Who are the People in your Neighborhood?

Representations of Diversity in the

Children’s Educational Television Show *Sesame Street*

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EDUP&L 834 – MON/WED 1:30pm
The goal of this lesson is to help students assess the representation of racial and ethnic diversity (or total lack thereof) in media. This specific lesson will address the representation of diversity in the children’s educational television show *Sesame Street*.

**Overview**

More than ever, very young children are watching television. They are watching on the weekends, after school, and sometimes even in the classroom as a means of learning. If television is going to play such an important part in the lives of children, it is imperative that
parents and educators highlight the television shows that will be the most beneficial for their children to watch. Ideally television shows geared toward young children would be as educational as possible, both in the traditional school sense as well as culturally educational. Since the show’s inception, the creators of Sesame Street have strived to provide both kinds of education.

Sesame Street first aired in 1969. The creators of the show developed Sesame Street with the goal of improving school readiness in urban socioeconomically disadvantaged children. Segments highlighted the introduction of letters of the alphabet, numbers, and shapes and colors. But the show was also designed to promote positive images of diversity. The show’s creators hoped that positive media representations of racial and ethnic minorities would not only boost cultural pride and self-confidence, but they would also enhance awareness and understanding.

The show has always employed implicit methods of promoting diversity. The set, for example, was designed to resemble a block in a New York City burrough, one that viewers would recognize since it was similar to their own urban homes. Characters spoke through windows in the main apartment building to passersby on the street below, and characters would often gather on the main apartment building’s stoop to talk.

The show’s creators also went to great lengths to make sure their cast of characters represented a wide range of diversity. Adults and children from a variety of racial and ethnic background were hired in an effort to provide role models and peers that viewers could relate to. This type of attention to detail was not only mirrored in the makeup of the human cast of
characters – muppets were also made in every color of the rainbow. And this attention to diversity was not solely focused in the realm of race and ethnicity. Over the years Sesame Street has highlighted characters like “Linda”, a deaf woman, “Jason”, a young boy with down syndrome, and “Miles”, a boy who was added to one of the show’s families by means of adoption. Diversity and differences of all kinds were celebrated on Sesame Street.

Although the show creators utilized implicit visual representations of diversity, they also promoted explicit representations of diversity in show segments. Matt Robinson, the actor who played the character “Gordon” in the first few seasons of the show and who later went on to write and produce for The Cosby Show, developed a muppet character called “Roosevelt Franklin” who overtly promoted awareness of African cultural and history as well as pride in being an African American. Robinson, through the muppet Franklin, sang a song called “The Skin I’m In” that verbalized Franklin’s self-esteem about being black in America. Some of the lyrics include:

If you’ve never seen my kind, I wonder where you have been. A lot of people have my kind of skin, you know I love the skin I’m in. Ha, that’s right.

Way way back in the old days we used to be ashamed, imagine that. But then we found out we were beautiful. And we’ve never been the same, uh-uh. I’m not just speaking for myself now, I speak for all of my kin. When I tell you just once more again that I love the skin I’m in. Ha, I love it.

Sesame Street segments have also always promoted bilingual education, particularly through the teaching of letters, words, and numbers in the Spanish language. One of the original main characters of the show, “Maria”, is Hispanic. Her character regularly speaks Spanish and married a Hispanic character on the show named “Luis”. In 2007 the characters’ daughter
“Gabi” on the show successfully graduated from high school and decided to attend college. In more recent episodes the addition of “Rosita”, a bilingual Mexican muppet, has continued to promote the use of Spanish among the show’s young viewers.

Show creators went to the trouble of making Sesame Street segments witty and often satirical in order to appeal to adults as well, which encourages parents to watch the show with their children and discuss the segments together as a family. Research shows that the lessons learned while watching Sesame Street are better absorbed by children when they can discuss the lessons with their parents (Harris 1999).

In 2003 Sesame Street expanded the diversity in its curriculum by promoting international awareness. The muppet character “Grover” now takes trips throughout the world and comes back to Sesame Street to teach children about customs and traditions from other countries. Video segments that are shot internationally accompany these “Global Grover” segments.

International versions of Sesame Street are developed in a similar fashion. International productions in various countries receive the opportunity to develop social curriculum specific to the needs of their own communities, which can include improving gender equality or easing social tensions between ethnic groups at odds in that country.

Sesame Street has been, since the very first episode, a trailblazer in promoting racial and ethnic diversity in children’s educational television. The show’s characters provide positive role models for all of its young viewers. This does not mean that the show has not come up against criticism. Critics of the show blame it for encouraging short attention spans in children, since all
of the show’s individual segments are only a few minutes in duration. But overall the show’s benefits to society far outweigh this criticism, which after all can be a criticism of television in general.
Activities

II Conveying messages to children

After the overview, the classroom can have an open discussion about the television shows that they watched as children and whether or not racial and ethnic minorities were represented positively, or at all, in those shows. If the students are familiar with contemporary television shows that are geared toward children, these shows can also be discussed. Are contemporary educational television shows more positive in these racial and ethnic representations? Are there any current shows that the students would prefer their younger siblings or other younger family members to watch based on the presence of positive representations of diversity?

II Minority representation in the media

Students in the classroom will be asked to bring in examples of racial or ethnic minority representation in media. Media forms can be audio-visual examples from television shows as well as commercials, movies, or music in addition to print media representations in magazines, newspapers, and books. Students will then work in small groups to discuss their examples. Discussions can begin with the following questions:

1) Are racial and ethnic minority members represented positively in the example?

2) If so, how and why is that representation positive? If not, how and why?

Students can also bring in a piece of media that does not include any racial and ethnic minority representation and discuss whether or not they believe that exclusion was intentional.

III Research

Students will be asked to find one scholarly article that relates to racial and ethnic minority representation in mass media. Students will be expected to read the article and write a one page summary. The goal here is for the teacher to compile a list of resources that the entire class and even school can have access to for further research.

IV Diversity appreciation presentations

Students will be asked to prepare a short presentation for their class, one in which they teach the class about diversity as represented in their own families or communities. Examples of presentation options include (but are not limited to) students bringing in samples of ethnic food,
providing a foreign language lesson, or teaching the class a game or art form that is used in their family’s home country of origin.

BOOKS


ARTICLES


VIDEOS

WEBSITES

http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aroundtheworld

PHOTOS

All photos inserted in this paper were obtained from:

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki