

Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations: Portraits of Individuals With Disabilities in Star Trek

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Abstract

Weekly television series have more influence on American society than any other form of media, and with many of these series available on DVDs, television series are readily accessible to most consumers. Studying television series provides a unique perspective on society's view of individuals with disabilities and influences how teachers and peers view students with disabilities. Special education teachers can use select episodes to differentiate between the fact and fiction of portrayed individuals with disabilities with their students, and discuss acceptance of peers with disabilities. With its philosophy of infinite diversity in infinite combinations, Star Trek has portrayed a number of persons with disabilities over the last forty years. Examples of select episodes and implications for special education teachers for using Star Trek for instructional purposes through guided viewing are discussed.

Keywords

videotherapy, disabilities, television, bibliotherapy

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"Families, societies, cultures -- wouldn't have evolved without compassion and tolerance -- they would have fallen apart without it." -- Kes to the Doctor (Braga, Menosky, & Singer, 1997).

Television has always been a powerful medium. Television can entertain, inform, and educate. As with motion pictures, it can influence the way we think and how we perceive things. Often, in life, it does not matter how things really are, but how they are perceived. This is especially true how individuals with disabilities are perceived in the media. With the increasing numbers of students with disabilities entering the general education classroom, this media-induced perception of disabilities influence how teachers and peers view students with disabilities. For example, Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* (1988) accurately portrays an individual with autism. His character repeats or echoes what he hears from other people (echolalia), and he is resistant to change. However, *Rain Man* has savant syndrome, an unusual condition in which extraordinary abilities are displayed. In this case, *Rain Man* has remarkable mathematical abilities. Because of this movie, teachers and peers may think that all students with autism have some exceptional ability, and may look for this "unfound genius" (Safran, 1998a; Safran, 1998b).

Unlike movies shown in theaters, which are viewed occasionally by consumers, television series have more influence on American society because they are weekly events and are readily accessible to most consumers. With many television series available on DVDs, special education teachers can use select episodes to differentiate between the fact and fiction of portrayed individuals with disabilities with their students, and discuss acceptance of peers with disabilities within the special education classroom.

A Reflection of Society

For the last fifty years, television has been a reflection of American society, but it also has had a substantial impact on public attitudes. Television has addressed racial issues through casting the first black actor in a starring role (Bill Cosby in *I Spy*, 1965 – 1968), the first interracial kiss (Captain Kirk kisses Uhura in *Star Trek*, 1967), and ridiculing racism (*All in the Family*, 1971 – 1983); challenged the Vietnam War (*M*A*S*H*, 1971 – 1982); and promoted feminism (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 1973 – 1980). Often, television served as the only source on the nature of disabilities for many Americans, and very few television series feature individuals with disabilities. Dennis Weaver portrayed a deputy with a physical disability (Chester Goode on *Gunsmoke*, 1955 – 1964). Gene Sheldon played a deaf mute (Bernardo, manservant of Don Diego De La Vega in *Zorro*, 1957 – 1959). Raymond Burr played a paraplegic (Robert T. Ironside in *Ironside*, 1967 – 1975).

Even fewer television series have actors with disabilities portraying individuals with disabilities. In one of the earliest portrayals on a television series, Susan Peters played a female attorney in a wheelchair in *Miss Susan* (1951). The real actress, Susan Peters, was paralyzed from the waist down from a spinal injury. Linda Bove, a deaf performer, played Linda, a deaf librarian working on *Sesame Street* (1976 - present). She would be the first of many individuals with disabilities to walk on *Sesame Street* (Kingsley, 1996). Chris Burke, an individual with Down syndrome, played Charles "Corky" Thatcher, a likable 18-year-old with Down syndrome in *Life Goes On* (1989), and as an angel with Down syndrome in *Touched by an Angel* (1994 – 2004). However, no television series has consistently portrayed individuals

with disabilities as major characters as *Star Trek*.

Throughout its numerous incarnations, a focal point of the *Star Trek* universe has been the acceptance and tolerance of those who are different. It is the first television show to have an interracial kiss (between Captain James T. Kirk and Lieutenant Nyota Uhura) and to have an inter-species (interracial) character in Spock, who was half-human and half-Vulcan. A number of episodes throughout its forty years have showcased individuals with various disabilities. Many of these episodes presented acceptance of individuals with disabilities, and a few episodes have shown the objectionable intolerance others have for those who are different.

Disabilities in Star Trek

Emotional Disturbance

17-year-old Charles Evans is the lone survivor when the ship he was on crashed on the planet Thasus when he was three years old. Raised by non-corporeal beings called the Thasian, Charles is provided with psychokinetic powers to survive. He is eventually rescued, but because he is raised in isolation, he has severe difficulties behaving according to societal expectations. Charles meets three of the criteria for emotional disturbance. He has an inability to build or maintain appropriate relationships with peers and adults. Charles does not get along with anyone, with the exception of Captain Kirk, who momentarily is a father figure to the teenager. He displays inappropriate behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances, and has sent away people who laugh at him or do not return his amorous affections. Finally, Charles displays a general mood of unhappiness or depression. He does not understand why no one likes him, and he does not understand why he cannot

have what he wants when he wants it. The concept that sometimes things do not go the way one would like is difficult for many children with emotional and behavior disorders, and Kirk tries to explain it to Charles.

Kirk: *"Charlie, there are a million things in this universe you can have and there are a million things you can't have. It's no fun facing that, but that's the way things are."*

Charles: *"Then what am I going to do?"*

Kirk: *"Hang on tight. And survive. Everybody does"* (Fontana, Roddenberry, & Dobkin, 1966).

Unfortunately, Charles does not have the time to learn the lessons. He is irrational, defies authority, and harms others. Before Charles can destroy the *Enterprise*, the Thasian show up to take him back to Tharus. Charles pleads with the *Enterprise* crew to let him stay. Understanding the nature of Charles' disability, Kirk tries to reason with the Thasian. He even suggests an individualized plan to educate and train Charles.

Charles: *"Please. I want to go with you. Help me."*

Kirk: *"The boy belongs with his own kind."*

Thasian: *"That will be impossible."*

Kirk: *"With training, we can teach him to live in our society. If he can be taught not to use his powers..."*

Thasian: *"We gave him the power so he could live. He will use it always, and he would destroy you and*

your kind, or you would be forced to destroy him to save yourselves.”

Kirk: *“Is there nothing you can do?”*

Thasian: *“We offer him life. And we will take care of him.”*

Unfortunately, many children like Charles are placed in self-contained classrooms or other restricted environments. Children with emotional and behavior disorders are four times as likely as other students with disabilities to be educated in separate public facilities or separate private facilities (Bradley, Henderson, & Monfore, 2004). The difficulty lies in understanding the characteristics and nature of a child with emotional and behavior disorders, and with our attitudes and perceptions toward individuals with disabilities.

Visual Impairments

The *Enterprise* picks up Kollo, a Medusan ambassador whose race is technologically sophisticated, but whose appearance can make humans insane. Dr. Miranda Jones is a telepath who will try to mind-meld with Kollo and bring Medusan technology to the Federation. However, when an individual who has gazed at Kollo goes insane and hurls the *Enterprise* to unknown space, Spock suggests that he mind-meld with Kollo since the Medusans' knowledge of navigation is extensive. Dr. Jones objects, and insists that since she was scheduled to mind-meld with Kollo, she should make the attempt. Dr. McCoy reveals to the others that Dr. Jones is blind and can only see using a sensor web that she wears like a shawl. She is incapable of navigating a starship, even if she obtained the knowledge from Kollo.

McCoy: *“I'm sorry, Miranda, but you must be realistic. You are blind, and there are some things you simply cannot do.”*

Spock: *“Evidently, a highly sophisticated sensor web. My compliments to you, and to your dressmaker.”*

Kirk: *“Yes, of course. It's the only reasonable explanation. You can't see, and Kollo can't hurt you.”*

Spock: *“An elegant solution. But I fail to understand why you apparently try to conceal your blindness, Dr. Jones.”*

Kirk: *“I think I understand. You said it. Pity is the worst of all.”*

Jones: *“Pity...which I hate”* (Aroeste & Senensky, 1968).

The lessons learned include understanding a person's strength and needs. The Medusans have skills in technology and navigation, but cannot be looked upon by the naked human eye. Dr. Miranda Jones can tell Captain Kirk his heart rate by using her sensor web, but cannot pilot the starship because she is blind. Yet, more than anything, she abhors pity, a constant theme when discussing individuals with disabilities. Many individuals with disabilities do not want pity, but understanding and acceptance. This is an important lesson for students without disabilities to understand.

Another example of an individual who was blind was Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge. A major character in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, La Forge was the chief engineer aboard the *Enterprise* who was able to

see the entire electromagnetic spectrum by means of a prosthetic device placed over his eyes called a VISOR (Visual Input Sensory Optical Reflector). While the VISOR allowed him to see more than most humans, La Forge occasionally lamented that he has never seen a rainbow or a sunrise like most humans. This is an especially poignant lesson for students who do not appreciate their abilities and take for granted the things that surround them.

Through the La Forge character, the issue of disabilities was discussed in several episodes. In one episode, La Forge is trapped on a planet with an injured Romulan, who is curious about La Forge's blindness.

Romulan: *"How did this happen?"*

La Forge: *"I was born that way."*

Romulan: *"And your parents let you live?"*

La Forge: *"What kind of question is that? Of course they let me live!"*

Romulan: *"No wonder our race is weak. You waste time and resources on defective children"* (Kemper, Pillar, & Carson, 1989).

In another episode, the crew of the *Enterprise* is trying to save a genetically engineered society living in an artificial environment from an approaching stellar core fragment. La Forge engages Hannah, a scientist from this masterpiece society, in a discussion regarding her settlement's decision to remove all disabilities from their offspring.

La Forge: *"So...guess if I had been conceived on your world I*

wouldn't be here now, would I?"

Hannah: *"No."*

La Forge: *"No. I'd have been terminated as a fertilized cell."*

Hannah: *"It was the wish of our founders that no one have to suffer a life with disabilities."*

La Forge: *"Who gave them the right to decide whether or not I should be here? Whether or not I might have something to contribute?"* (Belanoff, Pillar, & Kolbe, 1992).

Unfortunately, many cultures practiced infanticide. A child who was deemed incapable of serving in the Spartan army was left to the elements and perished. In ancient Rome, a child with a disability would have been thrown into the Tiber River so that the child would not become a burden to society (Winzer, 1993). In the United States, children with mental retardation were sterilized in the early 1900s so that they would not dilute the gene pool (Zanskas & Coduti, 2006).

Yet, the theme in the *Star Trek* universe is the inclusion of all individuals in society. In a case of poetic justice, the solutions to the problems in both episodes were found in La Forge's blindness and his VISOR. Geordi La Forge is a lesson that all individuals can contribute to society, and in the twenty-fourth century, a blind individual is capable of piloting a starship.

In an interesting and often recited story, the character of La Forge was inspired by George La Forge, a young man who suffered from muscular dystrophy. Despite his disability, he attended as many *Star Trek* con-

ventions as he could, and became friends with the series creator, Gene Roddenberry. Roddenberry made George an honorary lieutenant in Starfleet before George died in 1975. When *Star Trek* was revised as a series in 1986, Roddenberry remembered his friend and named the chief engineer character Geordi La Forge in tribute to this exceptional individual.

Deafness

The *Enterprise* is ordered to transport a mediator named Riva to the site of a bitter planetary conflict. Riva is deaf, and he communicates through the Chorus, a group of three people who can read his thoughts and translate them into words. This episode is a well-written story of how each of us is special in our own ways through a dialogue between Riva, his Chorus, and La Forge.

Picard (introducing La Forge to Riva):
"Lieutenant Geordi La Forge."

La Forge: *"It is my pleasure to meet you, sir."*

Woman: *"What is that you're wearing?"*

La Forge: *"A VISOR – it interprets the electromagnetic spectrum and carries the reading to my brain."*

Woman: *"And without it, can you see?"*

La Forge: *"Without it, I'm blind as a stump."*

Woman: *"Then your VISOR serves the same function as my Chorus, which interprets my thoughts and translates them into*

sound."

La Forge: *"Yes."*

Man: *"And you don't resent it?"*

La Forge: *"The VISOR or being blind?"*

Man: *"Either."*

La Forge: *"Well, no, since they're both part of me and I really like who I am, there's no reason for me to resent either one."*

Woman: *"It's a blessing to understand that we are special, each in his own way."*

La Forge: *"Yes. Yes, that's the way I feel exactly"* (Zambrano & Shaw, 1989).

Unfortunately, when a dissident soldier kills the Chorus, Riva becomes withdrawn and loses his confidence. Riva is finally persuaded to return to the planet to negotiate a peace treaty, announcing that he plans to teach the warring leaders sign language so that they can communicate with him and, in turn, with each other. Riva was going to turn his disadvantage, his inability to communicate effectively without his Chorus, into an advantage. In learning to communicate sign language with Reva, the warring factions would also have to learn to communicate with each other.

Like all of us, individuals with disabilities share the same emotions, joy, laughter, frustration, and like all of us they have strengths that can be used to their advantages. In an interesting side note, actor Howie Seago, who effectively portrayed Riva, was deaf.

Language Disorders

Individuals who have a language disorder may have difficulties receiving and expressing ideas. On *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Chief Miles O'Brian begins to speak in gibberish. Dr. Julian Bashir examines him and diagnoses O'Brian with an unusual form of aphasia.

O'Brian: "*Strike limits flame the dark true salt.*"

Bashir: "*Please, Chief, take a seat.*"

O'Brian: "*Way link complete. Way link!*"

Kira: "*What's wrong with him?*"

Bashir: "*He appears to be suffering from a form of aphasia. It's a perceptual dysfunction in which aural and visual stimuli are incorrectly processed by the brain. His actual thinking hasn't been affected but he's incapable of expressing himself or understanding others.*"

O'Brian: "*Victory strike limits frosted wake. Simple hesitation!*"
(Caves, Behr, McGreevey, Shankar, & Lynch 1993).

Aphasia is an inability to produce or comprehend language. People with aphasia can think normally, but cannot communicate. Aphasia is usually caused by a traumatic brain injury or stroke. However, O'Brian's aphasia is caused by a virus, and soon, others on the space station contract it.

Many individuals take their communication abilities for granted, and from watching this episode of *Star Trek*, students may understand the frustrations that peers with

communication disorders have at trying to communicate and not being fully understood. Teachers may also realize the struggles from which students with communication disorders may have to contend. Communication is essential for teaching and learning, and if a student has difficulties comprehending language, they are likely to have problems learning.

Learning Disabilities

In an episode of *Enterprise*, Captain Jonathan Archer cannot form long-term memories due to an infection of parasites. These parasites are from a domain outside of normal space-time, and a cure is not readily available. As a result, Archer wakes up each day with no memories from previous days. For twelve years, Archer has lived in a modest house with T'Pol, his former first officer, as his caregiver. She has obviously grown closer to her former captain, but he does not remember anything about their relationship. The ship's doctor, Phlox, surmised that this one sided relationship had to be difficult for T'Pol.

Phlox: "*I can only imagine what it must have been like... spending all those years in that house, learning so much about him. Yet, he remembers nothing about you... beyond the day he became ill*" (Sussman & McNeill, 2003).

While severe loss of memory is uncommon, it does happen. In 1985, Cambridge University graduate and choir-master of the London Sinfonietta, Clive Wearing lost his memory and his ability to form long-term memories when a herpes simplex virus caused severe inflammation of his brain. When he had recovered, he could not remem-

ber his past, nor could he remember anything after seven seconds (Wearing, 2005). The relationship with his wife, who he did remember, had been strained over the years, but like Archer and T'Pol, the relationship did survive. Once again, the story was one of acceptance and compassion. As Captain Janeway from *Star Trek: Voyager* told the recovering Borg drone, Seven of Nine, who was searching for her humanity, "*A single act of compassion can put you in touch with your own humanity*" (Braga & Eastman, 1998; Sherwin, 1999). How we view individuals with disabilities affects how we view ourselves.

Physical Disabilities

Ensign Melora Pazlar is the first Elaysian to join Starfleet. She grew up on a planet with low surface gravity, and as a result had to have accommodations made for her on space station Deep Space Nine. These accommodations included a low gravity quarters, and a wheel chair that she called a "trolley chair." But Melora is defensive about her "disability." She does not want to be treated differently, and is militant in her quest for equality. When she arrives at a briefing, she finds Commander Sisko, Dax, and Dr. Bashir already discussing her request to pilot a runabout alone, and she is incensed.

Sisko: "*Dax and Bashir were just telling me about your request to pilot a runabout alone.*"

Melora: "*Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to include me in that conversation?*"

Sisko: "*I was getting a briefing by my senior officers, Ensign. We discuss personnel matters all the time.*"

Melora: "*I'm sorry if I seem overly sensitive but I'm used to being shut out of the 'Melora problem.' The truth is, there is no 'Melora problem' until people create one. This may sound ungrateful because Dr. Bashir has been wonderfully helpful in the preparations for my arrival, but frankly, I wonder why a medical opinion is necessary in this discussion.*"

Dax: "*Julian knows more of your capabilities than any of us.*"

Melora: "*I don't need a medical opinion to tell me my own capabilities.*"

Sisko: "*Ensign...*"

Melora: "*I simply object to being treated like someone who is ill.*"

Sisko: "*I don't see anybody doing that.*"

Melora: "*Try sitting in the chair, Commander. No one can understand until they sit in the chair. I dreamt about exploring the stars as a child and I wasn't going to allow any...handicap – not a chair, not a Cardassian station - - to stop me from chasing that dream.*" (Somers, Baum, Pillar, Crocker, & Kolbe, 1993).

Melora starts feeling accepted by the crew, and begins to feel more comfortable about herself, but when Dr. Bashir discovers a medical procedure that would allow her to walk without the aid of a wheelchair or an exoskeleton device, she faces a dilemma. If

she takes the treatment, she would be able to walk in an earth normal gravity; however, she would never be able to go home again. Her predicament is compared to the story of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. The little mermaid trades her magical life under the sea for a pair of legs to walk on the land, and is never happy again. On Melora's home world, her people are able to fly due to the low surface gravity. By undergoing the procedure, she would not be able to fly again, nor spend long periods of time visiting her home. Melora realizes that the treatment would change a part of who she is, and decides not to undertake the treatment. This is a story of acceptance by others and acceptance of one's self.

In another episode, Nog, a Ferengi officer stationed onboard the space station *Deep Space Nine*, was injured in battle and his leg was amputated. Even though Nog has a new biosynthetic leg, he struggles to cope with his disability. He escapes reality by living in the holosuite world of 1962 Las Vegas lounge singer of Vic Fontaine. Eventually, Vic realizes that Nog has had time to heal, and that it is time for him to leave the fantasy world of the holosuite.

Vic: *"You got to go."*

Nog: *"Don't you get it? I can't go out there."*

Vic: *"Why not?"*

Nog: *"I'm scared... okay? I'm scared. I didn't think anything was going to happen to me and then, suddenly Dr. Bashir is telling me he has to cut my leg off. If I can get shot, if I can lose my leg, anything can happen to me, Vic. I could die tomorrow. I don't know*

if I'm ready to face that. If I stay here, at least I know what the future is going to be like."

Vic: *"You stay here, you're going to die, not all at once, but little by little. Eventually, you'll become as hollow as I am."*

Nog: *"You don't seem hollow to me."*

Vic: *"Compared to you, I'm as hollow as a snare drum. Look, kid, I don't know what's going to happen to you out there. All I can tell you is that... you've got to play the cards life deals you. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But at least you're in the game"* (Moore & Williams, 1998).

Social Phobia

Individuals with social anxiety disorder have a marked and persistent fear of social situations. They fear embarrassment and may avoid social situations at all costs. Lieutenant Barclay's fear of social situations has led him to escape into the holosuite, where he confronts crew members who have embarrassed him, but his social anxiety disorder has begun adversely affecting his duties aboard the *Enterprise*. Commander La Forge tries to help Barclay with his fears.

Barclay: *"It's, it's...I'm... When I'm in there, I'm just more comfortable. You don't know what a struggle this has been for me, Commander."*

La Forge: *"Well, I'd like to help if I can."*

Barclay: “*Being afraid all the time of forgetting somebody’s name, not... not knowing what to do with your hands. I mean, I am the guy who writes down things to remember to say when there’s a party. And then when he finally gets there he winds up alone, in the corner trying to look comfortable examining a potted plant.*”

La Forge: “*You’re just shy, Barclay.*”

Barclay: “*‘Just shy.’ Sounds like nothing serious, doesn’t it? You can’t know*” (Caves & Bole, 1990).

La Forge tries to give Barclay a sense of belonging, and by the end of the episode, Barclay does help save the *Enterprise* from destruction; however, Barclay’s social phobia is not cured at the end of the episode. Through additional episodes from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*, Barclay gradually gains self-confidence. In the final episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, Barclay has overcome his social phobia and is an integral and respected member of Starfleet. It is important to remember that the way students with disabilities feel about themselves, their self-concept, affects how they behave in school, and like Barclay, a student’s self-concept can be improved through acceptance and feeling that the individual has something to contribute.

Using Star Trek as Videotherapy

Special education teachers can use guided viewing of *Star Trek* episodes to facilitate discussions of affective disability issues. This instructional technique, known as videotherapy, is similar to bibliotherapy, which allows students to identify with charac-

ters similar to themselves, and discuss their own behaviors and situations through a safe distance of a film character (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006). Not only could videotherapy help students with disabilities find resolutions to their own feelings and problems through the vicarious experiences of *Star Trek* characters, but it can also be used with students without disabilities to promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance of individual with disabilities (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006).

There are six potential goals of using *Star Trek* as videotherapy:

1. To provide information about disabilities in a non-threatening format. Since *Star Trek* is a science fiction/fantasy genre, it may be easier for students with disabilities to discuss disability issues.
2. To provide insight into a specific experience or situation.
3. To provide alternative solutions to the problem faced by *Star Trek* characters and students with disabilities. Spock is always fond of saying that there are always alternatives.
4. To stimulate a discussion of the problem faced by *Star Trek* characters and students with disabilities.
5. To communicate new values and attitudes.
6. To help students with disabilities understand that they are not the only one who has experienced these problems (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Pardeck, 1995).

Steps to Guided Viewing

Special education teachers can use videotherapy in the classroom through guided

viewing of specific episodes of *Star Trek*. The special education teacher needs to decide whether to include other school personnel in the process. For example, if dealing with sensitive issues, the school counselor may assist in the guided viewing.

The special education teacher should become familiar with the specific *Star Trek* episode and define specific issues related to the students prior to sharing it to the students. For example, if students with physical disabilities are feeling defensive about their disabilities and have difficulties accepting accommodations, the episode with Medora could serve as a catharsis for their feelings. Or students who have difficulties interacting with others may benefit from watching how Lieutenant Barclay deals with his social phobia.

From viewing the episode, the special education teacher needs to prepare a list of questions to facilitate discussions with students. The teacher should begin with non-threatening, introductory questions, followed by more sensitive questions that focus on the situation faced by the *Star Trek* character and the students (Hebert & Sergent, 2005; Hebert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002). Several sample discussion questions for the use with Medora are provided below:

- What challenges did Medora face on the deep space station, Deep Space Nine? (Difference in gravity, inaccessible Cardasian architecture, etc.)
- Why did Medora feel that everyone treated her differently? How did she feel about her accommodations?
- Why was Medora upset when Captain Sisko would not let her take the Runabout alone? (Because she felt his decision was based on her disability). Was she justified in her assumption?

- Medora treated Dr. Bashir harshly, yet he continues to treat her with respect. What does this say about Medora? What does this say about Dr. Bashir?

Another technique to generate prompts for discussion is through direct quotes from the *Star Trek* episode. An excellent source for special education teachers is *Quotable Star Trek* (Sherwin, 1999), which is comprised of notable quotes from all the *Star Trek* series and movies. Several examples from *Star Trek* are provided below.

When Captain Sisko tells Medora that she cannot pilot the runabout alone, she is incensed. She feels that she is being held back because of her disability and because she is confined in a wheelchair. She tells Sisko, “Try sitting in the chair, Commander. No one can understand until they sit in the chair.”

Discussion questions that the special education teacher might pose would be:

- Why do you think Medora told Captain Sisko to “sit in the chair?” Was she trying to get him to actually sit in the chair or was it something else?
- Do you think that Medora’s attitude about her disability helped her? Did she pilot the runabout? Why?

In another episode, Riva asks Lieutenant La Forge if he resented having a VISOR or being blind. La Forge responds, “Since they’re both part of me and I really like who I am, there’s no reason for me to resent either one.”

A discussion question that the special education teacher might pose would be:

- What do you think La Forge was really trying to tell Riva? Was it to reassure Riva, who was deaf? Did La

Forge really mean what he said? How does it make you feel when someone asks you about your disability?

It is also important to recognize that *Star Trek* can also convey negative messages. Charles is not integrated back into society, and the story line is unresolved. The message of this episode perpetuates the placement of students with emotional and behavioral disorders in more restrictive settings. Hannah's viewpoint that individuals with disabilities would have a life of suffering could also provide a spark for a discussion about how disabilities are viewed by some individuals with discordant mindsets. Students need to be actively evaluating the messages that are conveyed, and the lack of resolution may be the impetus of the discussion.

Special education teachers need to follow the discussion with student activities. These activities should be enjoyable to the students and could include artistic expressions, role-playing, creative writing activities, and music (Hebert & Sergent, 2005; Hebert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002). Some activities could include:

- Draw or paint pictures of Medora, La Forge, Riva, or any other *Star Trek* episode depicting disabilities.
- Write a *Star Trek* script that is a sequel to the viewed episode and continue the story of the character with the disability.
- Design and role-play a talk show interview of the character with the disability.
- Write an entry in a dialogue journal about how you felt about the *Star Trek* episode.

Conclusion

While videotherapy is only one strategy that can be used to meet the affective needs of students with disabilities, it is easy to recognize the potential of using videotherapy in the education setting, especially with students with reading and language deficits (Dole & McMahan, 2005). *Star Trek* presents many affective disability issues that special teachers may want to address within their classrooms. These issues include understanding the nature of disabilities, acceptance of individuals with disabilities, and societal expectations of individuals with disabilities. Sharing these episodes with students can reinforce prosocial messages and promotes the concept of *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations*, a Vulcan philosophy that was introduced in the original series and an important concept of acceptance of individuals who are different. With 726 episodes (including an animated series) from six series, and ten movies (and another due out in 2008), *Star Trek* plays a powerful role in contemporary society and is an important aspect of American culture. It is a series that is familiar and may provide a receptive conduit for discussing sensitive topics regarding disabilities with students with and without disabilities. Through guided viewing of certain episodes and follow-up activities, students may view disabilities in a more positive light. These activities can include discussions, creative writing, skits, role-playing, or creative problem solving (Hebert & Hammond, 2006).

In an address delivered to the Association for the Severely Handicapped, Sue Suter stated, "The world needs to rediscover what's normal. Disability is a normal part of being human. People with disabilities are ordinary people. It is a fundamental recognition of our undeniable worth and our inseparable membership in the human race" (Suter, 1999). Or

as Captain Picard would say about our differences, "We are born, we grow, we live, and we die. In all the ways that matter, we are alike!" (Manning, Beimler, & Wiemner, 1989).

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