Research in Arts & Education

ISSUE 1/2026

THEMATIC ISSUE ON CULTIVATING NEURODIVERSITY RESEARCH IN ARTS AND ARTS EDUCATION

Representation Matters Responding to Autistics in Popular Visual Culture

Laura Hetrick
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
laurajh@illinois.edu

ABSTRACT

This article critically examines television portrayals of autistic characters in *Atypical*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *The Good Doctor*, *Community*, and *Sesame Street* through qualitative content analysis informed by the affirmative model of disability and critical disability studies. It interrogates stereotypes such as the savant trope, explores authentic casting debates, and considers cultural and pedagogical implications for art education. Drawing on scholarship and lived experience as an autistic educator, the study argues that media representations shape public and educational perceptions, advocating for inclusive practices that affirm neurodivergent identities and dismantle ableism in visual culture and classrooms.

KEYWORDS

autistic representation in media, affirmative model of disability, neurodiversity and ableism

DOI https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.161985

DATE OF PUBLICATION 02/04/2026

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

In contemporary society, visual culture plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of marginalized communities, including autistic individuals. As media representations increasingly influence societal norms and expectations, it becomes essential to critically examine how autism is portrayed in popular visual culture. As an autistic art education professor, I explore the implications of these portrayals for educators, particularly in the arts, and advocate for more nuanced, inclusive, and accurate representations. Drawing from both academic literature and my lived experience, this analysis interrogates the ideological underpinnings of media depictions of autism and addresses how these representations may negatively skew educators' conceptualizations of autistic students and/or colleagues. By mitigating the gap between representation and reality, this work aims to empower educators to engage more thoughtfully with neurodivergent students and challenge reductive stereotypes.

Autism, Disability Models, and Critical Frameworks

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as defined by the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), is characterized by persistent differences in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. While clinically useful, these diagnostic criteria often support media portrayals that emphasize deficits rather than diversity. This reflects the dominance of the medical model, which frames disability as pathology located within the individual, requiring normalization or cure to align with neurotypical standards. As Dwyer (2022) explains, "the appropriate response to disability [in the medical model] is to strive to transform disabled people into able-bodied and typically developing individuals" (p. 74). Such a framework marginalizes autistic identities and reinforces stigmatizing narratives that prioritize conformity over acceptance.

However, this deficit-oriented lens is increasingly challenged by alternative frameworks such as the social model of disability, which posits that disability arises not solely from individual impairments but from the interaction between those impairments and societal barriers. As Goldberg (2023) notes, "the social model framed disability as the misalignment between the individual (ability and needs) and their environment (accessibility and accommodation capacity)" (p. 977). Yet, for neurodevelopmental conditions like autism, challenges may persist even in inclusive environments, revealing the limitations of this binary. To move beyond deficit-based thinking, the affirmative model of disability affirms disability as a valued aspect of human diversity and identity. Individuals with an affirmative orientation "consider disability as their primary identity and view it in positive terms" (McCormack & Collins, 2012, p. 157), embracing disability culture and rejecting the need for normalization. This perspective encourages educators and media creators to recognize and celebrate autistic identities rather than pathologize them. As Ballantyne and Muir (2008) argue, "the affirmative model opens up possibilities for practice where the individual is understood as being located within a social context and that different outcomes then become possible" (p. 149). This shift in orientation

challenges the reductive assumptions of the medical model as well as aligns with a more inclusive, identity-affirming approach to autism representation and support.

While the affirmative model offers an identity-affirming stance, Critical Disability Studies (CDS) extends this work by interrogating the cultural, political, and economic conditions that produce ableism. CDS critiques neoliberal narratives that frame disability as an individual problem to be overcome, exposing how educational and media systems perpetuate ableist norms under the guise of diversity. For art educators, this shift moves the conversation from accommodation toward structural change through rethinking curricula, pedagogy, and representation. Garland-Thomson (2005) situates disability as a cultural system akin to race and gender, noting that disability is "a cultural interpretation of human variation rather than an inherent inferiority, a pathology to cure, or an undesirable trait to eliminate," (p. 1557). Her work can be used to illuminate the representational politics embedded in visual culture, where images of disability circulate as normative scripts. For autistic characters, these scripts often manifest as reductive tropes (e.g., the savant genius, the inspirational figure, the child) that may shape educators' expectations and interactions. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) deepen this analysis through their concept of *narrative prosthesis*, which describes disability as a device upon which stories rely for dramatic effect. "Disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (p. 49). This insight is important for understanding autism portrayals in television and films, where neurodivergence often functions as a plot mechanism rather than a lived reality. Such instrumentalization reinforces stereotypes and limits authentic representation, with implications for how educators perceive autistic students as symbols rather than subjects.

Finally, CDS foregrounds intersectionality, emphasizing how disability intersects with race, gender, and class (Goodley, 2013). This is particularly relevant given the overwhelming focus on white, cisgender male autistic characters in media (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022). By integrating CDS into art education discourse, educators can move beyond performative inclusion toward practices that dismantle ableism (Eisenhauer, 2007) and affirm neurodivergent identities in their full complexity. Therefore, the combined lens of the affirmative model and CDS provides a robust theoretical foundation for this study. Together, they challenge educators to examine cultural scripts embedded in visual media and enact pedagogies that resist ableist norms. For art educators, this means recognizing stereotypes and actively reconstructing classroom practices to honor neurodiversity as a source of creativity, knowledge, and cultural richness. Building on this foundation, the next section examines how these cultural scripts operate within visual culture, revealing how representational practices reinforce or challenge ableist norms.

Visual Culture and Its Influence

Visual culture examines how images across advertising, television, film, and digital media do more than reflect social attitudes; they actively construct them. Scholars such as Freedman (2003) and Tavin (2002) argue that visual culture shapes normative understandings of race, gender, class, and ability. In this context, autism portrayals function as ideological texts that circulate cultural norms about neurodivergence. As Tavin and Anderson (2003) note, "These representations… play a significant role in the symbolic and material milieu of contemporary society by shaping, and often limiting, perceptions of reality and constructing a normative 'vision' of the world" (p. 21), which I argue includes autistic culture. Dean and Nordahl-Hansen (2022) affirm this view, noting that "many people form personal perceptions of ASD based on the characters they observe on the screen" (p. 470), especially given that many viewers have limited direct experience with autistic individuals. These parasocial encounters can foster familiarity but also entrench stereotypes when portrayals are narrow or inaccurate. For example, white male characters with savant traits dominate screen representations, despite savantism occurring in fewer than one in ten autistic individuals (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022, p. 471). Such skewed visibility reinforces ableist norms and unrealistic expectations.

From a critical disability perspective, these portrayals are far from benign and reproduce hierarchies of normalcy and difference. Visual culture critique, therefore, must move beyond passive observation toward social reconstruction, dismantling dominant assumptions and re-centering marginalized perspectives. In the case of autism, this means challenging reductive tropes and advocating for authentic, diverse, and affirming representations. While some progress is evident, stereotypical patterns persist, and characters from minority racial, linguistic, and gender identities remain underrepresented (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022, p. 475). This absence distorts public understanding and erases the complexity of autistic lives. For art educators, these dynamics matter profoundly. Media scripts shape expectations in classrooms, where "the binaries created by the media about autism reinforce educators' belief that autistic learners are differently bad" (Ressa, 2021, p. 17). As diagnoses rise, teachers should mindfully investigate these portrayals to dismantle internalized biases and foster inclusive, empathetic environments. Yet awareness alone is insufficient; as Tavin and Anderson (2003) caution, "teachers may potentially disavow that information and do nothing with it upon entering the classroom" (p. 21). Mitigating this gap between recognition and action requires moving from theory to application. For art education, this involves transforming visual culture critique into pedagogical practice and creating spaces where neurodiversity is acknowledged as well as championed as ingenuity and cognitive expression. To understand how media narratives shape these possibilities, the next section outlines the methodological approach used to analyze six influential television series and their portrayals of autism.

Methods and Approach

This study employed a qualitative content analysis to examine autism representation in six contemporary television series: *Atypical* (Rashid, 2017), *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Moon & Yoo, 2022), and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (Jo & Park, 2020) all on Netflix, *The Good Doctor* (Shore, 2017) and *Community* (Harmon, et al., 2009) both on Hulu, and *Sesame Street* (Stone, 1969) on PBS/YouTube. These shows were selected for their cultural visibility, narrative significance, and the diversity of traits commonly associated with autism, including sensory sensitivities, communication differences, and intense or specialized interests. I viewed all but two series in full, taking detailed notes and personal reflections on character development, narrative arcs, interpersonal dynamics, and recurring tropes. Particular attention was given to a priori criteria such as how autistic traits were framed, whether as sources of strength, obstacles to overcome, or markers of difference, and how these portrayals aligned with or diverged from my own lived experience as an autistic educator. The accessibility of these series on widely available platforms ensured that the media analyzed reflected content readily available to general audiences and educators alike. Using iterative coding on my notes taken during observation, I identified emergent themes such as savantism, social ineptitude, and inspirational framing. These patterns were then critically examined through the lenses of the affirmative model, disability studies and visual culture theory. This approach is grounded in the belief that media representations are not neutral but ideological texts that shape and reflect cultural understandings of disability. Analyzing these portrayals through a critical, reflective lens provides insight into how visual culture constructs autism and influences educational perceptions.

Case Studies: Sam Gardner (Atypical) and Shaun Murphy (The Good Doctor)

Sam Gardner and Shaun Murphy exemplify the enduring white male autistic trope in popular media, yet their portrayals diverge along two familiar axes: the socially inept burden and the gifted savant. In *Atypical*, Sam, a suburban high schooler, is framed as awkward and slightly dependent; his autism often positioned as a strain on his family. His rigid routines and sensory sensitivities are foregrounded in domestic conflicts, while his hyperfixation on Antarctica and penguins becomes a narrative shorthand for eccentricity. Scenes of Sam reciting penguin names or clinging to structured lists showcase his inability to navigate social ambiguity without external scaffolding, reinforcing the image of autism as isolating and cumbersome.

By contrast, in *The Good Doctor*, Shaun Murphy inhabits the savant archetype as a surgical resident whose extraordinary diagnostic brilliance compensates for his perceived emotional detachment. His autism is dramatized through

stylized visualizations of anatomical structures, elevating his cognitive prowess as lifesaving and indispensable. While Shaun's interpersonal challenges are acknowledged, they are overshadowed by his technical genius, which secures his place in a high-stakes medical hierarchy. Both series amplify autism visibility but through a narrow lens: white male protagonists whose identities are defined by extremes, either as socially inept dependents or as prodigious outliers. This bifurcation perpetuates reductive stereotypes, marginalizing the heterogeneity of autistic experiences and reinforcing a cultural script where autism is either a burden or a superpower, rarely anything in between.

Case Study: Woo Young-Woo in Extraordinary Attorney Woo

The 2022 South Korean series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* portrays Woo Young-Woo, an autistic woman navigating a high-stakes legal career. Her character stands out for its cultural specificity and emotional depth, challenging Western norms that often center white male protagonists. Young-Woo exhibits traits such as sensory sensitivities, rigid routines, and a special interest in whales, which the series uses as a creative motif to externalize her thought process. While her eidetic memory and legal brilliance reinforce the autistic savant trope, the narrative also foregrounds systemic ableism as she faces repeated job rejections despite academic excellence and the interpersonal misunderstandings that arise from neurotypical expectations. Importantly, her colleagues' evolving responses reflect both bias and growth, offering a nuanced view of workplace inclusion. This portrayal affirms autism as part of identity while acknowledging cultural and gendered dimensions of representation.

Case Study: Moon Sang-Tae in It's Okay to Not Be Okay

This 2020 Korean drama includes Moon Sang-Tae, an autistic male adult whose story intertwines with themes of trauma and healing. Unlike portrayals that romanticize autism or reduce it to savantism, Sang-Tae is depicted with complexity; his sensory sensitivities, echolalia, and intense interest in dinosaurs are shown as meaningful aspects of his identity. A pivotal scene during a book signing illustrates the challenges of sensory overload and public misunderstanding, handled with empathy and realism. The series also explores the deep bond between Sang-Tae and his younger adult brother Gang-Tae, portraying caregiving as both tender and taxing, without reducing Sang-Tae to only a troublesome burden. His aspiration to become an illustrator and his contributions to children's books honor his agency and artistry. By situating autism within Korean cultural contexts and acknowledging intersections with trauma, the series expands the representational landscape beyond narrow stereotypes.

Case Study: Abed Nadir in Community

Abed Nadir, a character from the 2009-2015 sitcom *Community*, offers a distinctive portrayal of autism within an ensemble cast. Unlike many media depictions that center white male protagonists, Abed is of mixed Polish and Palestinian heritage, adding cultural diversity to autism representation. Though not the main character, he is a strong supporting figure with rich storylines that foreground his unique perspective and social communication differences. Abed's autism is referenced throughout the series, sometimes humorously, but his identity is treated with respect by his peers. His intense interests in film and pop culture shape his worldview, often framing interactions through cinematic metaphors. While his literal interpretations and difficulty with social cues create comedic tension, these traits are never pathologized; instead, they are integral to his character's creativity and insight. A recurring dynamic involves older student Jeff, who acts as a protective "mother hen", warning others not to force Abed into neurotypical molds and advocating for his autonomy. This relationship highlights the show's commitment to acceptance rather than normalization. Abed's portrayal avoids the savant stereotype, presenting him as deeply knowledgeable in his passions without framing him as superhuman. His narrative arc emphasizes friendship (especially with classmate Troy), agency, and belonging, offering educators and viewers a model of neurodivergent identity that is complex, culturally situated, and affirming.

Case Study: Julia in Sesame Street

Julia, introduced in 2017 through *Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children*, is the first autistic Muppet and represents a milestone in children's media. A four-year-old who loves drawing and singing, Julia exhibits traits such as echolalia, sensory sensitivities, and a preference for routine, which are portrayed without pathologizing her differences. One instructive scene shows Julia painting with friends. Focused and humming softly, she uses rhythmic brushstrokes as Big Bird approaches. When Julia doesn't respond immediately, educator Alan explains that she needs extra processing time. This moment illustrates artmaking as both communication and sensory regulation. Her stimming, gentle humming, and repetitive strokes integrate seamlessly into her creative process, modeling for educators how autistic expression can enrich artistic practice when supported. The scene illuminates the importance of patience, flexibility, and adapting to neurodivergent communication styles, aligning with disability-affirming pedagogy (Fung, 2021). Julia's portrayal challenges deficit-based narratives by presenting her as joyful and socially connected rather than sensationalized. Research shows her presence on *Sesame Street* fosters understanding and acceptance among children and parents (Chow & Hayakawa, 2022), offering educators a powerful example of inclusive representation.

Personally, I found Julia's representation particularly resonant in the context of arts education. Her sensory sensitivities, including not liking to touch finger paints, preference for visual expression, and need for predictable routines, mirror my own experiences, as well as some autistic students I've had in my classrooms. By centering Julia's perspective, *Sesame Street* invites educators to reimagine the art room as a space of neurodiverse inclusion, one where all students can explore, express, and connect through the arts. In my opinion, Julia's character offers a gentle yet profound intervention in the landscape of autism representation. Through her, Sesame Street models how media can affirm neurodivergent identities and provide educators with practical insights into inclusive, empathetic teaching. Her artmaking scene, in particular, stands as a testament to the power of creative expression as a connection between neurotypes.

Discussion: Stereotypes and Their Consequences

Across the six analyzed series: *Atypical*, *The Good Doctor*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *Community*, and *Sesame Street*, recurring stereotypes shape how autism is imagined in popular culture. These portrayals, while increasing visibility, often narrow the spectrum and influence public and educational perceptions in problematic ways. The most pervasive trope is the autistic savant, exemplified by Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor* and Woo Young-Woo in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Both characters possess extraordinary cognitive abilities such as Shaun's surgical brilliance and Young-Woo's eidetic memory, framing autism as synonymous with genius. While compelling, this stereotype distorts reality; as mentioned in the introduction, fewer than one in ten autistic individuals exhibit savant traits (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022). In classrooms, this myth can lead to unrealistic expectations and pressure on autistic students to perform exceptionally, overshadowing their authentic needs and strengths.

Closely related is the socially inept individual, seen in Sam Gardner (*Atypical*) and Abed Nadir (*Community*). These characters struggle with social communication and literal thinking, often used for humor or dramatic tension. Although Abed's portrayal includes respect and advocacy with Jeff's insistence not to force Abed to be anyone else, such depictions risk reinforcing the misconception that autistic individuals lack emotional depth or relational capacity. Educators may misinterpret communication differences as rudeness or disengagement rather than valid neurodivergent expression (Ressa, 2021). Another recurring frame is the burden (to family or society), evident in Moon Sang-Tae's storyline in *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*. While the series offers empathy and complexity, Sang-Tae's dependence on his younger brother can perpetuate assumptions that autistic individuals are inherently difficult or disruptive. In educational contexts, this stereotype may translate into lowered expectations, exclusion from group activities, or overreliance on aides instead of fostering autonomy and inclusion.

Conversely, the inspirational figure emerges in Julia from *Sesame Street*. Her presence promotes empathy and understanding among neurotypical peers, modeling inclusive values. Yet framing autistic characters primarily as tools for teaching kindness risks reducing them to educational props rather than recognizing their agency and individuality. Finally, patterns of racial and gender bias persist. With the exception of Woo Young-Woo, Moon Sang-Tae, Julia, and Abed Nadir, most portrayals center white male characters, marginalizing autistic women, people of color, and nonbinary individuals. This lack of representational diversity reinforces diagnostic disparities and cultural invisibility (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022). These stereotypes do not exist in isolation. They shape cultural models that educators internalize, influencing how they may interpret behavior, assess ability, and design interventions. When left unchallenged, such narratives may perpetuate ableist assumptions, undermining inclusive practice. To counter these effects, educators should question narrow media portrayals, recognize the diversity of autistic experiences, and resist the urge to fit students into pre-scripted roles shaped by television and film. Beyond questioning stereotypes, conversations about representation must also address who gets to tell these stories. Authentic casting is central to this discussion, as it shapes whether portrayals feel lived or simply performed.

Autism Community Perspectives on Authentic Casting

Authentic casting remains one of the most debated issues in autism representation. Advocacy organizations such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and scholars argue that hiring neurotypical actors to portray autistic characters often results in portrayals that feel performative rather than lived, reinforcing stereotypes and ableist assumptions. As Dancey-Downs and Carrier (2023) explain about Lillian Carrier, an autistic actor and consultant, “When neurotypical actors play autistic characters, Carrier worries that it can feel like a mockery. ‘Some of them do it brilliantly. They did their research, they were very respectful,’ she said” (p. 66). Carrier goes on to say that those representations can also go “very wrong, very easily” (Dancey-Downs & Carrier, 2023, p. 67). Carrier further critiques the industry’s reluctance to hire autistic actors, calling it “dehumanising and debilitating,” and likening it to outdated practices such as blackface, saying that “[Being neurodivergent] is a lived experience, it’s something you can never understand unless you are in our bodies” (Dancey-Downs & Carrier, 2023, p. 67). Recent scholarship echoes these concerns, noting that authentic representation requires more than research; it demands inclusion of autistic voices in writing, consulting, and acting roles (Mittmann, et al., 2024).

While shows like *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* increased visibility, they have been criticized for casting neurotypical actors and framing autism through deficit-based or savant narratives. Conversely, productions that employ autistic actors and consultants, such as *Everything’s Gonna Be Okay* (Thomas, 2020), are praised for their depth and authenticity. As a member of the autistic community, I share these mixed feelings. I am glad these shows exist because they

open space for conversations about autism, yet some portrayals felt disconnected from my lived experience. Certain scenes evoked secondhand embarrassment because they mirrored moments I have endured, while others helped me understand how neurotypical peers might perceive me in similar situations. I deeply appreciated the complexity of the Korean dramas, which portrayed autism within cultural and relational contexts, and I found joy in Abed Nadir's character in *Community* as someone I imagine would be my friend or even a love interest in real life. These reactions accentuate why authentic casting matters: representation is about visibility as well as resonance, dignity, and nuance. Thankfully, positive steps are emerging. Though I have not personally watched this, I have heard and read about Chloé Hayden's portrayal of Quinni in *Heartbreak High* (Chapman, 2022) and how it marks a significant shift toward authenticity. Hayden, an autistic actor, brings lived experience to a character navigating masking, sensory overwhelm, and social complexity. While this is only a step in the right direction, it signals progress toward narratives that reflect autism with depth and agency, an approach that media creators and educators alike should strive to emulate.

Implications for Art Education

More than simply entertaining people, media portrayals of autism can shape cultural customs that influence how educators perceive and interact with neurodivergent students. When stereotypes such as the autistic savant or socially inept genius dominate, teachers may enter the classroom with unrealistic expectations or deficit-based assumptions. For art educators at all levels of schooling (preK-college), this is particularly consequential because the art room can either reinforce these biases or serve as a transformative space for inclusion. To move beyond passive awareness, art educators must reconsider the narratives they consume and translate critical insights into practice. This begins with recognizing that autistic students of all ages often experience the art room as both an opportunity and a challenge. Sensory sensitivities, such as aversion to certain textures or discomfort with noise, can make traditional art activities overwhelming. At the same time, artmaking can provide a powerful avenue for nonverbal communication, regulation, and self-expression, as illustrated by Julia's painting scene on *Sesame Street*. Her rhythmic brushstrokes and humming were not distractions but integral to her creative process, modeling how stimming can coexist with artistic engagement. Recognizing these possibilities in artmaking calls for intentional planning. To translate this understanding into practice, educators can adopt several strategies that create sensory-friendly, choice-driven, and affirming environments for neurodivergent learners.

Practical Strategies for Inclusive Art Rooms at Any Level

- **Adapt Sensory Environments:** Offer alternatives to messy materials like finger paint, provide a quiet corner with fidgets, plushies, and noise-reducing headphones, and allow students to choose seating away from high-traffic areas.

- **Honor Stimming and Movement:** Normalize behaviors such as humming or repetitive motions during artmaking. Frame these as creative rhythms rather than disruptions.

- **Use Visual Supports and Predictable Routines:** Visual schedules, clear step-by-step instructions, clear achievable expectations, and consistent class structures to reduce anxiety and support executive functioning.

- **Provide Choice-Based Projects:** Allow students to select media and/or themes aligned with their interests, whether dinosaurs, whales, or pop culture, mirroring the deep passions seen in characters like Moon Sang-Tae and Woo Young-Woo.

- **Foster Peer Understanding:** Incorporate discussions about neurodiversity into art critiques and collaborative projects, helping students appreciate diverse ways of thinking and creating.

As an autistic educator, I have found that these strategies support neurodivergent learners in preK-12 grades through college level as well as enrich the classroom for all students. My own sensory profile informs how I design lessons with actions taken to avoid harsh lighting, offer differently textured supplies, build in quiet breaks, and model flexibility. When I do share aspects of my lived experience with undergrads and graduates, students often respond with curiosity and empathy, creating a culture of mutual respect. Representation in media can spark these conversations, but it is the educator's responsibility to ensure they lead to action rather than tokenism. Ultimately, the art room at any grade level should function as a site of affirmation, where neurodiversity is recognized as an origin of imagination and innovation. By dismantling ableist assumptions and embracing inclusive practices, art educators can transform visual culture critique into lived equity, making space for all students to thrive as artists and as individuals.

Conclusion: Toward Affirmative and Inclusive Representations of Autism in Visual Culture

This study examined six recent portrayals of autistic characters: *Atypical*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *The Good Doctor*, *Community*, and *Sesame Street*, through a lens that combines the affirmative model of disability with critical disability studies. These narratives reveal both progress and persistent limitations in how autism is depicted. While some characters, such as Julia and Moon Sang-Tae, offer emotionally grounded and culturally nuanced portrayals, others lean heavily on tropes like the autistic savant, narrowing public understanding of the spectrum and reinforcing unrealistic expectations. Representation matters for visibility as well as for shaping social conventions that educators carry into classrooms. Media can either perpetuate ableist assumptions or serve as a catalyst for empathy and inclusion. Positive steps such as casting autistic actors like Hayden in *Heartbreak High* signal movement toward authenticity, though these remain incremental. True transformation requires centering autistic voices in storytelling and consulting, ensuring portrayals reflect lived realities rather than stereotypes.

For art educators, the implications are clear: the art room can be a site of equity and affirmation. By dismantling deficit-based assumptions and embracing inclusive practices such as sensory accommodations, choice-based projects, and recognition of stimming as creative expression, teachers can create spaces where neurodiversity is celebrated as cognitive richness. My own experience as an autistic educator reinforces this urgency. Representation in media has helped me reflect on how I am perceived and how I teach, but systemic change begins with intentional and empathic action in each of our classrooms. I want the world to be better for the neurodivergent students who will enter educational spaces after me. That change can start in the art room where educators commit to seeing difference as possibility, not as deficit. Let us move beyond tolerance toward practices that honor agency, enhance creativity, and instill dignity. The stories we tell and the spaces we shape today will define the futures all of our students deserve.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (DSM-V-TR) (5th ed., text rev.). https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787

Ballantyne, E., & Muir, A. (2008). In practice from the viewpoint of an occupational therapist. In J. Swain & S. French (eds.), *Disability on equal terms* (pp. 142–149). Sage.

Chapman, H. C. (Creator). (2022–present). *Heartbreak High* [TV series]. Netflix; Fremantle Australia; NewBe.

Chow, E., & Hayakawa, M. (2022). Transforming children's perception of autism through the "superpower" of media representation in the U.S. *Journal of Children and Media, 16*(4), 543–553. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2022.2059539

Dancey-Downs, K., & Carrier, L. (2023). Autism on screen is gonna be okay. *Index on Censorship, 52*(2), 66–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/03064220231183824

Dean, M., & Nordahl-Hansen, A. (2022). A review of research studying film and television representations of ASD. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 9*(2), 470–479. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-021-00273-8

Dwyer, P. (2022). The Neurodiversity Approach(es): What Are They and What Do They Mean for Researchers? *Human Development, 66*(2), 73–92.

Eisenhauer, J. (2007). Just looking and staring back: Challenging ableism through disability performance art. *Studies in Art Education, 48*(1), 7–22.

Freedman, K. (2003). *Teaching Visual Culture. Curriculum, Aesthetics and the Social Life.* Teachers College Press; The National Art Education Association.

Fung, L. K. (Ed.). (2021). *Neurodiversity: From Phenomenology to Neurobiology and Enhancing Technologies*. American Psychiatric Association.

Garland Thomson, R. (2005). Feminist Disability Studies. Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30*(2), 1557–1587. https://doi.org/10.1086/423352

Goldberg, H. (2023). Unraveling Neurodiversity: Insights from Neuroscientific Perspectives. *Encyclopedia 2023, 3*, 972–980. https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia3030070

Goodley, D. (2013) Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Disability & Society, 28*(5), 631–644, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.717884

Jo, Y. (Writer), & Park, S. (Director). (2020). *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* [TV series]. Studio Dragon; Story TV; tvN; Netflix.

McCormack, C., & Collins, B. (2012). The affirmative model of disability: A means to include disability orientation in occupational therapy? *British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 75*(3), 156–158. https://doi.org/10.4276/030802212X13311219571909

Harmon, D., McKenna, C., Krasnoff, R., & Foster, G. (Executive Producers). (2009–2015). *Community* [TV series]. Universal Media Studios; Sony Pictures Television.

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press.

Mittmann, G., Schrank, B., & Steiner-Hofbauer, V. (2024). Portrayal of autism in mainstream media – a scoping review about representation, stigmatisation and effects on consumers in non-fiction and fiction media. *Current Psychology, 43*(9), 8008–8017. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04959-6

Moon, J. (Writer), & Yoo, I. (Director). (2022). *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* [TV series]. AStory; KT Studio Genie; ENA; Netflix.

Rashid, R. (Executive Producer). (2017–2021). *Atypical* [TV series]. Sony Pictures Television; Netflix.

Ressa, T. (2021). Histrionics of Autism in the Media and the Dangers of False Balance and False Identity on Neurotypical Viewers. *Journal of Disability Studies in Education, 2*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1163/25888803-bja10009

Shore, D. (Executive Producer). (2017–2024). *The Good Doctor* [TV series]. ABC Studios; Sony Pictures Television.

Stone, J. (Executive Producer). (1969–present). *Sesame Street* [TV series]. Sesame Workshop; PBS.

Tavin, K. (2002). Engaging advertisements: Looking for meaning in and through visual culture. *Visual Arts Research, 28*(2), 38–47.

Tavin, K., & Anderson, D. (2003). Teaching (popular) visual culture: Deconstructing Disney in the elementary art classroom. *Art Education, 56*(3), 21–35.

Thomas, J. (Executive Producer). (2020–2023). *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* [TV series]. Freeform.