

# Children's television is primarily white

## ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES WORLDWIDE

Manda Mlapa

**An IZI analysis of 126 educational programmes from 30 countries investigated whether there is a statistically verifiable connection between the skin colour of people working in children's television and that of the protagonists.**

Numerous analyses of children's television have shown that the overwhelming majority of main characters in (educational) children's and adolescents' media formats is white. Only a quarter of presenters in explanatory and knowledge programmes by German, British and American channels are "people of colour"<sup>1</sup>, and these generally tend to be co-presenters (Schlote, 2013). Among the 935 main characters in German children's television analysed in a 2011 study, 2.7% were characters "of colour" (Götz et al., 2011). A 2007 study of 14,959 main characters across television worldwide found 961 "of colour" (6.4%), whereas it identified 10,764 (72%) as "white Caucasian" (Götz et al., 2008). When the analysis was repeated 10 years later in 8 countries, the proportion of white main characters in television had actually dropped to 68%, however it still remained considerably behind the diversity of the inhabitants in most countries (Götz et al., 2018).

This has consequences. When children with light skin are asked to name their favourite presenter from a knowledge programme, they always picture a light-skinned presenter. They imagine

the same skin colour and mostly also the same sex as themselves. By contrast, only one in 3 "black" children can imagine this (Holler et al., 2013). They lack the role models and therefore probably also the self-confidence to imagine themselves – with their skin colour – standing in the shoes of a researcher or an instructor. Because "educational programmes evidently have an influence on the knowledge of the world" (ibid., p. 50), it is particularly important to be sensitive to diversity.

So, what are the possible reasons why, now as in the past, "Caucasian white" main characters so clearly dominate children's television? It possibly has something to do with the producers. We investigated this hypothesis by means of an analysis of children's television programmes. The empirical material used was the catalogue of the MIPJunior, the largest trade fair for children's television worldwide, which takes place every year in October in Cannes. We analysed the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 with a particular focus on the categories of educational television.<sup>2</sup> On the production side, we also used websites to research the professional categories of authors, producers and directors, identifying the producers' skin colours on the basis of their photos on the internet. We coded whether they belonged to the "white" majority society or were "people of colour", i.e. "black", (South) Asian, Arabic, etc.

On the basis of 126 programmes from the 155 contributions within the educational categories from 30 countries, we analysed 339 positions with regard to the ethnic background of the authors, producers and directors involved.<sup>3</sup>

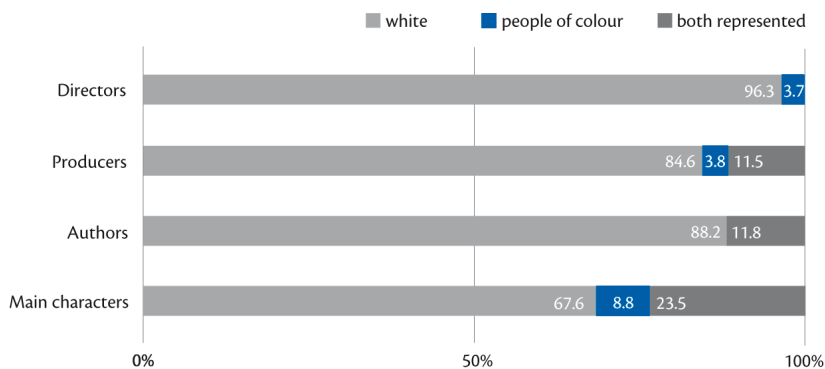
---

### BEHIND THE CAMERA

In the professional category of **directors** we see a very clear dominance of "white" directors (Ill. 1). Programmes which were made under the sole responsibility of directors "of colour" appear only in 2013 and 2015, and only once in each of those years. In 2014, just under 20% of educational programmes were directed by both "white people" and "people of colour".

This distribution is similarly uneven among **producers**. Programmes produced exclusively by "white people" – 8 in every 10 – represent the norm. Programmes made under the joint responsibility of "white" producers and producers "of colour" come to 10.7%. Programmes produced under the sole responsibility of a "person of colour" are the absolute exception, with 6.3% in 2014 and only one format in each of the years 2013 and 2015.

The underrepresentation of "people of colour" is even clearer when it comes to the **authors**. Authors "of colour" participate next to or alongside "white" authors in a maximum of 1 in every 10 programmes. The remaining pro-



Ill. 1: Distribution of ethnic groups on screen and behind the scenes of educational formats in 2015; data in %; n = 104

grammes are written exclusively by “white” authors.

The ratio becomes even more precarious if we include the category of gender in the analysis. Of the 155 contributions, we were not able to identify a single programme exclusively made by female authors, producers or directors “of colour”. Educational formats in children’s television are therefore predominantly written, produced and staged by white men.

## ON SCREEN

The ethnic distribution is comparatively better among the main characters. Nonetheless, across all the years encompassed by the study, educational programmes with only white main characters dominate (with at least 60% (2014) and at the most 76.9% (2013)). Main characters “of colour” are predominantly found at the “white” characters’ sides. It is very rare to find a programme with main characters who are exclusively “of colour” (Ill. 1). It was not possible to identify, among the 155 educational programmes, a single programme which featured a female main character “of colour” operating on her own. If these characters appear at all, they appear as the companions of a “white” man. Does having more producers “of colour” lead to more diversity among the main characters?

It is possible to calculate statistically<sup>4</sup> whether more diversity in skin colour behind the camera leads to more diversity in skin colour in front of the camera. Unfortunately, the number of programmes under the sole responsibility of producers “of colour” is extremely small. Nonetheless, it is evident that there is – at least for 2014 – a statistically significant correlation<sup>5</sup>: producers predominantly prefer main characters with the same skin colour as themselves.

We see the same tendency in producers’ collaborations with authors and directors. Producers work more frequently (almost exclusively) with colleagues with the same skin colour (ethnic group) as themselves. This applies e.g. to producers and authors in the years 2014<sup>6</sup> and 2015<sup>7</sup> as well as to producers and directors in the years 2013<sup>8</sup> and 2014<sup>9</sup>.

More diversity among producers also leads to more diversity among main characters, directors and authors. This is a promising approach, and quality-oriented children’s television ought to make a concerted effort to promote it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Definition available under Amnesty International’s recommendations: <https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensiblesprache> [8.11.2018]

<sup>2</sup> We captured information under the headings “Art, Music and Culture”, “Research”, “Documentation/Knowledge Magazine” and “Education”.

<sup>3</sup> In the online research from 2013 to 2015 we were able to unequivocally classify 68.8% of all contributions according to the skin colour of their directors. In the case of the producers, we were able to identify 63.3% of all contributions, and in the case of the authors 45% of all contributions.

<sup>4</sup> By means of the chi-square test

<sup>5</sup> On the conventionally accepted significance level of 5%, the relation between the variables with a p-value of 0.03 is significant and therefore 97% attributable to skin colour.

<sup>6</sup> With a p-value of 0.002, the relation between the variables is highly significant and therefore 99.98% attributable to the ethnic group.

<sup>7</sup> With a p-value of 0.02, the relation between the variables is significant and is attributable to the ethnic group with a probability of 98%.

<sup>8</sup> With a p-value of 0.05 and a probability of error of only 5%, the relations are not attributable to chance but to skin colour.

<sup>9</sup> With a p-value of 0.009, the relation between the variables is highly significant and therefore 99.1% attributable to the ethnic group.

## REFERENCES

Götz, Maya, Adam, Izabela, Hofmann, Ole, Schwarz, Judith & Windisch, Lysann (2011). Diversity im Kinderfernsehen. Eine Inhaltsanalyse des deutschen Kinderfernsehprogramms 2011. (unpublished research report)

Götz, Maya, Hofmann, Ole, Brosius, Hans-Bernd et al. (2008). Gender in children’s television worldwide. Results from a media analysis in 24 countries. *TeleviZlon*, 21(E), 4-9.

Götz, Maya, Hofmann, Ole, Mendel, Caroline et al. (2018). Whose story is being told? Results of an analysis of children’s TV in 8 countries. *TeleviZlon*, 31(E), 61-65.

Holler, Andrea, Egerer, Anne & Schwarz, Judith (2013). This is the TV presenter I’d like to have. *TeleviZlon*, 25(E), 30-31.

Schlote, Elke (2013). Wer begleitet Kinder in Erklär- und Wissenssendungen? Eine Medienanalyse der LernbegleiterInnen in Wissenssendungen in Deutschland, Großbritannien und den USA. *TeleviZlon*, 26(2), 44-47.

## THE AUTHOR

Manda Mlapa, a psychologist (B.Sc.), is a freelancer at the IZI, Munich, Germany.

