

A Master's Research Project Presented to
The Faculty of the College of Education
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by

Tamara Sue Scholl, MEd Mild to Moderate Educational Needs

June, 2008

This Master's Research Project has been approved
for the Department of Teacher Education

Dianne M. Gut, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Special Education

Ginger Weade, Ph.D.
Professor and Interim Chair of the Department of Teacher

Americans and their children spend a lot of time watching television. The average American watches approximately 4.5 hours of television a day. The average American child under six years of age watches approximately 2 hours of television a day (*Screens and young children*, 2008). School aged children have the potential to watch over 1,023 hours of television in one year, compared with 900 hours in the classroom (*TeachingK-8*, 2001).

With these figures in mind, it is evident television has a considerable place in the lives of children, and as a result, has the potential to influence children's perceptions. Indeed, research has examined whether or not television viewing is capable of making children more violent. In addition, advertisers use television to influence children to buy, or have their parents buy their products. Therefore, there is little doubt that television has a great deal of influence in the lives of American children.

There has been a great deal of interest in how persons with disabilities are portrayed in media. Descriptive studies demonstrate how individuals with disabilities are portrayed in films throughout the twentieth century. Many of the documented portrayals were negative, especially regarding mental illness, and physical disabilities that require the use of artificial limbs (Safran, 1998).

However, most of these studies focused on films intended for adult audiences. Children's media, specifically television, seems to have been largely ignored. Therefore, this study examined if and how people with disabilities are portrayed in children's television programming and when these portrayals occur, do children notice them. Both preschool and primary-aged children were

interviewed regarding children's television programming on *Nickelodeon*, *Cartoon Network*, and *PBS*, portraying characters with disabilities.

Literature Review

The demographics of American children are changing. Producers of children's television programming seem to be well aware of this.

Children and Race and Ethnicity

Research has shown that children notice differences at an early age. It is believed that children become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities between the ages of two and five years of age (Brink, 1996).

Children's television programming, especially programming geared towards young children has become diverse, with a concerted effort to include children of different cultures, genders, and social backgrounds. However, people with disabilities seem overlooked in this focus on diversity.

In recent years, networks have made great strides at presenting racial and familial diversity in television programming aimed at children. Shows such as *Dora the Explorer*, *Go Diego Go!*, *Little Einsteins*, and *El Tigre*, all present different cultures to children.

Conversely, somewhat conspicuously absent from children's television programming, is diversity relating to cognitive and physical abilities. Persons with disabilities come from every ethnicity, socio-economic background, and religion on the planet. They make up approximately 20% of the population, and it has been said that people with disabilities are in fact the largest minority group in the United States (Disability Funders Network, 2008).

With this in mind, it could be asked, “Do networks have guidelines with regards to diversity?”

Television Shows

The networks included in this study were all contacted asking for guidelines or policies regarding how individuals with disabilities are included in the shows they broadcast. They were also asked to provide examples of shows that included any characters with disabilities.

The only network to respond was PBS. While they did not answer the principle question of guidelines or policies regarding the inclusion of characters with disabilities, they did provide examples of shows. Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon failed to respond to multiple inquiries.

Nickelodeon’s *Avatar: The Last Airbender* introduced in its second season a twelve-year-old girl named Toph. Toph is blind, and it is stated in the show that she was born blind. She is an extremely strong character with a rich sarcastic sense of humor. The animators chose to physically represent her blindness through a noticeable cloudy discoloration of her eyes.

Toph is somewhat able to compensate for her blindness through a form of martial-arts based magic known as “Earthbending” where she senses vibrations through the Earth. This somewhat lessens the accuracy of the depiction of blindness and harkens back to the myths of persons who are blind developing special abilities or heightened senses to compensate for their lack of sight.

Toph makes jokes regarding her blindness on the show and is rarely an object of pity because of her blindness. The one exception to this was Toph’s

own parents who seemed to view her as a weak, delicate, "blind girl" who needed protecting from the world. However, usually, Toph is first and foremost, depicted as "Toph" and her blindness is secondary.

A minor character on *Avatar* is a little boy named Teo, who uses a wheelchair. At the time of this study, Teo only appeared in one episode of *Avatar*. Teo was evidently involved in an accident when he was younger resulting in damage to his legs. He was not presented in a stereotypical manner, and his father did not seem to view him as "weak" or in need of excessive protection.

Also on Nickelodeon, *Fairly Oddparents* sported a cameo by Stephen Hawking during one episode. Dr. Hawking was depicted in his wheelchair using a computer for communication for most of his appearance, as he does in real life. When his character left however, his wheelchair was shown to have rocket-type boosters added to it for a dramatic exit. Despite this humorous interpretation of Dr. Hawking, the portrayal was for the most part respectful, emphasizing his great mind and mathematical talents.

In its second season, PBS's *Dragon Tales* introduced a dragon character named Lorca, who uses a wheelchair. During his introductory episode when other well-meaning characters on the show offered to "help" Lorca do things, Lorca in turn showed his new friends how he could do things on his own.

PBS's, *Maya and Miguel* not only highlights a wonderful array of culturally diverse characters, it also has characters with different abilities. This show introduced a character named Andy, who is a friend of the title character Miguel.

Andy has one arm and is portrayed without the use of a prosthesis. When he is introduced, Maya tries to “help” him feel more comfortable by attempting to make the other boys in the neighborhood not play sports. However, she soon learns that Andy can play sports, and that is important to treat others as equals.

Some viewers have suggested that Maya has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder due to her excitable and sometimes hyperactive nature; however, this is never stated directly in the show, nor is it stated on PBS’s website.

On the episode of *Maya and Miguel*, “Give Me a Little Sign”, Marco, a character that is deaf was introduced. Marco uses American Sign Language to communicate and befriends a secondary character on the show.

Sesame Street, also shown on PBS, shows a child in a wheelchair during its theme song.

In its first episode, Cartoon Network’s *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends* introduced the character of Wilt. Wilt is a tall, red, imaginary friend who is also a basketball player. He tends to apologize for everything, and is extremely helpful, often at the risk of his own happiness or comfort. Wilt also has one severely damaged eye and is missing an arm.

During the introduction of Wilt, the two main characters of the show, an eight-year-old boy named Mac and his imaginary friend named Bloo, stare at Wilt. Wilt assumes they are staring at his physical disabilities, but in reality Mac and Bloo are struck by his immense height!

Through visual confirmation, it is fairly easy to determine that a range of physical disabilities are depicted in children's television programming. However, it is difficult to visually determine if cognitive disabilities are being portrayed.

There are many instances when secondary characters appear to be less intelligent than the main characters in a show, but it is impossible to determine if these are depictions of cognitive disability. Some characters speak in noticeably different tones from the other characters, and seem to be cognitively slower than their peers. Sometimes, as in the case with Chip and Skip, two dung beetles from Cartoon Network's *Camp Lazlo*, personal hygiene is also an issue.

These characters were presented primarily for comic relief. There were no characters that seemed to be genuine attempts to depict individuals with cognitive disabilities. Because of this hypothesized lack of sincerity, and lack of visual verification in these depictions, they were not included for use when interviewing students.

There were also characters presented on all networks that had speech impediments. Most noticeable were classic characters such as Daffy Duck, Sylvester, and Tweety Bird. These characters were not included in this study, as they did not fit the label of "disability." However, future research could be done with regards to these types of characters and the impressions they make on young children.

In every instance, the characters with disabilities that were found in the children's shows on these three networks were either secondary characters, or guest characters. Currently, there are no shows on these three networks that

have a central title character with a disability. However, each of the three networks included in this study had at least one show with one character who had a disability.

Since some networks who have children as their primary, target audience are presenting characters with disabilities in some of their programming, children have the potential to be exposed to persons with disabilities during their television viewing.

With this in mind, questions arise as to how these portrayals affect the children watching these shows.

In light of the evidence provided, the following questions arise and will be addressed in this study: How do children perceive television characters with disabilities? Do children notice any differences between characters with disabilities and their typically developing counterparts? With networks presenting such a small selection of characters having disabilities, are children exposed enough to form an opinion? Are children watching networks that do choose to show characters with disabilities?

Method

The purpose of this study was to analyze when persons with disabilities are portrayed in children's television programming and to see how those characters are portrayed. Topics that were considered included: What kind of disability is it? Are they a main character, secondary character, or background character? Are they portrayed positively or negatively?

With these questions in mind, the next step was to see, when these portrayals take place, if children are able to notice them. In order to do so, children were invited via parental consent to participate in this study. The children were asked specific questions about specific programs that had characters with disabilities. Their answers were recorded by writing down their verbal responses. This data was analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

Participants

Two groups of children were interviewed to gain perspective into how children view characters with disabilities. A group of primary-aged children, and a group of preschool-aged children. There were eight children in the primary-aged group and nine children in the preschool-aged group. A random sampling was taken from each age group.

The primary-aged children were recruited from a local elementary school. They were all in the second grade, in the same school, and had the same teacher. The preschool-aged children were recruited from a local Head Start center, and were all from the same classroom.

Data Collection

Children who participated in this study were first asked to list their favorite television shows. Their responses to all inquiries were written down on a form along with the child's gender and age.

Next, the children were asked about specific shows and characters. They were asked about *Avatar*, *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, *Maya & Miguel*, and *Dragon Tales*. If the children stated they were familiar with a particular show, they were then asked if they were familiar with the target characters from those shows. If the children were unfamiliar with a show, they were then asked about the next program on the list.

Finally, the children were asked if they knew what a disability was. If they were unfamiliar with the term, it was defined for them. After having a firm definition in place, the children were asked if they had ever seen someone on television with a disability.

Procedures

The primary-aged children were selected from a local Elementary School when a classroom teacher volunteered her class to participate. Every student in her classroom was given a permission form to take home. Students whose parents completed the form were interviewed in the classroom, one-on-one.

The preschool-aged children were selected from a local Head Start center. The principal investigator in this study was also a teacher at this center. Every child in the center-based program received a permission form. Students whose

parents completed the permission form were interviewed in their classroom, one-on-one.

Data Analysis

If a child claimed to be familiar with a show that had a character with a disability, and was able to accurately describe that character, it was recorded on a graph. This was done to compare with the number of children who claimed to be familiar with the show and to see if the majority of children viewers notice that specific character.

Another graph was made to show the number of children who claim to have seen individuals with disabilities on television.

The results were somewhat surprising.

Results

All data was recorded on questionnaire sheets. Student's answers were written down as they spoke. The data was then transferred into graph form.

Primary Interviews

Primary child 1. Primary-aged child 1 was an eight-year-old female. She did not mention any of the target shows when asked to name her favorite television shows. When asked if she was familiar with *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, she stated that she was. When she was asked to describe the character Wilt, she was able to give an accurate description. She said, "He's the tall guy, very tall. He plays basketball, he has only one arm."

When asked if she had ever seen anyone on television that had a disability, she needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition, she

stated that she had seen someone on the show the Simpsons who was blind. Thus, she was able to apply the definition of disability and used an example that was given.

Primary child 2. Primary-aged child 2 was an eight-year-old male. He did not mention any of the target shows when asked to name his favorite television shows. When asked if he was familiar with *Avatar*, he said yes, however, he was unable to describe the character Toph.

When he was asked about *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, he stated that he was familiar with the show. He was able to describe Wilt when asked. He stated, "I think he likes to play basket ball."

When asked if he had ever seen someone on television with a disability, he needed to have the term disability defined. He then stated that he had seen someone on television with a disability. He said, "Yeah. They were like deaf. I can't remember the show."

Primary-aged child 2's response indicates he was able to use an example that was given in the definition/explanation of what a disability is.

Primary child 3. Primary-aged child 3 was an eight-year-old male. He did not name any of the target shows when asked to name his favorite television shows. When asked if he was familiar with *Avatar*, he said he was, but he was unable to describe the character Toph.

When he was asked if he was familiar with *Fosters Home for Imaginary Friends*, he said he was. He was able to give a description of the character Wilt. He described Wilt as being the "Red tall one."

When asked if he had ever seen anyone on television with a disability, he also needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition, he stated that “No” he had not seen any persons with disabilities on television.

Primary child 4. Primary-aged child 4 was an eight-year-old female. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to name her favorite television shows. When asked if she was familiar with *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends*, she stated that she was, however she was unable to give a description of the character Wilt.

When asked if she had ever seen anyone on television that had a disability she needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition, she said she had seen an individual with a disability on television. When asked to explain she said it was a movie, “A Stephen King movie. A little girl wore sunglasses.” This could be an indication of a blind character, or an overgeneralization on the part of the student. She also stated she had seen an individual in a wheelchair on a television program, but she was unable to recall what television program it was.

Primary child 5. Primary-aged child 5 was a seven-year-old male. He did not list any of the target shows when asked to name his favorite television shows. When asked, he was unfamiliar with all of the target shows. When queried if he had ever seen an individual with a disability on television he needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition he stated “No” he had not seen any individuals with disabilities on television.

Primary child 6. Primary aged child 6 was an eight-year-old female. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to name her favorite television shows.

She was familiar with the *Avatar*, and when asked to describe the character Toph, said, "The one that wears green, the blind one."

She was also familiar with the show *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*. When asked to describe the character Wilt she said, "He's the tall one. He has red on, he's a monster. He has one googly eye. One of his arms isn't there. He likes to play basketball."

When asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, she needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition, she said she had, "On *I-Carly*, Johnny has a sneezing problem."

This represents an overgeneralization on her part, demonstrating appropriate development based upon her age, but also a misunderstanding of what a disability is.

Primary child 7. Primary-aged child 7 was an eight-year-old female. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to name her favorite television shows. She was unfamiliar with any of the target shows when asked.

When asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, she needed to have the term disability defined. She stated she had, and said, "My dad watches it. They're in a wheelchair."

Her revelation indicates an understanding of what a disability is, but is an example that was used in the definition and explanation of what a disability is.

Primary child 8. Primary-aged child 8 was an eight-year-old male. He did not list any of the target shows when asked to name his favorite television shows. When asked, he was unfamiliar with any of the target shows.

When asked if he had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, he needed to have the term disability defined. After the definition, he said “Yes,” however, he was unable to say what type of disability it was or what television show it occurred on. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not he has a true understanding of what a disability is, or if he indeed has seen an individual on television that had some form of disability.

Primary Summary

Some students were familiar with the shows in question, and some were even familiar with the target characters. None of the primary-aged students knew the term “disability” and needed to have it defined.

When describing the characters with disabilities the students usually listed some other form of description before noting the character’s disability. For example, Wilt was more often described as being “tall”, “red”, or as a basketball player, before his physical disabilities were brought up.

The student, who was familiar with Toph, similarly described the color of her outfit before stating that she was blind.

Interestingly, not a single student was able to make the connection, when asked if they had ever seen someone with a disability on television, to the target shows.

The next step in the study was to see if younger children would give similar responses to their older peers.

Preschool Interviews

The preschool-aged children who were interviewed were recruited from a local Head Start. They were of multiple ages from two classrooms. Some of these students were students of the principal investigator in this study.

Preschool child 1. Preschool-aged child 1 was a four-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to list her favorite television programs. However, she did indicate that she was familiar with Lorca from PBS's *Dragon Tales*. When asked to describe Lorca, she said, "Has wings."

Preschool-aged child 1 also said she was familiar with Wilt from *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* and Andy from *Maya and Miguel*. However, her descriptions of these characters were somewhat ambiguous. She described Wilt with the word "Motorcycles" and said of Andy "Going to be a teacher."

When she was asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined, she indicated she had and said, "He rides a motorcycle too." Again, indicating perhaps a lack of understanding.

Preschool child 2. Preschool-aged child 2 was a four-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to name her favorite television programs. She indicated that she was familiar with several of the target characters when asked.

She indicated that she was familiar with Wilt, but merely nodded and gave no verbal response when asked for a description. Preschool aged child 2 also

indicated she was familiar with Lorca from *Dragon Tales*, and described him accurately as a dragon. She was also familiar with the show *Avatar*, but was unfamiliar with the character Toph.

When asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined, she nodded. When asked to describe the individual she said, "They umm....I don't know."

Preschool child 3. Preschool-aged child 3 was a four-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to list her favorite television programs. She did however say she was familiar with several of the target shows and characters when asked further.

She indicated that she was familiar with Wilt, from *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*; however, she described him inaccurately as "He's a little kid with blue on." Similarly, she indicated a familiarity with both Andy from *Maya and Miguel*, and Lorca from *Dragon Tales*. However, her descriptions were ambiguous making it uncertain if she was indeed familiar with these characters. She described Andy as "Andy the cartoon.", and Lorca by saying "Lorca, I like."

When preschool-aged child 3 was asked if she had ever seen an individual on television that had a disability, after having the term disability defined for her, she indicated she had. When asked to describe the individual she replied "30", once again making it unclear as to whether or not she had truly seen a person with a disability on television.

Preschool child 4. Preschool-aged child 4 was a five-year-old boy. He did list the target program *Dragon Tales* when asked to list his favorite television shows. However, he was unable to describe the character Lorca.

When asked if he had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined, he stated, "I heard it at church."

Preschool child 5. Preschool-aged child 5 was a five-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to list her favorite television programs. She was also unfamiliar with any of the characters or target programs.

When asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined for her, she stated "Yes." When asked where she had seen them she replied, "Only on Doctors' when it's on TV."

Her response could indicate that she has seen individuals with disabilities on television. Perhaps she has seen individuals who use wheelchairs on a medical program. However, it is ambiguous enough that it is difficult to tell whether or not this is the case.

Preschool child 6. Preschool-aged child 6 was a three-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to list her favorite television programs. She was also unfamiliar with any of the characters or target programs. Child 6 did not indicate she had ever seen an individual on television with a disability.

Preschool child 7. Preschool-aged child 7 was a five-year-old boy. He did not list any of the target shows when asked to list his favorite television programs.

Preschool-aged child 7 stated he was familiar with several of the target characters when asked. However, his only accurate description was that of Wilt whom he described, “Likes to do fun things and stuff. Tricks, upside down tricks, with a ball.” His other descriptions were largely nonsensical.

When he was asked if he had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined for him, he said, “Sometimes I use sign language.”

Child 7 took from the definition and explanation of what a disability was, and applied it to his own life. He referenced the fact that sign language was used in his preschool classroom and it was a form of communication one could use without speaking. Despite this connection, it is still uncertain as to whether or not he truly understood what a disability is.

Preschool child 8. Preschool-aged child 8 was a five-year-old boy. He did not list any of the target shows when asked to list his favorite television programs. He did indicate he was familiar with Toph, from *Avatar*. Child 8 described Toph accurately as “Earthbender.”

When asked if he knew what a disability was he said he was, but gave an incorrect definition. After having the term defined, he indicated he had seen an individual with a disability on television, but he did not recall what show it was on, or anything about the character.

Preschool child 9. Preschool-aged child 9 was a five-year-old girl. She did not list any of the target shows when asked to list her favorite television programs.

When asked if she had ever seen an individual with a disability on television, after having the term defined, she stated that she had. She said, “Blind movie. He was black, has to wear black glasses on.”

It is possible she was describing the film *Ray*, depicting the life story of Ray Charles. Her description included the stereotypical dark glasses often used to portray a blind person, so it is probable she understood the term disability after having it explained and examples given.

Preschool Summary

The preschool-aged students did not seem to notice when characters from their favorite shows had a disability. When they did recognize a character’s name and accurately described that character, his or her disability was not mentioned.

Figure 1 represents the number of children who claimed they were familiar with the target programs.

Figure 1

Children Who Claimed Familiarity with Character's Shows

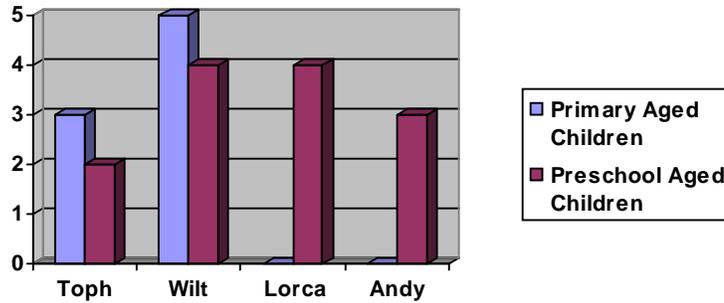


Figure 2 represents the number of children who were able to accurately describe specific characters with disabilities in children's television shows.

Figure 2

Children Who Accurately Described Characters

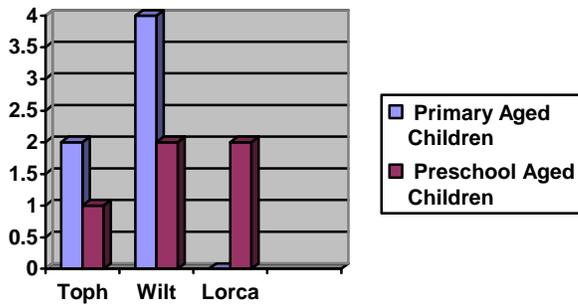


Figure 3 represents both the number of children who have seen an individual with a disability on television and the number of the children who have not seen an individual with a disability on television.

Figure 3

Number of Children Who Have Seen/Have Not Seen Individuals with Disabilities on Television



As one can see, students who claimed to have seen a television show, did not necessarily accurately describe the target character from that show. However, most students interviewed felt that they had seen an individual on television with some form of a disability.

Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations

Summary

The purpose of this study was to see if characters with disabilities are presented in children's television programming, and to see when those portrayals take place, if children notice them.

Two groups of students were interviewed for this study: a group of primary-aged children in the second grade at a local elementary school, and a group of preschool-aged children from a local Head Start.

Children were interviewed one-on-one and asked to list their favorite shows. They were then asked if they were familiar with "target" shows that

hosted a character with some form of physical disability. The students were then asked if they were familiar with the target character. Their answers were written down by the interviewer, and then compiled into graph form.

Primary Findings

When asked about specific characters from shows the primary-aged children were familiar with, some children were able to describe the target characters. However, there were times that although the child was familiar with a particular show, he/she was unfamiliar with the character with a disability.

The non-human character with a missing arm and damaged eye “Wilt,” seemed most obvious to the children. However, when describing him as such, they also described him by color, height, and that he was a basketball player.

“Toph” from Nickelodeon’s *Avatar* was recognized by a few of the children. She was first described by the color of her outfit, and then her blindness was used as a secondary description.

In the interviews with the primary-aged children, none understood the word “disability.” They were asked if they knew what a disability was, and the universal response was negative.

When the term “disability” was defined for the children and they were given specific examples (such as blindness, deafness, or a person who needs a wheelchair), they were then able to state if they had seen one of the examples given, but did not typically extend to any other disabilities not mentioned.

Some children were unfamiliar with the characters in question. However, of these children, some were able to identify a character with a disability on a

different television show. Yet, few were able to recall the specifics of the television show that included the character.

Children who were unfamiliar with the television shows in question were invited to mention other television shows they enjoyed. Sometimes these shows were not ones that had children of their age group as the targeted audience. This made it difficult to assess whether or not these children could identify characters with specific disabilities, as these shows were not included in this study. On occasion, the shows mentioned by the children as being their favorite television shows were adult shows, such as *Family Guy*, and *The Simpsons*.

Preschool Findings

Preschool children like their primary-aged counterparts were unfamiliar with the term disability. The primary-aged children seemed more willing to admit they were unfamiliar with the term, while some of the preschool-aged children were either unwilling to admit their unfamiliarity, or did not realize they were unfamiliar with the term.

The preschool-aged children also gave sometimes-nonsensical answers to the questions. This could be due to a misunderstanding on the part of the children, or their desire to appear knowledgeable.

Interestingly, the preschool-aged children did not mention the disabilities of the characters in this study. The preschool-aged children who seemed to have a true understanding of the characters in this study used other descriptions when describing the target characters. For example, describing Toph as an “Earthbender”, and depicting the types of tricks Wilt does with a basketball, in no

way relate to either characters' respective disabilities. Comparatively, the primary-aged children sometimes used a character's disability when describing them, and other times they did not.

Disabilities in Children's Television

There are a small number of characters who have disabilities in children's television programming.

The primary-aged children did appear to notice when a character had a physical disability. This was expected given their age. However, despite the fact previous research has shown that children begin to notice differences such as disabilities between the ages of two and five years of age (Brink, 1996); the preschool-aged children did not seem to notice these disabilities.

This could be because the questions about these characters were asked in a school setting, where television is not viewed, therefore making it a more abstract type of question for the young students. It could also be possible that the preschoolers might be familiar with a character, but do not know the character's name.

Recommendations

Since some children had never seen the target shows, it is impossible to know if or how they would have responded to seeing a character with a disability. This is further complicated by the small sampling of children interviewed.

If it were possible in the future, additional children could be sought to get a greater number of participants. Also, it should be specified beforehand that the children be familiar with the target programming.

Another possibility would be to show episodes to children and interview them directly after viewing.

However, the biggest limitation remains the lack in the number of characters on television with a disability. Until television networks remedy this, it will be difficult to accurately assess a wide number of children's reactions and impressions of characters who are disabled.

Summary

While some networks are indeed including characters with disabilities in their programming, the selection is small. When these characters are nonhuman characters, it potentially adds another barrier for children to understand and relate to them.

When the characters are a one-time or "guest" character, it also can make it difficult for children to understand the individual behind the disability. Guest appearances in addition, limit the chances of a child seeing a character in order to form opinions or understandings regarding that character's disability.

However, when a character is given time to develop and shown on multiple occasions over the course of several episodes, children are more likely to notice these characters. They are also more likely to notice disabilities, as is the case of Wilt and to a lesser extent, Toph.

There is great potential for children's programming as it relates to depicting individuals with disabilities. If networks took the initiative and expanded their attempts to include characters with disabilities in a greater number of programs, or created shows centered on a main character with a disability

children could have greater opportunities for exposure to disabilities and what they are.

References

Brink, M. (1994). Helping children deal with differences. *Child Care Center Connections*, 4(3), 1-3.

Disability stats and facts. (2008). Retrieved February 10th, 2008 from <http://www.disabilityfunders.org/disability-stats-and-facts>

(2001). Education newswatch: News and grants for teaching professionals: In brief. *TeachingK-8*, 8.

Safran, S. (1998). The first century of disability portrayal in film: An analysis of the literature. *The Journal of Special Education*, 31(4), 467-479.

Screens and young children. (2008). Retrieved February 10th, 2008, from http://www.screentime.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=31