



Lesson

Learning about Autism: A Service Learning Project

OVERVIEW

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 50 U.S. children is autistic. That means there are likely to be several children with autism in every school in the country. To address the integration of those children, this lesson involves older students in a service learning project to create an activity or piece of media that helps younger students learn about autism and, where relevant, their classmates. In addition to teaching about autism, the project offers students opportunities to practice research, writing, speaking, multimedia, organizational and time management skills.

The video clips for this lesson are from *Best Kept Secret*.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- demonstrate an understanding of autism spectrum disorder
- design an activity and/or create a presentation to explain what they know to younger students

GRADE LEVELS

9-16

SUBJECT AREAS

Education

English/Language Arts

Health and Psychology (and Related Sciences)

Media Literacy

Service Learning

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- Internet access for student research
- multimedia production equipment (if needed)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

Most of this project will take place outside of class, but to screen the film clips, plan on one 50-minute class period, and then one additional class period at the end of the project to share student work.

FILM CLIPS

This lesson uses portions of **Best Kept Secret** that feature two young men, Quran and Erik.

Clip 1: "Introduction" (3:55 min.)

This clip begins at 1:04, showing the inside of the John F. Kennedy School. It ends at 4:59 with Erik saying, "I live in Orange."

Clip 2: "Quran's Coat" (2:31 min.)

The clip begins at 7:24 with Quran learning to ask for his coat. It ends at 9:55 with Quran looking for a videotape as his parents talk.

Clip 3: "Meeting Erik" (1:38 min.)

The clip begins at 11:42 with Erik's sponsor mother speaking. It ends at 13:20 with a student vacuuming the church floor.

Clip 4: "Discussing Plans for Erik After Graduation" (1:08)

The clip begins at 21:49 with a shot of Erik's file. It ends at 22:57 with Erik's sponsor mother saying, "I'm good with that."

Clip 5: "The Talk Box" (2:15 min.)

The clip begins at 26:00 with Quran's father talking to Janet Mino. It ends at 28:15 with Rahamid smiling and shaking his head.

Clip 6: "Erik's Birth Mother" (1:58 min.)

The clip begins at 39:49 and ends at 41:47. It consists of the scene in which Erik's birth mother, Bessie, visits his class.

Clip 7: "Going to Work" (1:31 min.)

The clip begins at 1:05:47 with Erik at Burger King. It ends at 1:07:18 with Erik on the computer.

Clip 8: "Graduation" (3:57 min.)

The clip begins at 1:12:09 with Erik and his classmates walking down the hall in their graduation gowns. It ends at 1:16:06 with Rahamid leaving the auditorium.

ACTIVITY

1. Introduce the assignment: Either individually or in teams, prepare an activity or a presentation to help elementary school students learn about autism. (Consider inviting speakers who have experience with autism to address the class. Potential speakers include family members of children with autism, people on the autism spectrum who are comfortable speaking publicly about their experiences, special education teachers, researchers and clinical specialists from your community.)

To complete their projects, students will need to conduct research to ensure that the information they share is accurate.

Note: Choose the parameters of the activity or presentation according to your curriculum needs. If students need to practice writing, then you might assign them to create an informational children's book. If they need to practice English, they might create a bilingual captioned video. If public speaking is a goal, then a class presentation or short play might be the best choice. Use this as an opportunity to differentiate instruction.

Also, choose a target audience (e.g., 5th graders or 2nd graders). If possible, identify an actual class that is willing to have students present their final projects.

To add a media literacy component, ask students to evaluate their research sources and explain which were the most credible and why.

Be sure to let students know the project due date. You can give them as little as a week or as long as a month. Consider establishing interim check-in deadlines to report on project progress.

2. To get students started, show all of the film clips. Following the clips, invite students to react. To help them see people with autism as individuals and not as stereotypes, encourage them to describe the personalities of Quran and Erik. In the remaining class time, allow teams to meet and begin planning their projects. If needed, take a few minutes to talk about the developmental level of the target audience.

3. On the due date, have students share synopses of their projects or, if projects are short, the actual work. Encourage the class to evaluate the effectiveness of each project in terms of accuracy of information, how well it would hold the attention of the target audience and any other criteria you deem important to meeting curriculum goals (e.g., quality of informational writing or clarity of spoken English). As an option, the class might vote for the best two or three projects and arrange to present them to elementary school students.

4. Assessment can include a combination of checking written, spoken and multimedia work; reviewing source evaluations (perhaps helping the class chart which sources came up most frequently as credible and looking at the features of those sources); or even having the class vote to choose the best projects.

EXTENSIONS

1. Have students present their projects to community groups.
2. Facilitate volunteer opportunities, either at schools or at local agencies, for students who are interested in working with or just spending time with people who have autism.
3. Screen ***Best Kept Secret*** in its entirety and have students brainstorm solutions to the challenge of post-graduation placement for young adults on the far end of the autism spectrum.

RESOURCES

Autism Now

<http://autismnow.org/>

This organization's website serves as a clearinghouse for information and resources related to living with autism spectrum disorder, including a searchable "Autism 101" collection of relevant articles.

Autism Society

www.autism-society.org/

This grassroots organization provides support, advocacy and research for people living with autism. Information available on its website includes clinical information, statistics and research reports, strategies for living with autism and family stories.

Autism Speaks

www.autismspeaks.org

This advocacy organization supports research and provides practical strategies for people raising or helping children with autism.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: New Data on Autism Spectrum Disorders

www.cdc.gov/Features/CountingAutism/

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide official government statistics and information on autism.

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: Autism Fact Sheet

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm

This division of the National Institutes of Health offers basic information (in both English and Spanish) about autism, including an extensive set of links to autism-focused organizations.

POV: *Best Kept Secret*

www.pbs.org/pov/bestkeptsecret

The discussion guide for ***Best Kept Secret*** (available via a link on the left side of the page in the section for educators and organizers) covers additional issues and includes prompts that you can use to help students think more deeply about the film clips.

STANDARDS

The standards addressed by student projects will vary, depending on the design of their specific activities. They are likely to address the following:

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

[W.9-10.2](#), [11-12.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

[W.9-10.2d](#) Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11-12.2d Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

[W.9-10.4](#), [11-12.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

[W.9-10.6](#) Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

W.11-12.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

[SL.9-10.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

McREL (www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 150 independent films.