

Casting of ‘The Little Mermaid’ Brings Pride and Prejudice

Compelling Question: Why does having a diverse representation of princesses—and characters in general—matter?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2, SL5 Language: L4, L5
6	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Diverse Books Matter](#)
- [Dolls are Us](#)
- [Mo'Ne Davis and Gender Stereotypes](#)
- [Role Models and Stereotypes: Misty Copeland's Story](#)
- [What "Draw-A-Scientist" Reveals about Gender Stereotypes](#)

Other Resources

- [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)

Early Childhood FAQs

- [Why Is It Important to Teach Young Children to Appreciate Diversity?](#)

Key Words

animated
controversy
diversity
hurtful
made-up
protests
racism
remake
representation
spirit
woman of color

LESSON OVERVIEW

In July 2019, it was announced that Halle Bailey, an African-American actress and singer, would play the leading role of Ariel for the upcoming live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. There has been some controversy about this casting decision. Some critics questioned why an African-American actress was chosen for the role because, according to them, the character should be White; the 1989 version of Ariel was a White, red-headed character. Some detractors even began using the hashtag #NotMyAriel on social media to express their negative opinion about the casting choice.

At the same time, many praised and applauded the decision to cast a Black woman as Ariel. Artists instantly started to draw depictions of Ariel as a Black mermaid. As someone posted on Twitter, "For a little Black girl who grew up obsessed with the 1989 movie. THIS IS A DREAM! I can't wait to wallpaper every inch of my belongings with images of Halle as Ariel." This will be the first time a theatrically-released Disney film has cast a woman of color as a princess in a traditionally white role. A few days after the announcement, a *Morning Consult/The Hollywood Reporter* [poll](#) found that 60% of the adults surveyed who were shown a picture of the actress supported Bailey's casting and 17% opposed the decision.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about the recent casting decision of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, reflect on the lack of diversity of Disney princesses and consider the general importance of diversity and representation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore the significance of a recent casting decision made by the director of *The Little Mermaid*.
- Students will reflect on the lack of diversity of Disney princesses.
- Students will consider why diversity and representation in different forms of media are important and how they impact people.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Construction paper and drawing materials (crayons, markers, colored pencils) for each student
- [Black actress cast as "The Little Mermaid" has fans and critics](#) (one copy for each student)

- Prepare three (3) signs to put along a continuum on the wall for the “Here I Stand” activity as follows: (1) AGREE, (2) DISAGREE and (3) NOT SURE/IN BETWEEN

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing: What Do Disney Princesses Look Like?

1. Start the lesson by asking students: *Have you ever seen The Little Mermaid? Who is the main character? Have you heard about the recent decision to cast Halle Bailey, an African-American actress, as Ariel, the main character?*
2. Explain to students that during this lesson, they will discuss a recent casting decision about the remake of *The Little Mermaid*, the diversity (or lack of) of Disney princesses in general and the importance of diversity in media portrayals.
3. Distribute construction paper and drawing materials (crayons, markers, colored pencils) to each student. Make sure to have colors that include various skin complexions.
4. Ask students to draw a Disney princess of their choice. If they don't remember the princesses, share the names of several: Cinderella, Jasmine, Aurora/Sleeping Beauty, Belle, Rapunzel, Ariel, Snow White, Tiana. If they are unfamiliar with Disney princesses, they could just draw a picture of any princess. Give students 10–15 minutes to draw; if they don't complete their drawings, tell them they can finish them later or for homework.
5. Hang the pictures around the room. Have students do a quick gallery walk or have them hold their drawings up high for all to see. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What do you notice about the princesses that our class drew?
 - What do they have in common?
 - How are they different?
 - What other reflections do you have about the princesses?
6. Share your own reflections about the princesses and if appropriate, say something like: “I notice that many/most of the princesses are White. This may be because most of the Disney princesses over the years have been White.”

ALTERNATIVE: if the drawings demonstrate more racial diversity than is reflected in the Disney princesses, say something like: “I notice that there are princesses here of all different races—I see different skin tones, facial features and hair types. Yet the princesses that we see in Disney movies and TV shows have mostly been White.”
7. Explain to students that girls/women of color (Black, Latina, Asian, Native American) are very rarely portrayed as Disney princesses. Jasmine was the first Middle Eastern princess (1992); Pocahontas was the first Native American princess (1995); Mulan was the first Asian princess (1998); Tiana was the first African-American princess (2009) and Moana was the first Pacific-Islander princess (2016).



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article, “[Black actress cast as "The Little Mermaid" has fans and critics](#)” and give students 10–15 minutes to read the article silently.

ALTERNATIVE: You can read the article together, having students take turns reading aloud or you can read it aloud.

2. After reading, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions.
 - What did you learn from the article that you didn't know before?
 - How is this Ariel different from the Ariel from 30 years ago?
 - What do you think about the director's decision to cast an African-American actress/singer to play Ariel?

- Why do you think some people don't like or agree with this casting decision? Why do you think someone wrote online: "You will never be Ariel"?
 - Why are the people who criticized the decision being called racists? Do you agree with that?
 - Do you think it's important to have different races of people play different characters? Please explain.
3. After discussing the reading, share some or all of the following information (in your own words):
- In July 2019, it was announced that Halle Bailey, an African-American actress and singer, would play the starring role of Ariel for the upcoming live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. The film's director said, "After an extensive search, it was abundantly clear that Halle possesses that rare combination of spirit, heart, youth, innocence, and substance—plus a glorious singing voice—all intrinsic qualities necessary to play this iconic role."
 - There has been some controversy about the casting decision, particularly critics who are questioning why an African-American actress was chosen for the role. (Define **controversy** as an argument/disagreement that involves many people who strongly disagree about something.) In the 1989 version of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel was a White, red-headed character. Some of the critics began using the hashtag #NotMyAriel on social media to express their negative thoughts about the choice.
 - At the same time, many praised and applauded, including several celebrities, the decision to cast a Black woman as Ariel. In addition, artists immediately started to draw depictions of Halle Bailey as Ariel.
- NOTE:** You may want to share (project on screen or board) some of these images: [Fans Are Drawing Amazing Art Inspired By Halle Bailey's Casting As Ariel In "The Little Mermaid."](#)
- Someone posted on Twitter, "For a little Black girl who grew up obsessed with the 1989 movie. THIS IS A DREAM! I can't wait to wallpaper every inch of my belongings with images of Halle as Ariel."
 - A few days after the announcement, a *Morning Consult/The Hollywood Reporter* poll found that 60% of the adults surveyed who were shown a picture of the actress supported Bailey's casting and 17% opposed the decision.
4. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
- Why do you think there is controversy about the decision?
 - What do you think about the decision?
 - What would you say to someone with a different opinion than your own?

Here I Stand Activity: Identity and Diversity

1. Ask students: *What is identity?* Come to a definition of **identity** as the qualities and beliefs that make a particular person or group different from others.
2. Engage students in a brainstorming session about different aspects of identity which can include: name, physical characteristics, race/ethnicity, heritage, culture, gender, sexual orientation, likes/dislikes, hobbies/talents, family structure/composition, ability/disability, religion, community and neighborhood, etc.
3. Ask students: *What does diversity mean?* Elicit/explain that **diversity** is defined as:

Diversity: Different or varied. The population of the United States is made up of people from different places and from diverse racial and cultural groups.
4. Explain that for the purposes of looking at Disney princesses and diversity, we will focus mostly on race, ethnicity and skin complexion—since there has been a lack of diversity in those identity characteristics. Tell students that we are going to do a "Here I Stand Activity" to talk about our different opinions about some of these ideas.
5. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing an AGREE response and the farthest left point a DISAGREE. In between, place IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE in the middle. Post the signs with these words that you created in advance on the wall.

6. Read some or all of the statements below, requesting students take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum. Remind them that they should stand in the place according to their opinion or belief. Have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have students spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are standing where they are. If time permits, have a few students share with the rest of the class their thinking.
- I have watched some TV/movies and read books with characters that share my race, ethnicity and/or skin complexion.
 - Most of the characters I see on TV/movies look like me in terms of race, ethnicity and/or skin complexion.
 - It doesn't matter to me what the race/ethnicity/skin complexion are of characters in books and on TV shows and movies.
 - I feel great when I see someone of my same race/ethnicity in movies, TV shows, games and books.
 - I would enjoy seeing more racial diversity on TV/movies, books and game.
 - Disney princesses should reflect many different races/ethnicities of people.
 - It is important that characters in books, TV, movies and games reflect the diversity of the people who live in the U.S.
7. After the activity, lead a whole group discussion using some or all the following questions:
- Were some statements easier to decide where to stand and some more difficult? How so?
 - What did you notice about your own opinions and responses?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you notice any patterns in the class?
 - How do you think students in another class or school might respond to the statements?
 - How do you think young people might feel if they don't see themselves in movies, books, TV, etc.?
 - What did you learn by doing this?

Closing

Have each student fill in the blanks to make a complete sentence about their thoughts related to the lesson as follows:

I used to think _____ but now I think _____.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“‘Ariel...is a mermaid’: Disney network defends casting black actress in live-action remake of classic film”](#) (*The Washington Post*, July 9, 2019)
- [“Identity Politics and ‘The Little Mermaid’”](#) (*Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2019)
- [“Disney’s Choice to Cast Halle Bailey in ‘Little Mermaid’ Is Mostly Well-Received, Poll Finds”](#) (*The Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2019)
- [“Most People Support Halle Bailey’s Heading Under the Sea as the Little Mermaid”](#) (*Morning Consult*, July 15, 2019)
- [“The Black Mermaid Booklist”](#) (*School Library Journal*, July 16, 2019)
- [“Fans Are Drawing Amazing Art Inspired by Halle Bailey’s Casting As Ariel In ‘The Little Mermaid’”](#) (BuzzFeed, July 5, 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.
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.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
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.
L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.



Black actress cast as “The Little Mermaid” has fans and critics

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.12.19

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Word Count **457**

Level **560L**



Image 1. Halle Bailey, of the R&B duo Chloe x Halle, will be starring as Ariel in the upcoming live-action adaptation of "The Little Mermaid." On July 3, Bailey wrote on Twitter and Instagram that the casting was a "dream come true," sharing an edited image of Ariel that showed her with dark skin, brown eyes and black hair. Photo by: Dylan Bonner via Chloe x Halle Twitter

"The Little Mermaid" is a movie that came out almost 30 years ago. Ariel is the star of the film.

She had a certain look. Ariel had big blue eyes, white skin and bright red hair. Her only clothing was a purple top made of shells. Instead of legs, she had a green fish tail.

Disney is making a new "Little Mermaid" movie. It will not be animated, though. The movie will be a live remake. In it, Ariel will have a new look.

On July 3, Disney said that Halle Bailey will play Ariel in the new movie. She is 19 years old. She is a black actress and singer. It is the first time Disney has picked a woman of color to play a character that was previously a white princess in a live-action movie.

Online Protests

Many people were happy about Bailey being picked. Still, it brought online protests from others. They did not want the mermaid's look to change.

Rob Marshall is making the new "Little Mermaid." They chose Bailey after a big search, he said.

Bailey has "spirit, heart" and a great singing voice, he said.

On July 3, Bailey wrote online that the part was a "dream come true." She shared a drawing of Ariel. It showed her with dark skin, brown eyes and black hair.

Many people were happy for her.

Mariah Carey is a singer. "My kids and I are so excited," she posted online.

Jodi Benson voiced Ariel in the first movie. She was asked about Bailey, and she likes that they picked her.

Heart And Spirit Are What Matters

"The spirit of a character is what really matters," Benson said. What counts is what you bring for their heart and their spirit, she said.

"The most important thing for a film is to be able to tell a story. We need to be storytellers, no matter what we look like on the outside," she said.

Some people did not seem to care if Bailey shows heart. They were concerned about the mermaid's looks.

"You will never be Ariel," one person wrote online.

Bailey's supporters pushed back. They called people "racists." Racism is when a person is treated worse because of their skin color. There are many kinds of racism. Some racism is easy to see. For example, someone might say something hurtful.

Other people talked about Ariel being a made-up character. They said her looks are not important to the story. It is different for stories based on real people.

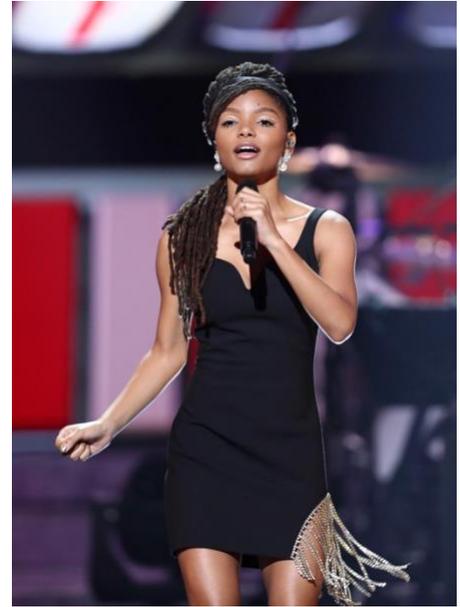


Image 2.Halle Bailey of Chloe x Halle performs onstage during Motown 60: A GRAMMY Celebration at Microsoft Theater on February 12, 2019 in Los Angeles, California. Photo by: Rich Polk/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

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