

On-Screen Diversity:

Why Visibility in Media Matters

Compelling Question: Why is it important to see the diversity of our society represented in media?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	4-5	45–60 Minutes	Reading: R1, R7 Writing: W2, W4 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL4 Language: L4, L6
6-7	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[Diverse Books Matter](#)

[Dolls Are Us](#)

[Representing the People: Diversity and Elections](#)

[Role Models and Stereotypes: Misty Copeland's Story](#)

[Who Am I? Identity Poems](#)

Other Resources

[Dos and Don'ts with Special Diversity Events](#)

[Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)

[Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)

Key Words

(See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).)

accent
analyze
assumption
complex
culture
discrimination
groundbreaking
hero
interracial
race
representation
reputation
research
self-esteem
stereotypes
villain

LESSON OVERVIEW

In September 2019, Kodi Lee won *America's Got Talent*, which was a groundbreaking and emotional victory. Lee is a person who is Asian-American, blind and has autism. While he is one example of on-screen diversity, there is still more work to be done to ensure that the stories told reflect all people. 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.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn how different types of entertainment, like movies and television, reflect our diverse society. Students will explore the importance of representation and conduct their own research about various characters in films and TV programming.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore the extent to which the movies and television shows they watch portray a diversity of characters.
- Students will consider the importance of representation and visibility in movies and television.
- Students will conduct their own research study about the diversity of films and television.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Blind Singer With Autism Wins 'America's Got Talent'](#) YouTube clip (2019, 15 sec. NBC Nightly News, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJYroBhoteQ>)
- [Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows](#) (one for each student)
- [Identity Group Definitions](#) (for teacher, optional to distribute to students)
- [Opinion: A diversity of media characters is necessary for children](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Data Collection: Television and Movie Analysis](#) (several copies for each student)

PROCEDURES

Video Viewing: America's Got Talent

1. Begin the lesson by asking students if they know who won the recent (2019) *America's Got Talent*. Elicit or explain that Kodi Lee was recently named the winner of the 14th season in 2019.
2. Show the video [Blind Singer With Autism Wins 'America's Got Talent'](#).
3. Ask students: *What did you learn about Kodi Lee from the video?* Explain that Kodi Lee is blind, has autism and is Asian-American. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Why do you think it is notable that Kodi won?
 - What do you think it means to people who share Kodi's identity characteristics?
 - Why do you think it's important that people like Kodi are visible to the general public?
4. Explain to students that when people talk about diversity and identity, they sometimes use the terms "mirror" and "window," especially when discussing children's books. Ask: *Does anyone know why the words mirrors and windows are used to describe children's books?*
5. Explain that mirror books (or movies, television shows, etc.) reflect back to people who they are, so they can see themselves in what they are reading and watching. Mirror books provide reflections of social group identity characteristics like culture, race, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Ask: *Why do you think these kinds of mirrors are important?*

If students are unsure, ask if they have ever seen a movie (or a television show or read a book) that had a character who shared their identity, and how it made them feel. Consider sharing an example of your own.
6. Explain that window books (or movies, TV, etc.) provide a view into other people's lives and experiences with which students may be unfamiliar. Window books provide information about and insight into identity groups they may not know much about.
7. Ask students: *Why do you think these kinds of windows are important? How do windows and mirrors relate to Kodi Lee winning America's Got Talent?*

Analysis: Movies and TV Shows

1. Tell students that they are going to examine diversity in movies and television shows. Have students write on a piece of paper three TV shows and three movies they watch, like or know about. For younger students, they can also draw a picture of their favorite characters from the show.
2. Distribute the [Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows](#) handout to each student. Review the questions with students so they understand what is being asked and give them ten minutes to complete the handout.

Note: If you need to provide definitions for different identity groups, read them aloud from the [Identity Group Definitions](#) or describe in your own words.
3. 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.
4. Have students hang their completed Diversity Analysis of Movies and TV Shows around the classroom. Then have all students move around the room, gallery style, to look at their classmates' information.
5. Reconvene the class and engage them in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Would anyone like to share their movie or TV program and how it is diverse or not?
 - What thoughts do you have after reflecting on the diversity of all of the movies and TV shows on the worksheets?
 - Did you notice any patterns in what our class reads and 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?
6. Ask students: *What do you think being visible and representing (to stand for a group who shares similar identity characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) has to do with diversity and movies, TV, etc.?*

Briefly explain why it is important that people in different identity groups are visible and represented in all aspects of our society, including movies and television. The focus of this discussion is similar to the earlier one about mirrors and windows—everyone gets to see themselves reflected and we learn about others through different media sources. There tends to be less (or sometimes non-existent) representation of certain groups, usually those that are in the minority or marginalized, which makes it even more important to represent those groups. Also, it is important to look at *how* people and certain groups are represented because they may be visible but portrayed in one-dimensional, stereotypical or negative ways.

7. Ask students: *As you moved around the room looking at your classmates' information about TV shows and movies and the identities of the characters, which groups are represented most? Which are represented least or not at all? Why do you think that is?*



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of [Opinion: A diversity of media characters is necessary for children](#) to each student and give them 10–15 minutes to read the essay silently. As an alternative, you can read the article together, having students take turns reading aloud or you can read it aloud.
2. 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?
 - 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?
3. After discussing the reading, share some or all of the following data about diversity and representation in the TV and movie businesses.
 - In a study of movies in 2017, people of color made up 19.8% of film leads. (40% of the U.S. population are people of color.)
 - In the same study, women made up 32.9% of film leads. (Women constitute slightly more than 50% of the U.S. population.)
 - During the 2017-18 television season, of the 45 new scripted television shows, four (9% of total) creators were people of color (all black) and seven (16% of total) creators were female.
 - Of the new TV shows during the same season, women played leads in 28% of them, a drop from previous years. In 28% of the shows, people of color played the lead, an increase from the prior year.
 - Across the 100 top-grossing movies of 2016, 2.7% of characters were depicted with a disability.
 - Of the same 100 movies of 2016, only one portrayed a gay protagonist (i.e., leading or main character).

Note: This information comes from the articles and sources listed below, which include additional data.

4. After sharing the information, engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
 - What do you think about this information?
 - Why do you think the representation of certain identity groups in television and movies is so low?
 - What other identity groups are not represented well in television and movies?
 - What do you think should be done about the lack of representation in movies and TV?



Optional Homework: Data Collection

1. As a follow-up to the lesson, have students do their own research on diversity in television and movies. They can choose to watch a week of different television shows or a few movies. You can define the parameters (e.g., number of hours such as 8–10 hours total or number of movies or TV programs such as three movies or ten TV programs) and assign the project accordingly.
2. Distribute several copies of the [Data Collection: Television and Movie Analysis](#) to each student. Review the handout and explain that for each TV show or movie they watch, they are to complete a separate data collection analysis sheet.
3. After completing their data collection, have students compile all the information they collected. Explain that they are to write up their results in an essay or PowerPoint presentation and present it to the class. 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?
4. As an extension activity, have students create a bar graph or pie chart based on their individual findings, or together as a class, create one graph based on all the data students collected.

Closing

Do a go-round where students share one thing that can be done to increase the diversity on television and in the movies.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“Despite reckoning on Hollywood diversity, TV industry has gotten worse”](#) (*The Guardian*, February 27, 2018)
- [Hollywood Diversity Report: Five Years of Progress and Missed Opportunities](#) (UCLA, 2018)
- [“Hollywood sticks to the script: Films aren’t more inclusive, despite a decade of advocacy”](#) (USC Annenberg, July 31, 2017)
- [“On YouTube, people with disabilities create content to show and normalize their experiences”](#) (*The Washington Post*, October 6, 2019)
- [“UCLA diversity report finds women and minorities still underrepresented in film and TV”](#) (*Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 2019)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
Writing
W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

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?

Identity Group Definitions

disability

A mental or physical condition that restricts an individual's ability to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working or caring for oneself).

ethnicity

Refers to a person's identification with a group based on characteristics such as shared history, ancestry, language and geographic origin, and culture.

gender

The socially defined "rules" and roles for men and women in a society. Dominant western society generally defines gender as a binary system—men and women—but many cultures define gender as more fluid and existing along a continuum.

gender identity

Relates to a person's internal sense of their own gender. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

race

Refers to the categories into which society places individuals on the basis of physical characteristics (such as skin color, hair type, facial form and eye shape).

religion

An organized system of beliefs, observances, rituals and rules used to worship a god or group of gods.

sexual orientation

Determined by one's emotional, physical and/or romantic attractions.

socioeconomic status

An individual or family's economic and social position in relation to others, as measured by factors such as income, wealth and occupation.



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 09.29.19
 Reprinted with permission from <https://newsela.com/read/elem-diversity-tv-movies/id/42909/>.

Word Count **714**
 Level **810L**



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 movie "Black Panther" was a smash hit. It was praised for its story and its African-American stars. Another recent hit film with an interracial cast is "A Wrinkle in Time." The lead actress is an African-American girl named Storm Reid.

Movies like "Black Panther" and "A Wrinkle in Time" make plenty of money and earn many awards. But our research shows another reason why they're important: Children need to see people from many different cultures and races on television and in movies. For the most part, they haven't.

Representation In Children's Television

In the 1970s, Boston University professor F. Earle Barcus looked at children's television. He found many more male characters than female. Almost all characters were white. In a 1983 study, Barcus analyzed more than 1,100 characters in 20 children's television programs. He found that only 42 were black, and just 47 others belonged to some group other than white. Children's television looks nothing like the world kids see around them.



Image 2. Korra is the protagonist of the famous cartoon entitled "Legend of Korra," which is also known for having mostly non-white characters. This does not happen often on U.S. TV shows.

Over the past seven years, we've continued to study this problem. The good news is that children's cartoons have become much more diverse. For example, we found that one-third of all characters are female and about 1 out of 20 characters is black. That may not sound great but it's better than it used to be. There are also many more Asian or Asian-American characters.

The bad news is that there's still a long way to go. About 1 out of 7 Americans is African-American, and just under 1 of about 5 is Hispanic or Latino. This does not match the number of black and Latino people on television. Only about 1 out of every 100 characters on television is Latino.

Furthermore, the shows use stereotypes of how characters look and talk, where "bad guys" often have non-American accents. Stereotypes are assumptions about groups of people. This means we already have ideas about what those people are like. But we don't have proof that our ideas are true. Stereotypes ignore the fact that people in the same group can be very different. They can lead to discrimination or give certain groups a bad reputation.

We see this in characters like Dr. Doofenshmirtz from "Phineas and Ferb" or Nightmare Moon on "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."

Important For Child Development

The real question is why this all matters.

It's important for children to see characters who look and sound like them. More kids have low self-esteem when they see their group shown in a negative way. In our study, we showed children images of cartoon faces and played voices that use different accents. We asked kids to tell us if the person was good, bad or if they couldn't tell. Then, we asked them why they thought that.

First- and second-graders had no problem sorting these faces into "good" and "bad" characters. They told stories about why a character was a hero or villain. They said a face looked like "a princess" or like "someone who goes to jail."

It's not surprising that children were quick to say who's good and who's evil. They see so many stereotypes on television.

That is why it's important for characters to have different traits. It's okay for characters to have non-American accents, but good guys should have them, too. Heroes should be male and also female. African-American and Hispanic characters should have more leading roles.

This brings us back to why these new movies are so groundbreaking. "Black Panther" shows that a movie about a black superhero can be a hit. "A Wrinkle in Time" is the first \$100 million movie directed by a woman of color. Beyond that, these movies show us that people are all different and complex.

Maybe TV shows and animated series will do the same. If that happens, we will finally move beyond television stereotypes. Children have been seeing them for far too long.

Julie Dobrow and Calvin Gidney teach child studies and human development at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

Jennifer Burton teaches filmmaking and media studies at Tufts.

Reproduced with permission.

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.

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

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

6. Summarize your findings on this show/movie.
