To write the essay, students should combine what they learned from the original article with some additional research they conduct on their own.

Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows

Name: _____

1. Name one of the TV shows or movies that you talked about with your partner.

   _____

2. What is the TV show or movie about?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Name the main and secondary characters and their identity group characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. (For example, on *Black-ish,* Andre Johnson, African American, male, straight, parent, middle-age)

   a. _____

      _____

   b. _____

      _____

   c. _____

      _____

   d. _____

      _____

4. Reflecting on all of the TV shows or movies you listed earlier, how diverse is your list of shows or movies? Why do you think that is?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

Opinion: Why it's so important for kids to see diverse TV, movie characters

By Julie Dobrow, Calvin Gidney and Jennifer Burton, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.29.2019
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Word Count: 714
Level MAX

Image 1. The Netflix show "One Day at a Time" is about a Cuban-American family living in Los Angeles, California. Pictured are (from left) Marcel Ruiz, Justina Machado and Isabella Gomez. Photo courtesy of Michael Yarish, Netflix

The hit movie "Black Panther" earned its hype. The hype was as bombastic as any feat the movie's superhero characters might perform. The film was praised for its layered story and what's been described as its "Afro-futurist" cast. Another recent blockbuster film with an interracial cast was "A Wrinkle in Time."

No matter how much money or how many awards films like "Black Panther" and "A Wrinkle in Time" amass, our research strongly suggests another reason they're important: Children need a diverse universe of media images. And for the most part, they haven't had one.

Some Progress, But …

In the 1970s, Boston University communications professor F. Earle Barcus began publishing the results of content analyses he had conducted on children's television. His findings showed large disparities between the numbers of male and female characters. They also showed disparities between the numbers of white and non-white characters. In a 1983 study, Barcus analyzed over 1,100 characters in 20 children's television programs and found that only 42 were black. Just 47 others belonged to some group other than white.

Researchers have kept studying the issue. They found that the animated worlds that children see on television are out of sync with their real environments. Over the past seven years, we've continued to study this topic. We

work with the Children's Television Project (CTV) at Tufts University. We've documented images of different races, gender and ethnicities in the most popular children's animated series. We've also taken steps to understand why stereotyped portrayals still exist. Finally, we're starting to develop ways to study and collect data about how children process the images they're exposed to.

We've categorized the images children see based on a system for coding the race, ethnic identity, gender and age of primary and secondary characters. We've also included a sociolinguistic component to the analysis. This is because children absorb both sights and sounds as they process media.

The good news is that the world of children's animated television is more diverse than it used to be. For example, we've found that female characters account for just under one-third of all characters. This may appear discouraging at first. Yet, it's a significant improvement from the 1:6 ratio that F. Earle Barcus had previously found. It is also better than the 1:4 ratio that communications professors Teresa Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos found in the 1990s.

There's more racial and ethnic diversity, too. Black characters account for 5.6 percent of our total sample of over 1,500 characters. (A study conducted in 1972, by researchers Gilbert Mendelson and Morissa Young for Action for Children's Television, found that over 60 percent of the TV shows in their sample had no racial minority characters at all.) There are many more Asian or Asian-American characters (11.6 percent). However, this is likely due to the prevalence of a few popular cartoons featuring mostly Asian characters. "Legend of Korra" is one example.

Image 2. Korra is the protagonist of the famous cartoon entitled "Legend of Korra," which is also known for having mostly non-white characters. Image: BagoGames/Flickr.

The bad news is that there's still a long distance to go. African-Americans represent an estimated 13.3 percent of the U.S. population. Meanwhile, Hispanic or Latinos make up 17.8 percent of the population, but we've found Latino characters only made up 1.4 percent of our sample.

Furthermore, stereotypes persist in both how characters are drawn and how they talk, with "bad guys" using non-American accents and dialects. We see this in characters like Dr. Doofenshmirtz from "Phineas and Ferb" or Nightmare Moon on "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."

We wanted to understand why stereotyping persists. So, we interviewed some of the people who write, direct, cast and provide vocal talent for children's animated programming. We haven't yet completed this part of the study. However, it seems that economic pressures compel the creators of children's animated programming to rely on stereotyping as a kind of shorthand.

For example, one director of a popular children's animated show told us, "If something's worked before, you tend to just use it again." It gets used even if that "something" is stereotyped. An African-American voice actor reported being in auditions where he was told to make something sound "urban." This is a code word for a more stereotyped African-American dialect.

Kids, Quick To Judge

But the real question is why this all matters.

Studies from many fields have shown that it's important for children to see characters who look like themselves and their families. It's important for those characters to sound like them as well.

There's a relationship between low self-esteem and negative portrayals of racial groups. There's also an association between poor self-esteem and the lack of portrayals of a particular group. Others have found that media misrepresentations of ethnic groups can cause confusion about aspects of their identity among children of these groups.

In our study, we show children images of diverse animated faces and play voices that use different dialects. We then ask kids to tell us if the person is good, bad or if they can't tell. We follow this up by asking them why they think that.

We're not far enough along yet in our research to provide definitive answers to our questions. But we do have some preliminary findings.

First and foremost, kids notice differences.

We presented first- and second-grade children with cartoon faces they haven't seen before. We found that they have no problem sorting them into "good" and "bad" characters. They are able to tell us lengthy stories about why they think a character might be a hero or villain. Interestingly, they do so with minimal information. Sometimes this seems to be based on their belief that a character looks like another media character they've seen. They'll then make the assumption that a face they're shown looks like "a princess" or "someone who goes to jail."

With the lack of diversity in the world of children's television, it's not surprising that kids would make associations with so little information. But it's also a bit alarming, given what we know about the prevalence of stereotyping. Children seem quick to make attributions of who's good and who's evil.

It's important that children not only have a diverse universe of characters but also that these characters have diverse characteristics. It's okay for characters to have non-American accents. But good guys – not just bad guys – should have them, too. The heroes can be male and female, and non-white characters don't have to be relegated to the role of sidekick — they can assume leading roles.

This brings us back to why these new films are so groundbreaking. Yes, "Black Panther" is demonstrating that a film about a black superhero can shatter box-office records. Yes, "A Wrinkle in Time" is the first $100 million movie directed by a woman of color.

But beyond all that, these films show the complexity and variety of black male and female experiences.

Perhaps, TV shows and animated series will follow suit. If that happens, we will finally move beyond television stereotypes. We will move beyond what children have been exposed to for far too long.

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Julie Dobrow is a senior lecturer of Child Study and Human Development, at Tufts University in Massachusetts.
Calvin Gidney teaches in the Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts.
Jennifer Burton teaches at the Department of Drama and Dance at Tufts.

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Data Collection: Television and Movie Analysis

Your Name: _____

Title of TV show or movie: _____

1. Name the main and secondary characters and their identity group characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. (For example, on *Black-ish,* Andre Johnson, African American, male, straight, parent, middle-age)

    a. _____

    _____

    b. _____

    _____

    c. _____

    _____

    d. _____

    _____

2. What is the basic storyline of the movie or TV show?

    _____

    _____

    _____

3. Is the topic of identity or diversity discussed or addressed in some way? Please explain.

    _____

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    _____

4. Do you notice any stereotypes? Are certain characters portrayed in stereotyped ways? If so, please record examples.

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5. Is there anything else you found interesting or noteworthy related to diversity?

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6. Summarize your findings on this show/movie.

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