

Barbie (Dolls,) Identity and Representation

GRADE LEVEL: Middle School (Grades 6-8)

COMMON CORE STANDARDS: Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening

SEL STANDARDS*: Self Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making

History of Barbie

Barbie is a toy doll that was created in 1959 by businesswoman Ruth Handler, who co-founded the toy company Mattel with her husband. The first Barbie doll debuted at the New York Toy Fair in March 1959. Handler didn't want Barbie to be portrayed only as a wife and mother, but also as a "career woman." Barbie sold 300,000 dolls in that first year and quickly became a household name and its success continued from there. Over the years, Barbie has changed and evolved. The toy company has made various attempts at diversifying the doll in terms of race, ethnicity, disability, body size, etc. to be more inclusive and more reflective of our diverse society. The topic of Barbie raises issues of identity, diversity, representation, and bias and the 2023 release of the film Barbie has ignited much public conversation and social commentary on the topic. As an extension of the Barbie topic, information will be shared about GI Joe to show a parallel of male stereotypes.

About the Lesson Plan

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about Barbie, reflect on their own experiences and opinions about Barbie, explore whether Barbie reflects our society and consider what identities may be missing from Barbie's collection.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand some of the history of Barbie's identity characteristics.
- Students will reflect on their thoughts and opinions about the role of Barbie in society.
- Students will explore the extent to which Barbie/GI Joe reflects and represents the diversity of our society.
- Students will consider how Barbie/GI Joe could be more inclusive and will conceptualize a new doll.

Materials and Preparation

1. Powerpoint
2. Poll Questions (whiteboards, agree/disagree cards or move around classroom)

3. Discussion Questions (Powerpoint)
4. Links for research
5. Drawing paper and art supplies
6. Microsoft form reflection

Activities:

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: Who is Barbie? What do you know about Barbie? What is memorable, important or meaningful about Barbie? When you picture Barbie in your mind, who do you see? **ON POWERPOINT**
2. Here I Am: My Thoughts and Opinions about Barbie
 - a. Explain to students that in the “Here I Am” activity, they will explore their thoughts and feelings about Barbie, identity, representation and bias.
 - b. Explain that they will listen to statements and decide whether they agree or disagree with the statement. Then, based on their opinion about each statement, students will position themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement.
 - c. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line that indicates the farthest right point representing a “Strongly Agree” response and the farthest left point a “Strongly Disagree” response. In between these two positions, indicate “Agree,” “In Between/Not Sure” and “Disagree” along the continuum.
 - d. Create signs with these words in advance and hang them up on the wall.

This can also be done using signs or whiteboards to signal answers to the questions.

QUESTIONS ARE ON POWERPOINT

- I played with Barbies or have had Barbies in my household that others played with.
- Barbie has a positive impact on children who play with her.
- Barbie reflects the diversity of people in our society.
- Barbie was “ahead of her time.” (Explain that “ahead of her time” means Barbie and their creators had new ideas a long time before other people started the same way.)
- I agree with the criticism of Barbie that the doll portrays an image of beauty that is narrow and unrealistic.
- Barbie sends children biased messages about identity and diversity.
- Toy companies should try to create toys and dolls that help children see themselves in those toys.
- Barbie has changed a lot over the years.

3. After discussing each of the statements, reconvene the class. Engage students in a class discussion using the following questions.
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to position yourself?
 - Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
4. Share the Background information about Barbie/GI Joe- Since it's a lot of information, students can split up into groups and read about one aspect of Barbie or GI Joe's identity, work to take 3-4 notes about that topic, and then each group can give a brief explanation to the class.

Choices are:

<https://www.sutori.com/en/story/barbie-identity-and-representation--KMMdK8n2r4hSXhNHd2vqJDhC>

<https://www.bradley.edu/sites/bodyproject/barbie/gijoe/>

LINKS ON WEBSITE

1. GI Joe article
2. Barbie background
3. Barbie Body Shape
4. Barbie Representation

5. What is Identity and Representation? ON POWERPOINT

- Ask students: What does identity mean? Elicit and explain that identity is: “the qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others.” You can explain that when we talk about social identity groups, we are referring to someone's race, religion, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.
- Ask: What does identity have to do with Barbie? 2. Ask students: What does representation (or “to represent”) mean? Elicit and explain that “to represent” means “to stand for a group that shares similar identity characteristics such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.”
- Post the definitions of identity and representation on the board/smart board. Then ask: What does this have to do with Barbie and dolls/toys in general? Briefly explain why it is important that people in different identity groups are represented in various aspects of our society, including games, toys, books, movies, television, etc. It is important that everyone, especially children as they are growing up, gets to see themselves reflected so they can feel visible, seen and valued in our society and world. Elicit from

students that sometimes certain groups are less visible and not as well represented, or not represented at all or poorly represented, in our society. This is especially important for those in groups that are often discriminated against and those in marginalized groups, which makes it more important to make sure those groups are represented, and represented with accuracy and complexity.

- Ask students: Does Barbie represent you or groups you identify with? Does Barbie represent us as a society? Invite students to turn and talk with their group and share their responses with each other to these questions.
- If you could design a new Barbie (or any type of doll) to represent you or someone else (or an identity group) who you don't feel is represented, what kind of Barbie would you create? Have each group work together to think of a type of identity which doesn't have any representation and write down some of the characteristics that this doll should have. Groups can share with the class and work to draw a rough sketch with ideas about their doll.

Microsoft Form: Reflection questions (Link on website)

<https://forms.office.com/r/RnmMZk5V0k>