# "She's just like me!": How to Develop Character Designs Reflective of Diverse Children

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# Introduction

- U.S. Department of Education Ready to Learn Grant
- Twin Cities PBS
  - Hero Elementary
  - Appropriate for low-income communities
  - Relatable to ethnic subgroups
- Collaboration with WestEd
- Iterative and interdisciplinary methods

# Methodology

- Character design and test focus
  - Visual aspects of the design – Appearance of the characters
  - Psychological aspects of the characters – Children's connections with the characters
- Study population
  - Low-income, Latino, English Language Learners, and children with special needs
  - K-2nd graders
- Three rounds of testing

# Study Implementation – Round 1

- Purpose
  - To narrow the artist from a wide selection of artists
  - To identify an artist that illustrates engaging characters that have high appeal to a diverse audience.

- Sample
  - 83 K-2nd graders
  - > 80% FRL and LatinX, >70% EL

# Study Implementation – Round 1

- Present description of character

- Present character designs

    - Focus Questions:
        - Questions pertaining to character preferences
          *e.g. Which character is your favorite?*
        - Questions about the compatibility of specific character designs
          *e.g. Which of these two characters are friends?*
        - Questions about personal interest in genre
          *e.g. If you were a superhero, what powers would you want to have?*

# Results – Round 1

- Responses to questions pertaining to preferences
  - Focus on similarities between children and the character
    - *"She is strong, and I am strong" (2nd, boy)*
- Responses to questions about the compatibility of character designs
  - Identify and articulate specific designs and characteristics of the character (1st and 2nd graders)
    - *"He's scrolling, so that's AJ"*
- Responses to questions about personal interest in genre
  - Familiarity with the superhero genre
  - Superpower ideas that reflects children's own interests

# Results – Round 1

- Insights for creating a developmentally appropriate protocol
  - Children would select a character because they liked the action pose
    - Provide static and action pose for each character
  - Children would select a character because of accessories (e.g. ring, beaker)
    - Direct artist to accessorize the characters in the same way
  - Children would select a character because of the long hair
    - Decide on length of hair and standardize for all artists
  - Boys tend to favorite boy characters and girls tend to favorite girl characters
    - Provide options of both the boy and girl character playing together
  - Kindergarteners got tired of the questions
    - limit options and questions

# Study Implementation – Round 2

- Purpose
  - To further narrow the character designs
  - To identify specific attributes that children preferred, in order to understand which characters had the most appeal to children and why.

- Sample
  - 112 K-2$^{nd}$ graders
  - > 50% FRL and LatinX, > 45% EL

# Study Implementation – Round 2

- Focus Questions:
  - Questions pertaining to character preferences
    - *E.g. Which character is your favorite? Why?*
    - *E.g. Which character is the same as you? How?*
  - Question pertaining to design dislike
    - *E.g. Which friends would you want to play with?*

# Results – Round 2

- An opportunity to further refine the protocol to efficiently use the limited available class time, particularly with the kindergarteners

- Responses to questions pertaining to preferences
  - Variation by grade level
    - kindergarten girls focused on the ring, tiara, and long hair
    - 1st and 2nd graders articulated (at length) how they would play with the characters
  - Articulation of detailed design elements
    - Design attribute reflects the children themselves
      - *"It looks like she is fast and I am fast and she looks like she does uppercuts in karate." (1st, boy)*
    - Physical characteristics and the design's reflection of a potential ability
      - *"She looks brave and she never gives up and she does science" (1st, girl)*

# Study Implementation – Round 3

- Purpose
  - To identify specific details that children liked or did not like
  - To understand whether or not children saw themselves reflected in these characters
  - To see how they thought of the characters as a unit, within the Hero Elementary context

- Sample
  - 54 K-2nd graders
  - > 60% FRL, LatinX, and EL

# Study Implementation – Round 3

- Focus Questions:
  - Questions pertaining to character preferences
    - *"What do you like about this character"*
  - Question pertaining to design dislike
    - *"If you could change anything about how this character looks, what would you change?"*

# Results – Round 3

- An opportunity to further refine the character designs based on children's interest, and to identify design elements that children did not like

- Responses to questions pertaining to preferences
  - selected specific design elements as reasons for their preference for the character
    - *"I like his headphones"*
  - remembered the characteristics of the characters beyond their physical appearance
    - *"I like when she flies but when she looks down I don't like that…" (2nd, girl)*

- Responses to question pertaining to design dislike
  - comments that reflected age-appropriate current trends

# Discussion/Recommendations

- Limit numbers of artists presented
- Limit numbers of choices to select from
- Limit the number of questions
- Ask the most critical questions in the beginning
- Make a large copy of image available for the children
- Ask questions that children can better understand and connect with themselves
- Test children in small groups to reduce bias
- Encourage independent voting and then provide opportunities for discussion

# Future Direction and Conclusions

- Explore character testing protocol differences in parents, teachers, and adults, in comparison to testing with children.

- Application of the iterative process with adults in the same communities (e.g., in-depth interviews with adult audiences that have a larger capacity for focus)

- Identify key character features that are critical to pin down first

- Decide on key features that will be standardized from design to design

# Questions?

For more information, please feel free to contact:

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# Thank you!

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