TRANSFORMING
MEDIA *in the*
Classroom

STUDENTS DESERVE TO FEEL RECOGNIZED AND VALUED, SEEING THEMSELVES REFLECTED IN THE LESSONS PROVIDED.

Rachel Hanley | Founder, PicDiversity

Companies like Netflix and Disney are experiencing positive pressure to produce film and television shows that reflect the diversity of their global consumers. A company's failure to be diverse directly impacts sales, creating a strong motivation for corporations to produce media that "gets it right."

But what about media in the classroom? Where do teachers go to find diverse media for their students? Can we begin the same sort of global movement to achieve diverse representation in educational media?

These are the issues the nonprofit organization PicDiversity, Inc. is working to solve. Whether illustrating a classroom behavior for kindergartners or increasing exposure to career opportunities, PicDiversity's goal is to bring diversity to the visuals and videos that surround students in the classroom. Through its website, PicDiversity offers an entire catalog of illustrations and videos for download and streaming, currently available for free to American school teachers.

This goal is about more than simply bringing diversity to class visuals—it is about transforming the internal belief system of children and teens. By ensuring the images we use in the classroom reflect the diversity around us, students learn that classroom lessons are

ENGINEER — WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE? #DREAMBIG

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for them. With role models as diverse as they are, they recognize that successful careers are available to all students, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity.

PicDiversity began with a simple conversation I had with kindergarten teacher Nereyda Dockett. Dockett explained that she could not find diverse visuals to use with her students to show them proper classroom behavior. As I talked to more and more teachers, I found that the issue was not isolated to kindergarten—teachers at every grade level were experiencing the same challenge. At the time, I was finishing law school with the hopes of pursuing education policy. I also had a large network of artist friends—PicDiversity was born.

To date, the nonprofit offers four sets of products: illustrations targeting PK-1st grade, a stock photography database targeting PK and up, inspirational posters targeting PK-5th grade, and a video series featuring careers to develop growth mindset for 4th grade and up.

The nonprofit works with a community of teachers to identify what kinds of media are most needed right now in the classroom. For example, the most recent illustration series came out of collaboration between artists and kindergarten teachers to identify all the self-help visuals they needed. The 2.5-hour event produced 75 images, including rule posters such as Active Listener and Raise Your Hand for Permission to Leave Your Seat, as well as job chart imagery. Before PicDiversity, teachers predominantly used illustrations created by other teachers, not professional illustrators and artists.

Quality Matters

While the media industry struggles to produce diverse media, teachers also struggle to find media created by experienced professionals; the visuals at their disposal often lack in quality as well as diversity.

The problem applies to video production as well. PicDiversity's diverse professional series is being developed in response to teachers' expressed need for videos of diverse professionals to give students heroes with whom they can identify as well as videos that make classroom lessons relevant in the real world. What is currently available often misses the mark
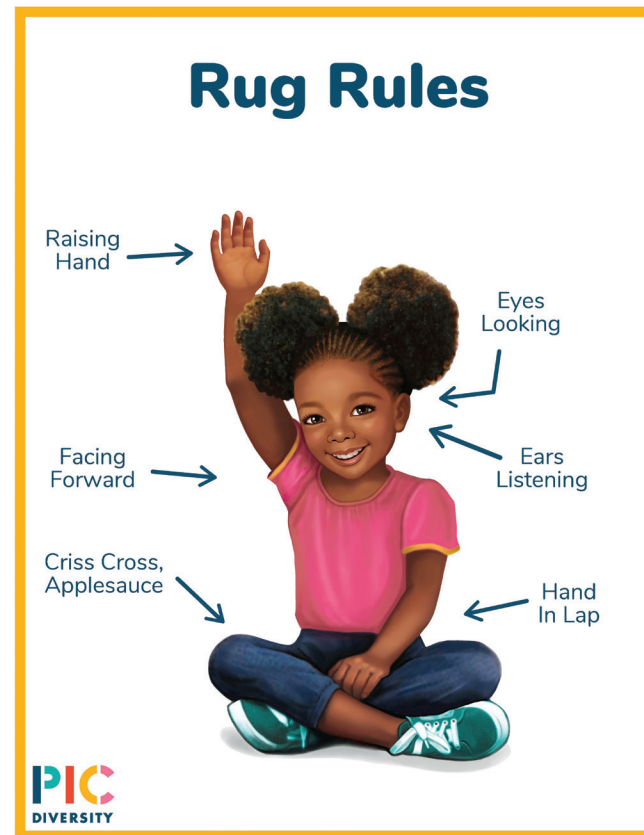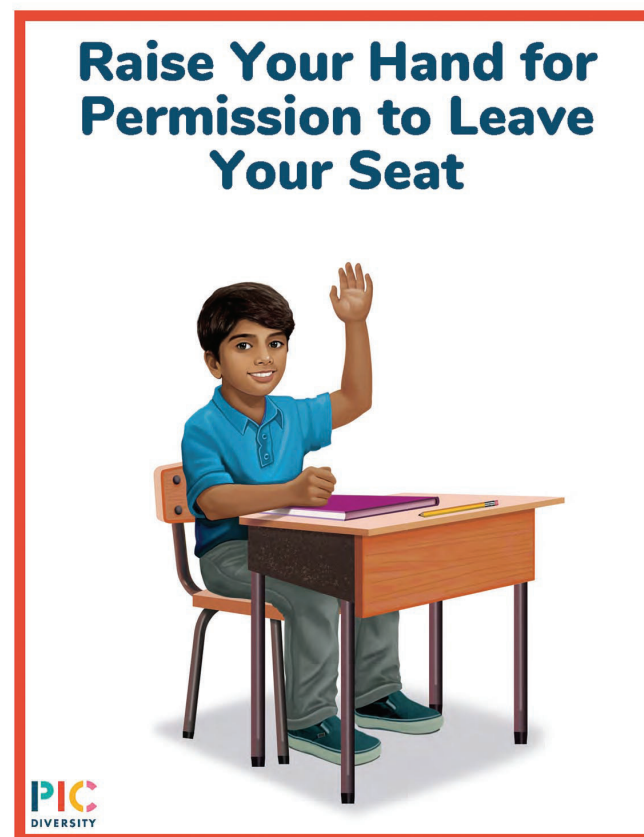
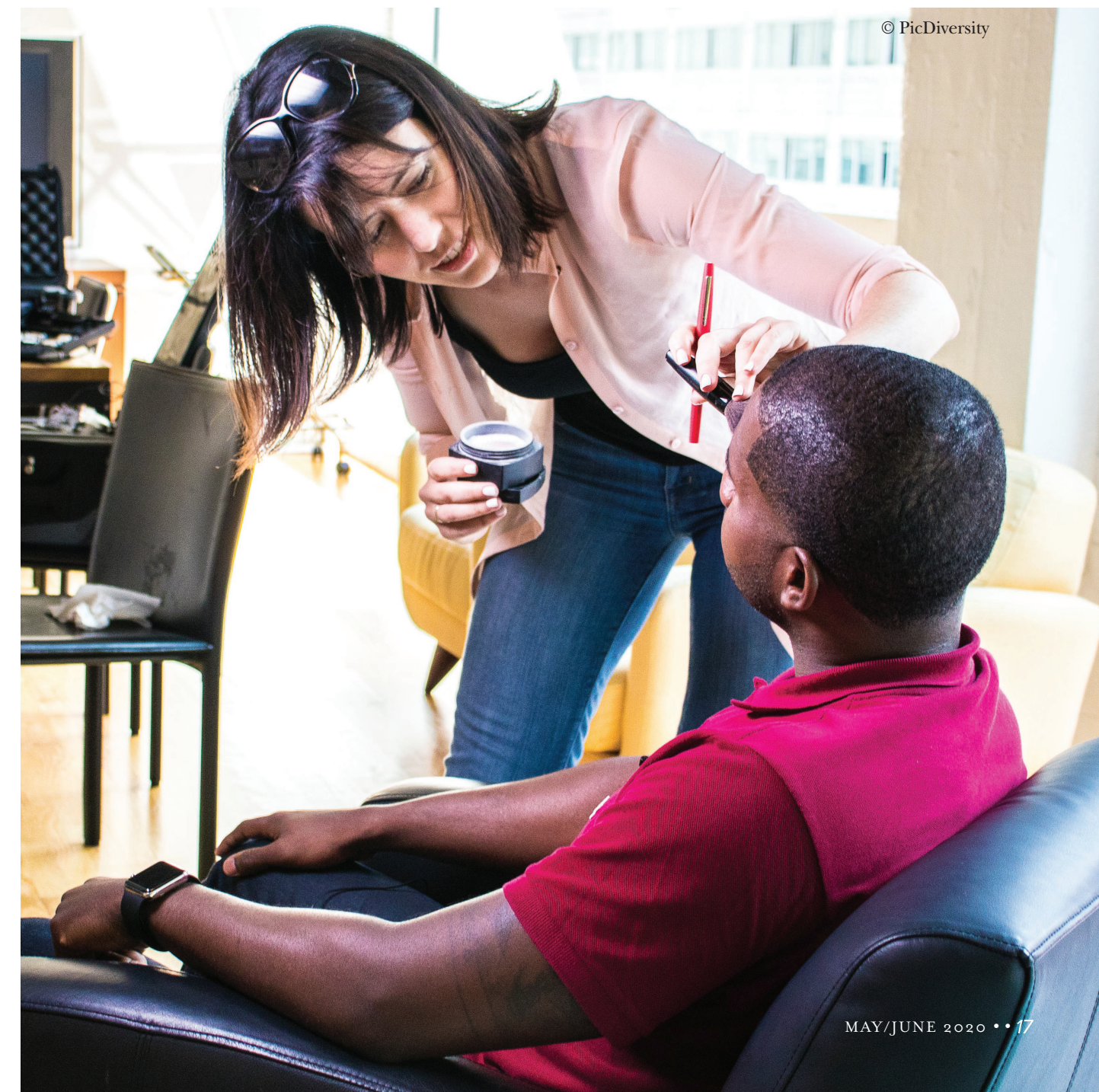substantively and/or in quality. Developers of this material are often focused on educational curriculum without the support of quality media production.

In contrast, PicDiversity works exclusively with talented media professionals to produce its product. Whether illustrations, photos, or videos, nothing is produced by amateurs, allowing PicDiversity to focus on the issue of producing excellent, diverse media. Taking on this issue is no easy task. There is no rubric or guidance, which is surprising in an industry replete with standards and regimens.

Listening to Students and Teachers

PicDiversity incorporates input from a diverse set of students. This input is not in the form of an official study—just open feedback from the students who are the intended audience. If the goal of an increase in diversity in media is to increase identity and inclusion among students, then listening to students to determine if the media accomplishes these goals is critical. The approach is different for each media type and with different age groups. Throughout this process, PicDiversity is constantly learning and refining.

Rug Rules

Raising Hand

Eyes Looking

Facing Forward

Ears Listening

Criss Cross, Applesauce

Hand In Lap

PIC DIVERSITY

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Raise Your Hand for Permission to Leave Your Seat

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• **Videos.** For the career videos, the PicDiversity team sets up screenings to watch students as they view the videos and then also curates feedback from teachers who use the product in the classroom. How long is attention maintained? What happens during the question-and-answer time that follows—do students ask relevant questions? How many students express interest in the career at the end of the video?

So far, the feedback is that the videos do hold students' attention—finding the personal story of the subject to be particularly engaging. Younger students also seem more open to pursuing a new career than older students. In one particular viewing with low-income 9-12th-graders, the students said they enjoyed the inspirational story of the video, but did not feel it was a career they could ever pursue. That particular video features a finance professional and the video's B-roll (supplemental or alternative footage intercut with the main footage) shows him writing out a simple algebraic equation. When asked if they thought they could pursue a career like that, one of the students shouted out "No!," stating that the professional was doing physics and that it was too hard.

The response from students in younger grades but similar demographics has been more positive. Students express more willingness to pursue careers after exposure to the videos. This makes sense, as they are more likely to feel that academic and knowledge gains are still within their reach at this stage in their education.

• **Illustrations.** Because the target audience for illustrations is 5- to 7-year-olds, the approach is to use open-ended questions and read nonverbal cues. This audience presents a different set of issues and questions. Which cartoon styles do kids identify with the most? Does it even make a difference? Do students identify with the characters that look the most like them? Are they inclusive of students who are very different from them?

On the issue of design, children consistently steer away from more abstract images and show a preference for images that are more

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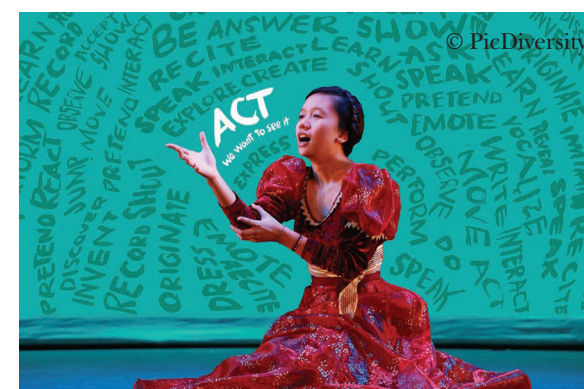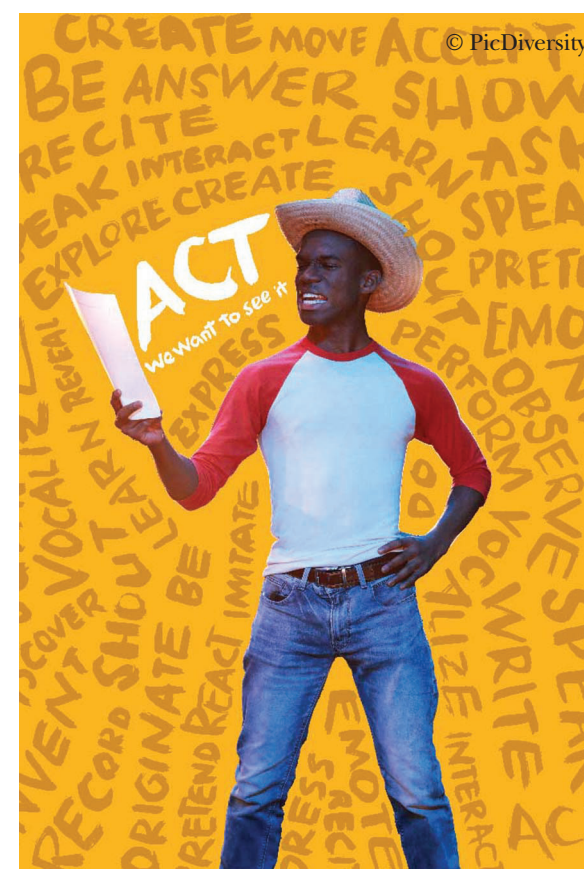
realistic. Anything intended to represent a human that does not quite look like the world they see is quickly identified as a flaw. For instance, when shown an illustration of Penny Proud from the Proud Family, children regularly ask, "Why is her head square?" and state they do not prefer the image to more realistic ones. They want images that look like what they see around them.

To explore whether students identify with the characters that are the most similar to them, the illustration series has 20 different characters reflecting the most common races and ethnicities in American schools. Although not every child is exactly represented, the majority of students are.

The responses from children on identity are mixed. While some children prefer the images that look like them, some students who are not white choose the white characters, particularly the blond ones, as the ones they like the most. This speaks eloquently to children's awareness of the bias around them. It is evidence of the need for PicDiversity's work.

The response from children concerning inclusion is also a mixed bag. Sometimes, the students responded with excitement to images that were different from them. In one 1st-grade class with mixed-race students, the children regularly exclaimed in excitement when viewing the image of a black girl with hair in two puffs. The consistent response was that she looked like one of their friends in class who had hair like her. In another instance, when shown a young Indian boy, the students first responded very negatively, asking if he was supposed to be Indian and laughing. Then, one of the students commented that he looked a lot like Ravi from the Disney channel. The moment the connection was made, the students erupted in excitement. From then on, the Indian character was acceptable to the group.

More positive, inclusive responses seemed to be forthcoming as the students were able to connect an image with a real person in their experience. This pattern was consistently found in the students' responses. It is also in line with the preference of children in this age group for the concrete and tangible over the abstract.

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Moving Toward the Transformative

While the feedback received from students in the process of prototyping the PicDiversity product does not represent official findings, it does suggest that the diversity or lack of diversity in the media is having an immediate impact. It also suggests that society has just begun to understand the impact visuals and videos are having on students.

A lot of work remains to be done, but awareness of the issue is the first step toward finding the right solution for the problem. This is PicDiversity's work, but the problem needs to be addressed by the education community as a whole. Students of all ages need to know that the classroom and its lessons are for them, and that work is bigger than one nonprofit—it requires a community response.

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