

ENG 106 – Spring 2020

Assignment Eight – Research Project

Sadie Smeenk

When *Sesame Street* was created by television producer Joan Ganz Cooney and psychologist Lloyd Morrisett in 1969, it revolutionized the industry of children's television because it focused not only on entertainment but also on education. In most episodes, the main characters, furry monsters in many shapes, sizes, and colors, go on an adventure, whether it be losing and finding things, playing a new game, or learning something important about their world. That main body is followed by several smaller segments, some live action and some animated, that often give close-ups of different characters or talk about something new and educational, such as a letter, number, or word. Those educational aspects of the show work to build a basic foundation for learning and prepare young children, especially those with disabilities or from disadvantaged families, to succeed in school. Since its conception, the show has helped millions of children to recognize shapes, sounds, colors, letters, and numbers in ways that stay with them even years later. Therefore, this impactful program has shaped the culture of education in countless ways. But while the characters on *Sesame Street* have remained virtually unchanged through the generations of viewers, the outside world has not. How have *Sesame Street*, its content, and its methods changed over the years to reflect the culture's definition of education?

According to dictionary.com, the first definition of education is "the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life" (dictionary.com).

Each of these things can be seen in basic form throughout most episodes of *Sesame Street*. The first part of the definition, either giving or receiving general knowledge and basic skills such as the ability to recognize and recite letters, numbers, shapes, and colors, appears in crucial segments from each episode. There are also staple segments that work to develop reasoning. Of those three aspects of 'education' listed in the dictionary definition above, the third, "generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life," has evolved the most over *Sesame Street's* 50 years of airtime. What exactly does it mean to be prepared intellectually? Does it just involve book learning such as understanding letters, numbers, colors, and other such things? What about environmental education, such as learning about other places? What about social education or learning about relationships? What about cultural education, learning about different people groups, nationalities, and life circumstances? What about moral education, being taught to distinguish, not just different shapes, but right versus wrong? How is that right versus wrong decided? Is it the responsibility of the school to teach these things? The family? Furry monsters on a morning television show? All these questions and more have been asked and some answered through *Sesame Street* and its evolution as a household program. By examining different stages of development and how each of these types of education – book, environmental, social, cultural, and moral – and the show's approach to each have changed over the years, more can be deduced about the outside culture, the concerns of the time, and the beliefs that have been held concerning education.

The first type of education, book education, is one that has remained consistent through the years. Every episode does something to teach preschool viewers about at least one staple of knowledge in 20th century America such as a letter, number, shape, or color. These things are

included with the intention of preparing young child viewers, especially those who come from disadvantaged or illiterate families, to succeed in preschool and kindergarten. Many of these specialized segments relating to specific aspects of book education are backed by the research of psychologists and teachers, including that of psychologist Lloyd Morriset, one of the creators of the show. This scientifically proven method of televised education has provided children with foundational learning experience. Because the creators had research-based input and a desire to educate well, *Sesame Street* took its first steps with the tools to succeed as an educational show that gave children tools to succeed for a lifetime of learning.

Another type of education that has remained fairly consistent through the show's lifetime is environmental education. Environmental education refers to content that instructs viewers about the environment outside where they may live. This is especially critical for children from urban areas, who might not otherwise be exposed to things like the woods, farms, or the ocean along with the plants and animals that live there and other aspects of the natural landscape while living in the city. Many different animals have appeared on *Sesame Street* over the years, whether as puppet characters or in informational segments, to expose viewers to nature. Those include gorillas, seals, penguins, turtles, foxes, hippopotami, lizards, elephants, ostriches, large cats, goats, several monkeys, kangaroos, rhinoceros, and many species of birds. There are also segments where more practical and involved aspects of discovering nature are encouraged. This is demonstrated in episodes like "Little Bo Peep Lost Her Cow," where Little Bo Peep loses her cow. Accompanied by short guitar songs, Elmo, Telly, and Bo Peep set off looking for 'cow clues' in order to find the missing bovine. Young listeners can participate when the monsters ask questions like "Look at the chicken's claw!" and "Let's

look for cow tracks!” (“Little Bo Peep Lost Her Cow” 0:30-9:23). This interaction provides viewers a chance to practice searching out more practical aspects of animal habitats and environmental knowledge. In more recent years, however, *Sesame Street* has also hopped onto the environmental responsibility bandwagon by including episodes that teach children how to “live green” by doing small things like disposing of trash properly, recycling, and reusing things. There is even a DVD special, “Love the Earth,” dedicated to discussing environmental awareness. This promotion of “green” mentality can be controversial for families who believe in a different approach to caring for the planet.

The third aspect that has remained rather constant is the social education, which teaches children about interactions and relationships. There are also messages about how to manage emotions such as joy, fear, anger, and sadness. Much of the teaching here is significantly more subtle than the blatant conversations about book and environmental learning discussed above. Most often, social situations and proper behavior are modeled through the actions and reactions of the puppet characters to and with each other. The old proverb, “imitation is the best flattery,” neglects to state that imitation can also be the best learning. For dozens of generations, children have learned by watching their parents, older siblings, and teachers and copying the responses that those authority figures demonstrate. In the same way, puppets can provide another example to children of how to behave in situations with both adults and their own peers. This is discussed in the article, “What Puppets Can Mean to Children,” by child content specialist Jean Mendoza. Mendoza explains why using puppets as models in a learning environment appeals so well to children. After speaking about Wiggin, a puppet who she loved in her childhood, she states that, “Part of the appeal of puppets like

Wiggin is that they can ‘behave’ like people while not exactly being people. The user can make the puppet move, talk, gesture, and react to its surroundings. A puppet operated by another person can help a child understand perspectives other than her own or see a new way she might respond to a difficult situation” (illinoiseearlylearning.org). By providing this example, Mendoza speculates that puppets bring a gravity in providing examples that human actors might not. Their young age and mindset allow viewers to relate to them, laugh at them and with them, and grow in both literary and social knowledge while observing the interactions of the puppets. In other words, the costumes and props of puppetry used by the actors foster those skills into a mindset of social awareness that remain for years to come.

One of the facets that most reflects the changing culture that surrounds *Sesame Street* is the aspects of cultural education that are featured. Since its inception, *Sesame Street* has championed diversity through the characters of different nationalities and cultures that have appeared on the show. During its formative years, the show revolved around many characters of African American culture. The first couple introduced in the debut episode are Gordon and Susan, a young African American couple who call Sesame Street home. Both are gentle, caring, and provide an excellent example both of a harmonious marriage and of loving relationships with those outside of their apartment. The two of them often laugh and joke with the others on Sesame Street, including the Caucasian general store owner Mr. Hooper, the slightly later introduced Hispanic couple, Luis and Maria, and the highly diverse cast of colored, textured, and uniquely shaped Muppets. Those positively modeled interracial relationships provided an example for children of all races still working to adjust to the national desegregation of public schools and other facilities. Diverse relationships continued to be championed by the characters

in episodes like “Racism on Sesame Street,” where friends Gina and Savion receive a racist phone call from someone saying degrading things about their relationship. When Telly Monster inquires about why they’re mad, Savion answers, “Telly, there’s just some really stupid people in the world who can’t stand to see it when people of different races are friends” (“Racism on Sesame Street” 3:22-3:30). When Telly asks what skin color has to do with being friends, Gina vehemently replies, “Nothing! Nothing at all, that’s the point!” (“Racism on Sesame Street” 3:46-3:49). That outspoken encouragement of diverse friendships allows viewers to consider relationships across nationality and culture a normal thing and promote interaction between those of different life circumstance.

Another way that cultural diversity is demonstrated, especially in more recent years, is the inclusion of characters from different socioeconomic and financial backgrounds. In the episode “Elmo the Engineer,” there is a segment where Abby and some of her friends try doing a neighbor’s job for the day. Before they meet their neighbors, however, Abby sings about her neighborhood. The scene opens on her wearing a blue tutu in front of a red brick building next to a grocery delivery man wearing a white hat and holding a bunch of bananas. She sings, “Who are the people in your neighborhood? The people that you meet each day.” During the song, she dances past several other ‘neighbors,’ including a female firefighter and a woman in a white coat holding a camera who snaps a photo of Big Bird (“Elmo the Engineer” 12:05-12:21). Even in this single segment, viewers can see that many of the people in their neighborhood have different jobs that contribute to society. Although families with some jobs might have more money than others, each and every one plays an important role in the everyday function of society. In recent years, episodes have also turned to address issues like hunger, homelessness,

mental illness, disability, addiction, and parental incarceration. That shift from pure nationality to socioeconomic status mimics the cultural attention shift from equality for race to equality despite personal or financial situation.

Finally, the show also touches on moral education, or being taught to distinguish, not just different shapes but right versus wrong. Like the social education discussed above, moral education can also be subtly interwoven into the ordinary happenings of *Sesame Street*, but unlike social education, moral education can be incredibly controversial. This realm of education can also have a long-lasting impact on the mental state of viewers. In an article that examines the connections between television content, medium, and language and the values developed by viewers, especially adolescent viewers, authors and education psychology professors Samaniego and Pascual note that “In relation to childhood and adolescence, enough evidence has been found of the influence of television narratives on the construction of values to justify the need to reflect on the necessity of establishing different guidelines for analysis, in order to promote the reconstruction of contents and facilitate the acquisition of new meanings” (Samaniego and Pascual 8). The phrase “influence of television narratives on the construction of values” indicates that television programs and their narratives, or stories, can have dramatic impact on how the beliefs and values of children are shaped. In response, they assert that guidelines should be established as to how and what moral content can be included in such television programs to utilize the format in promoting specific values and allow for children to construct and develop their own belief systems. This is also a cautionary statement; with that formative power comes tremendous responsibility.

Many basic moral guidelines have been maintained throughout the show's airtime. Standard phrases like "sharing is caring," "say please and thank you," and "apologize" all have a multitude of underlying appearances. However, in recent years more values have been established as part of the show's outreach. Those values can include things like healthy eating, recycling, and environmental care as discussed above. Despite all of this, much of the show's recent efforts to promote moral content can be summarized by one word: inclusivity. "Inclusivity" means making effort in action and in thought to accept and promote those from all different situations. That inclusivity mirrors the goals that much of society is now promoting and hoping to instill in today's youth.

One example of a highly controversial 'inclusivity' speculation is the issue of best friends Bert and Ernie and their sexual orientation. The two orange and yellow Muppets who have lived and laughed together since the show's first episode in 1969 were long understood to be friends before theories that the classic duo were gay partners began circulating. There have been a multitude of confirmations and denials, arguments for and arguments against. This is discussed in a brief article in the *New York Times* by writer Sarah Mervosh. After discussing the circulating theory of confirmation following the misinterpreted comments by Mark Saltzman, one writer of *Sesame Street* who works with Bert and Ernie's parts, Mervosh indirectly quotes a statement made in Saltzman's clarification of his previous interview, "He said he did not restrict Bert and Ernie to one sexual orientation, or any at all. While he believes that *Sesame Street* should include a gay couple in its programming, he said it should be done with human characters, not puppets" (nytimes.com). This is an extremely frightening idea. The moral standing of the LGBTQIAA+ community is something disputed by many groups. Many families have closely held

beliefs in either direction. Those beliefs may be related to personal experience and relationship or based off preexisting moral or religious viewpoints. The perceived ambiguity of Bert and Ernie's relationship allows for families to present their own beliefs to their children. However, a clearly portrayed human gay couple removes the right of the family to instill children with their own beliefs.

When those personal beliefs such as perspective on the LGBTQIAA+ community are so closely tied with religion, including such characters might even be considered a violation of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind *Sesame Street*, is partially operated on government funding, although less funding now than has been provided in previous years. This is not very explicitly stated anywhere on their site, but in biographies of employees like Sheila Kelly, government funding is mentioned. "Kelly is creating new ways to connect the Workshop's programs and funding activities to advance the organization's mission to help kids grow smarter, stronger and kinder with a greater focus on individual giving, as well as **continued funding through** foundation, **government** and corporate partnerships" (sesameworkshop.org). If such partnerships and funding exist, the government could be viewed as propagating this agenda through discreet partnerships like this and thereby violating the right of families to practice religion without government interference.

There have been many other characters included over the last few years who promote inclusivity. These include Julia, an autistic character; Karli, who is in foster care because her mother struggles with addiction; and Lily, whose family has suffered from hunger and

homelessness. While these characters are not extremely controversial in and of themselves, they do introduce extremely serious topics to children at a young age, which can help to prevent misconceptions, but can also oversimplify extremely complex issues. This can be dangerous when children absorb these ideas without involving parents in the conversation.

This aspect of *Sesame Street* is one that has become an issue in more recent years. While Sesame Workshop provides tools to parents and teachers for discussing social controversy with their children, the show portrays the opposite in many ways. For years, the characters turned to adults to answer their questions. Now, each episode features segments like “Elmo’s World,” where Elmo asks ‘Smartie the Smartphone’ to tell him more about different topics, such as jobs and businesses. Is technology an essential aspect of our world in many ways? Yes. Can it give lots of useful information about the world that we live in? Yes. But should children as young as three years old be shown that the internet is the best source for information and an answer to their problems and questions? This can become extremely dangerous when it, yet again, removes adults from the conversation by subtly encouraging children to turn to other sources for information on what is right and wrong and thereby robbing families of the power to guide children in their own values.

Through ‘inclusivity’ is a valuable lesson in some ways, it can be extremely dangerous in many others. That danger revolves around the expectations of the family and the school: how much is too much? What is right? What is wrong? Who decides that? While many of the lessons shown on *Sesame Street* are widely accepted and beneficial, some families view the show as overstepping boundaries by removing in several ways the ability of parents to teach and instill their own values in their children. This fine line between education and overinvolvement

continues to appear in much of the teaching that *Sesame Street* does, and it will continue to be debated for years to come. What was considered controversial in the past, such as addressing racism, has become normalized today, and perhaps today's controversies will become normalized in the future. But looking at the power that *Sesame Street* holds over the minds of young viewers, we as a society made up of individual families with specialized beliefs and teaching methods need to decide: where do we draw the line?

In conclusion, the book, environmental, social, cultural, and moral education that is displayed on *Sesame Street* can attest to the consistency and the evolution of the cultural influence on content and the definition of education, the controversial moral content that *Sesame Street* has included, and how the influence of that moral content has shaped the belief system of generations. Those observations can contribute to our understanding of the show as a cultural artifact and as a window into the perspectives of educational and moral development that are still occurring today.

Works Cited:

Education. Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/education?s=t>

"Elmo the Engineer." *Sesame Street*. Episode 4920. Sesame Workshop. PBS Kids. Pbskids.com <https://pbskids.org/sesame/videos/watch-full-episodes#>

"*Sesame Street* Debut-Monday, November 10, 1969." *Sesame Street*. Episode 1. Sesame Workshop. YouTube. 06 April 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7szvFGXKGg>

"Little Bo Peep Lost Her Cow." *Sesame Street*. Episode 4927. Sesame Workshop. PBS Kids. Pbskids.com <https://pbskids.org/sesame/videos/watch-full-episodes#>

Mendoza, Jean. "What Puppets Can Mean to Children" Illinois Early Learning Project. Illinoisearlylearning.org. <https://illinoiseearlylearning.org/blogs/growing/puppets/>

“Racism on Sesame Street.” Sesame Street. Episode 3140. Sesame Workshop. YouTube. 06 April 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCJgA_PkpwY

“Elmo the Engineer.” Sesame Street. Episode 4920. Sesame Workshop. PBS Kids. Pbskids.com
<https://pbskids.org/sesame/videos/watch-full-episodes#>

“The Teaching and Learning of Values Through Television” Samaniego, Concepción Medrano and Pascual, Alejandra Cortés. International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft. Jan2007, Vol. 53 Issue 1, p5-21. 17p.

Mervosh, Sarah. “Are Bert and Ernie Gay? ‘Sesame Street’ Writer Says His Comments Were Misinterpreted.” New York Times. Nytimes.com. 18 September, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/arts/television/bert-ernie-gay-sesame-street.html>

U.S. Constitution. Amendment 1.

“Sheila Kelly.” Sesame Workshop. Sesameworkshop.org. <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/who-we-are/our-leadership/sheila-kelly>