

Writing Inclusive and Diverse Children’s Television: transgender representation in

ABC Australia’s First Day

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Introduction

First Day is a four-part Australian series developed for children that follows a 12-year-old transgender girl, Hannah Bradford (played by young trans actor Evie Macdonald) as she navigates the challenges that come with starting at a new school. The trans character and actor provide a pioneering representation of liminal spaces, as explored in both her transition from childhood to adolescence, and her transition from her old identity to her new identity and are presented as leading storylines in the series. Originally based on a short film from 2017, *First Day* was commissioned as a four-episode series, with each episode roughly 20 minutes in length. Made by Epic Films and distributed by the Australian Children’s Television Foundation (the national industry body supporting originally made children’s media), the series has since been distributed beyond Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to the UK via the BBC and its iPlayer services and the USA via Hulu. Notably in non-English speaking territories the series has also been picked up and broadcast via public service broadcasters, including in Finland via its public service broadcaster YLE, in Norway via its public service broadcaster NRK, and commercial outlets Sweden (SVT), Israel (Hot TV), New Zealand (TVNZ) and Taiwan (MOMOKIDS) (EPIC Films 2021). In Australia it was supported by the ABC and its ABC ME digital channel and iView on demand platform. The ABC is one of two Australian Public Service Broadcasters, and while both broadcasters are expected to provide for a diversity of Australian audiences, the ABC in particular is bound, through its charter, to educate and entertain. In order to do this the ABC has developed specialist branches of its services to support the needs of specific audience demographics, notably ABC ME, a

digital channel aimed at school aged children, which sits between its other ‘youth’ offerings ABC Kids (for pre-schoolers) and Triple J (a radio-based youth network) (Giuffre 2021: 63).

First Day is the first Australian scripted show to cast a transgender actor in the lead role. *First Day* continues to be recognised through nominations and awards by the screen industry. It won the GLAAD Award for Outstanding Kids & Family Programming, first prize in the Children and Youth category at the Rose d’Or Awards, first prize for Best Live Action TV at the Chicago International Children’s Film Festival and has been nominated for several awards including Award for Best Children’s Program and Best Screenplay in Television (Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts), Screen Diversity and Inclusion Network award, Best Live-Action and Best Inclusivity at the Kid Screen Awards, and Live Action Children award at the Banff World Media Festival. For screenwriting practitioners and scholars, the show can also act as an exemplar for how to write authentic, inclusive and diverse stories and characters – something currently lacking in Australian television.

Screen Australia’s *Seeing Ourselves* (2016) report shed important light on the lack of diversity in Australian television drama, and offered up a set of challenges as opportunities. The report highlighted examples of successful television shows across all networks that ‘both normalise and provide authentic insights into many of our marginalised communities’ (Screen Australia 2016: 5). It also identified that those in positions of commissioning power were open to incorporating greater diversity because they recognise that diversity can provide opportunities to engage audiences with a vast range of interesting characters and stories (Screen Australia 2016: 20). One of the final opportunities the report highlights is that:

Authentic stories and characters can inspire mainstream audiences to identify with ‘heroes’ of diverse background, in the same way that viewers of diverse background are accustomed to identifying with conventional Australian protagonists. In this way, diversity not only has the potential to deliver large audiences and commercial

returns, it can also generate connection and empathy, and shift perceptions of ‘otherness’ within the Australian the community. (Screen Australia 2016: 20)

This article relies on a single case study and a single practitioner interview relating to *First Day*. While this is a first step with arguably a long way to go, the show is pioneering in a space that still has a long way to go. What is important about this show and the reason I argue we should study it even now, in the early days of its reception and production, is the way *First Day* differs from what has come before it. Robert E. Stake notes how conducting single case studies is useful when the case is of special interest and the aim is to primarily understand the one case and its context and not necessarily how it relates to other cases (1995: 4-7). Acknowledging Stake’s advice about being mindful of the particularities of a single case and noting the benefits as well as the limitations of trying to generalise experience and outcomes based on one experience and production, the unique nature of this example and the context of its production and creation justifies closer examination. The method of this article also draws on existing knowledge gained through recent focused case studies like those from Brenes (2018), Buckland (2019) and Ksenofontova (2019), which glean new knowledge of single works within unique and significant contexts. In this instance, the significance is in better understanding how a screenwriter approaches the processes of researching, consultation and writing for inclusive representation of trans identity in children’s television.

This article provides a brief, but concise, introduction to the term ‘transgender’ and how transgender identity is seen in contemporary Australian society. It then explores how screen representations of transgender identity and issues are relevant to the broader cultural and social conceptions and experiences of gender through a canvas of historical and contemporary representations of transgender people on Australian scripted television. Through an illuminating interview with *First Day*’s screenwriter/director Julie Kalceff, the article then exemplifies how screenwriters can create contemporary representations of transgender people

and issues. Finally, taking on board the insights gained from the interview with Kalceff, the article outlines a process for writing children's television that focuses on diversity and inclusivity by using marginalised characters in universal stories to connect wider audiences to new understandings of others. This process is based on three key aspects of Kalceff's screenwriting practice (researching, consultation and writing) and illustrates how screenwriters can create authentic characters and stories through understanding the lived experience of the marginalised characters and connecting these with universal experiences.

Transgender as a term, identity and representation

The term transgender is affiliated with the emerging academic field of Transgender Studies — an interdisciplinary field concerned with the relationship between the lived experience of being transgender and the representation of transgenderism. This article aligns with transgender theorists including Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006), by using the term to refer to all expressions of gender that fall outside of, or between, the normative categories of male/female and/or feminine/masculine. It further adopts the notion that 'social transitioning involves affirming how one wishes to be perceived and treated; one's ideal social role (e.g., declaring one's gender identity and preferred pronouns, changing or affirming one's presentation and role, etc.)' (Jones et al. 2016: 162). While transgender identity has historically been a contented/constructed term, there is a common understanding today due to activist and educational efforts in the media and online environments.

In Australia, studies like the *Growing Up Queer* report found that gender diverse young Australians were able to gain sophisticated understandings about gender, sex and sexuality through targeted online resources (Robinson et al. 2014 as cited in Jones et al. 2016: 158). These understandings have been supported by dedicated government and non-government organisations such as the "Safe Schools Coalition" (<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/>)

and the peer-supported initiative Ygender (<https://www.ygender.org.au/>), both outlets who received national mainstream media coverage (Jones et al. 2016: 157). While the Internet has facilitated a proliferation in children's media and education offerings and platforms, television remains the dominant medium in children's lives (Potter & Steemers 2017) and has significant public value (Potter 2015). *First Day* is an important catalyst to bring online and 'on demand' discussions about gender and representation, and particularly youth and gender, to traditional media forms so that these experiences can be discussed among more general audiences. As this article will show, there is also evidence now to demonstrate that these shows are both industrially viable and desired by audiences in Australia and in many regions around the world.

Transgender characters on screen

Screen media (including film and television) are powerful instruments of mass communication and mainstream Australian television and film act as vital exporters of Australian culture. In the history of Australian film and television, depictions of transgender lives and issues have been for the most part absent from scripted storytelling, and when included, are usually stereotypical or throw-away in nature. Typically, transgender characters have occupied the periphery and appeared episodically (Capuzza & Spencer 2017; Fellner 2017; Poole 2017), or as part of comedic or 'quirky' stories like the iconic performance by Terance Stamp as Bernadette in the cult film *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994).

Screen media are spaces where gender discourses are negotiated. In the past decade transgender characters in film and television (predominantly in the US) have made non-heterosexual or androgynous characters more tolerable to mainstream, and in some cases even fashionable.¹ These portrayals, however, tend to rely on the continuation of damaging stereotypes (Finkelstein 2007: 7), a trend that Sink et al (2018) note has continued to be a norm for perceptions of LGBTIQ+ television characters in the last few years. LGBTIQ+ characters in popular television are typically written and presented to 'model, reinforce and

validate' certain typecasts (Fouts & Inch 2005: 42), and transgender television representations fulfil a similar role. These representations impact how others see transgender people, and how transgender people see themselves, with the historical issues of stereotyping and symbolic annihilation/invisibility having dire consequences (Miller 2015; Capuzza & Spencer 2017). Examining screen media texts' representations of transgender provide important methods to 'critique the ways in which [these media can] challenge and/or disrupt heteronormative binary gendering' (McIntyre 2011: para 6).

First Day is a drama about a transgender child aimed at school aged children. It is an important departure from existing presentations of trans people and experiences on television that have come before it. For example, *Transparent* (2014-2019) only presents an adult child's experience (and it is actually the experience of having a trans parent, rather than being a trans child), or 'family entertainment' programs such as *Glee* (2009-2015), where a teen trans character, Wade "Unique" Adams was a present but only small part of a large ensemble cast, and *Supergirl* (2015-2021), where Nia Nal / Dreamer features as the first trans superhero (a secondary character, although a recurring character) on television. While trans teen actors have been featured in television drama on select occasions (notably Elliot Fletcher as Noah in *Faking It* (2014-2016)), this was a depiction of late teenagerhood/early adulthood rather than the school age period that is featured in *First Day*. While LGBTIQ+ characters have made significant inroads into the teen and family entertainment genres over the past decade — representing queer adolescent life as complex and varied — it is important not to conflate visibility and progressⁱⁱ, and acknowledge that there is a need for scholarship to also focus on politics of representation. As Monaghan notes, *Faking It*, as an example of contemporary LGBTIQ+ representation, is ground-breaking not for its realist approach to representing a diversity of sexes, genders, and sexualities, but for the way it functions as a reflexive

representation of LGBTIQ teen life [... and acts as] a significant cultural site where norms of sex, gender, and sexuality are confirmed and contested' (2021: 440).

While overseas television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) and *Transparent* (2014-2019)ⁱⁱⁱ have highlighted transgender issues, *First Day* is mostly alone in Australian screen culture. In 2016, Screen Australia released the *Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama* study on diversity in Australian TV drama broadcast between 2011 and 2015 (Screen Australia 2016). It looked at characters from three key aspects: cultural background, disability status and sexual orientation and gender identity. The report indicated that out of the 88 LGBTIQI characters in TV drama during this time, only 2 were transgender. Since the report's release, there have been a few more Australian fictional representations of transgender people that explore the realities and nuances of their lives, such as Australian pay TV Foxtel's miniseries *Secret City* (2016). The creators of *Secret City* (and other recent series like the semi-fictional *Carlotta* in 2014) were important innovations, however they were each still criticised for not casting a transgender actor to play the transgender character (McIntyre 2017). Iconic Australian soap opera *Neighbours* (1985-), the series established in the 1980s which launched stars like Kylie Minogue, Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe, introduced its first transgender character in 2019. Importantly in the *Neighbours* story the trans character, Mackenzie Hargreaves, was played by transgender actor Georgie Stone. The character of Mackenzie did feature in some of the show's prominent storylines for a time, but it would be a stretch to say they were what could be considered a prominent member of the ongoing main plots for the show. At best, Mackenzie is a part of the larger ensemble rather than a continually featured lead.

Screen representation provides important visibility for the transgender community and can highlight key issues faced by this marginalised group in wider communities. Visibility,

however, can be problematic with any marginalised group, as Booth (2011) notes: ‘an increase in media representation may be just as likely to further confuse the issue as to clarify it, particularly when the commercial interests controlling those representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms’ (Booth 2011: 191). Hart writes that contemporary representations of intersex identity ‘have changed in step with societal values, yet it could be argued there is still slippage towards sensationalism’ (2016: 207), and the same could be argued about transgender representation. Transgender theorist Jack Halberstam notes that the writing of gendered identities for the screen has shifted from a ‘tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard’ to stories that embody concepts of ‘heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment’ (2005: 96). Additionally, Plummer notes that:

The stories we tell of our lives are deeply implicated in moral and political change and the shifting tales of self and identity carry potential for radical transformation of the social order. Stories work their way into changing lives, communities and cultures. (2003: 38)

Taking these commentaries on board is important when considering the impact of *First Day*. Clearly, the production and reception of trans-centric work like this is hugely complicated and requires careful attention. As the following interview with screenwriter Julie Kalceff will show, those working on *First Day* were very aware of the responsibility they had to communities, as well as the broader public, when choosing to depict trans experiences in such a prominent way. Adding to this the focus on young people, specifically children, and the ambition, and achievements, of the production become even more remarkable.

Researching, writing and consulting in *First Day*: an interview with Julie Kalceff

In *First Day*, Hannah presents to the world an authentic expression of transgender identity. The fact that she is a young 12-year-old further illustrates the vulnerability that most transgender people face when coming out to peers and communities. The transgender protagonist (as with gender-atypical or intersex protagonists) on young adult or children's television challenges normative assumptions and expectations about gender, identity and sexuality. The majority of children and teens may not have a clear understanding of what exactly the term 'transgender' means (Norbury 2014: 2) but by watching characters like Hannah in *First Day*, viewers are able to challenge their preconceptions and better understand gender and sexualities as spectrums of expressions and embodiment than that of the binary logics they may have been raised to believe. Children's and young adult television, along with literature and film, may therefore have an increasingly important role to play in transforming social attitudes towards transgender people and the LGBTIQ+ community in the real world.

Kalceff's work as the screenwriter for *First Day* provides an important contribution to Australian, and international conversations and best practice models for trans representation. In an interview conducted on 19th May 2020, Kalceff detailed her screenwriting processes including phases of researching, writing and consultation. Importantly, Kalceff emphasised the importance she placed on actively engaging in the experiences of audiences and characters at the age and stage of those *First Day* would depict in contemporary life, rather than relying on nostalgia for her own experience/s of this life or of existing stereotypes. As she explained,

For this story [*First Day*] ... I had to do a lot more research. I had to go back and research what it's like to be a twelve-year-old girl *now*... and the things that they're dealing with and what are they interested in [...] What are the issues that kids are dealing with between year 6 and year 7 and what are the things that they're worried about? What are the biggest concerns they've got when they're starting a new

school? And really, it's a lot around, "will I find friends?", "will people like me?", all that sort of stuff.

As a screenwriter, Kalceff was mindful of creating a work that would be engaging for a general television audience as well as the minority identity group being represented by *First Day's* trans protagonist. Therefore, before diving into the specifics of the character's transgender identity, she explained her process of exploring the universal qualities of the story, to provides access points that every viewer could relate to regardless of their gender. As Kalceff states:

You want it [the story] to be universal. You're tapping into themes that everyone can relate to. That's why we made it about starting high school because everyone, even if you don't remember every detail of it, you remember that feeling, you remember what that was kind of like.

Researching (and Screenwriting) the Lived Experience

Kalceff's process when researching transgender issues was personal rather than academic. She explained a desire to understand the lived experiences of transgender individuals. It is not always easy to engage with members of a community you are not a part of yourself. As a member of the LGBT community, Kalceff was able to reach out to others in the community, and as an insider. However, there are other ways to conduct initial research and find ways to connect with members of the LGBT community. Kalceff engaged in this research by actively reaching out to those who could speak to that experience of what it is like to be a young transgender person. In our interview she recounts that the main component about researching transgender issues was speaking to parents of transgender children and, once Evie was cast to play Hannah, speaking to Evie about her experience:

I had already written an outline and I had a script when I cast her [Evie], and so then it was about talking to [the parents of transgender children] and making sure the story was as authentic as possible. I vaguely remember what it is to be twelve [myself as a member of the queer community], but I don't have any insight into what it is to be a twelve-year-old trans girl. The biggest thing for me was to do as much research as possible. To talk to Evie; talk to parents of trans kids, try and really tap into the kinds of things that they're really worried about and things that they're dealing with, but at the same time keeping it universal and keeping it about that transition from primary school to high school, but also taking into account the other things that that character's dealing with.

Beyond the process of research detailed above, Kalceff did also acknowledge performing supplementary additional research by watching publicly available materials also covering similar topics via YouTube. She noted that there were a lot of clips (from around the world available on this platform) from late teens talking about their transition. She noted that these videos provided further insight and information to the experience of many transgender people, as well as further confirmation of the authenticity of the character and scenarios she ultimately went on to write.

Utilising the Writer's Room

In Screen Australia's *Seeing Ourselves* report, they note the importance of research and consultation when writing for diversity, stating 'ideally, productions would bring in script consultants or advisors to project development and writers' rooms when developing characters and storylines from specific backgrounds' (2016: 27). Once it came to writing the scripts, Kalceff explains that the writer's room becomes an integral space to workshop the story and characters, but that it was imperative to have the right people in the room. She explains:

For this series we had a writer's room where we had the parent of a trans kid and a transgender writer in the room to get those insights and get that authenticity, because I think the biggest difference between what I've written in the past and writing this was the real need to get it right. The last thing we wanted to do was put out something that was negative or harmful or damaging to trans kids or to anyone and so the biggest thing was do as much research, [and] to consult with as many people as possible.

The writer's room provided feedback on the story development and provided the necessary insights to be able to tell an authentic story. For Kalceff's screenwriting process, the writer's room provided the opportunity to collaborate, but also to listen, drawing on the experiences of her colleagues to continue the research process and ensure that the developing written piece was progressing authentically. Kalceff explained that she would guide the room, and acknowledged 'for them [writing room collaborators] to get in a room and to have them open up and to share their experiences... for me that's like them giving me all these presents that I didn't have before.'

Engaging in a Meaningful and Ongoing Consultation Process

Part of the screenwriting process is being open to feedback from many different stakeholders including script editors and producers. Kalceff recounted that she was often receiving as many as seven sets of notes on a single episode's script and that being open to different opinions was a necessary part of the process. She explained that receiving notes is a usual part of the television screenwriting process and that it is always better to have as much feedback as possible. As Kalceff notes:

If you're not open to that information then it's really not going to be rich and authentic. Some of the detail we got about the stuff at the school including the language that the principal used and the things [Hannah] could and couldn't do at school was so invaluable and we got that from speaking with parents of trans kids. I had written that content, but then feedback would come back saying "that's not what would happen, this is actually what would happen", and so getting that information is invaluable and it's only going to make your script better.

Without this open feedback process, writers may miss valuable opportunities to not only improve the story but to ensure the story is authentic. Kalceff notes that this consultation process was important throughout the story and script development process, especially through engagement with GLAAD (the US LGBTIQ+ media representation advocacy group):

When we were in pre-production we sent the scripts to GLAAD, so that they could have a look. We don't have an equivalent for GLAAD in Australia and I don't know if there is an equivalent in the UK, I only know about GLAAD, but GLAAD are really open to reading anything and as early as possible in the pre-production process, they just want to help people get it right.

As the main industry advocacy and advisory body on LGBTIQ+ media representation, GLAAD provides media creators with services and training (including advice on scripts and stories), as well as providing yearly reports on the US film and television industry's inclusion of LGBTIQ+ characters (GLAAD 2019). In the absence of a local industry/advocacy body like GLAAD, Kalceff and her team relied on international markers and advice, however, the nuances of local Australian experiences and the intersectionality of local contemporary Australian life for children was one they were keen to capture as accurately as possible. As a

result, the producers actively sought, and responded to, a variety of feedback at all stages of production.

Receiving Feedback

Prioritising and balancing feedback provided by the various stakeholders and subject matter experts was managed relatively easily by the *First Day* production team. Kalceff explains that it works well because different people were commenting on different things.

My script editor, Amanda Higgs, would give me feedback on story, structure and character, whereas the parents of trans kids would talk about the experience of the trans kid and whether that rang true. And Amanda was great, she wouldn't comment on the trans stuff because she knows that that's not appropriate. Kristy Stark, the producer would give feedback on the story as well. When you get notes back from people, you kind of prioritise them anyway. It wasn't often that there was a clash [in the feedback] because people were commenting on where they were coming from and their area of expertise. We also getting notes from the ABC and the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) and you have to take on board the notes that speak to you and if they don't you fight for what you believe in.

Oftentimes, the acceptance of feedback comes down to the writer's vision of the story and the story that they want to tell. This was not to say that all comments and suggestions would need to be taken as changes to be definitely made, but rather than the first draft of the work was to be a solid way to continue to engage with the opinions and experiences of those in the room and a way to strengthen Kalceff's ultimate vision for the story being told via *First Day*.

Writing for Children's Television and the Youth Audience

Writing for children’s television provides a new set of challenges and opportunities for writers and creators, even more so when this may be the first time your audience has heard about or seen a transgender person. In the preteen children’s television genre, shows often revolve around a character’s social friendships and family dynamics in the transitional period from being a child to an adult. This transition is often marked by the physical move from primary school to high school, and many TV shows aimed at this demographic use school and home environments to explore the varying social, psychological and physical trials facing young people during this transitional time. Children are able to understand and relate to the transgender experience as there is a shared universal experience. This is further demonstrated by the Australian Children’s Television Foundation’s (2021) “First Day Teaching Toolkit” which was produced as an education resource to support Year 6 and Year 7 (11-13 year olds) teachers and students to explore the themes in *First Day*. Designed to ‘help students to prepare for, process, and reflect on their own transitions to secondary school... [and] and remind them that we are all more alike than we are different’, the toolkit provides learning tasks for students to engage in class discussions about gender, identity and bullying (2021: 3).

As a writer new to children’s television, Kalceff had to change the way in which she wrote the characters — including their dialogue and how to structure scenes — in order to meet the expectations of the target audience, but also the production and distribution teams’ expectations. Kalceff notes that working with the broadcaster helped guide her approach:

From the very beginning, the ABC said it’s kids TV, it has to be about the kids, it always has to be about the kids. So, I was constantly going back and saying “is this scene about the kids? Is this from the kids’ point of view?” Also, they kept saying the kids need to have agency... you don’t want the adults solving the problems for them – they have to be the ones that are solving the problems. So, it became us focusing on the fact that it’s Hannah’s story, she has some agency over what she

does and what happens, she has to solve her problems and we're always with her and with the kids. So, it was a real re-think for me and the way I had written in the past.

Kalceff's screen writing practice for *First Day* was clearly drawn on personal experience and interest, but also carefully crafted beyond that to make for a story that would be relatable to contemporary viewers. For writers venturing into children's television for the first time, there are structural differences to the episodes than what is often utilised in adult drama, such as cliff-hangers. In adult dramas, cliff-hangers can be a useful tool to drive suspense and leave a sense of anticipation in your audience, whereas when writing for children, the character's problems need to be somewhat resolved by the end of the episode. As Kaceff notes:

You can't leave an episode of kids' TV on a really dangerous cliff-hanger, because the kids get upset. You can have something happen, but it has to be clear that there is someone with that character. So even when [Evie] is outed at the end of episode 2, one of her friends takes her somewhere where she can get help... because it's kids you need one of her friends to take her away so the audience knows that she is going to be okay.

Kalceff's comments above demonstrate her clear understanding of the relationship between what children see depicted on television and how these depictions may then be replicated in their own real-life experiences. While her work is of course a piece of fiction rather than designed to be a direct instructional or educational tool, the role of television in shaping behaviour in young viewers and their families has been well explored by scholars, including most recently during COVID lockdowns (Balanzategui, Burke & McIntyre 2021).

Discussing the issues in an age-appropriate way

Ensuring an authentic representation of Hannah’s transgender identity meant consulting with children who have been through that experience. As Kalceff notes earlier, she consulted with adults of transgender children and transgender adults, however gaining Evie’s feedback on the story and her character was also important — it just had to be at the right time. Kalceff notes:

I didn’t want Evie to read the scripts too much before we went into the shoot because I didn’t want her to be too familiar with them. It would have taken away her spontaneity and the freshness of it. So, during the rehearsal period I spent time with each of the kids and went through their scenes. If there was language that they didn’t understand or didn’t feel right to them, we changed it.

So, while the scripts were as well researched and informed by the lived experience of adults within the transgender community, the scripts had to remain flexible when it came to production. As long as the essence of the scene and the feeling behind the moments were there on page, it was open to the actors to interpret that and if they felt it would be voiced differently, then she was ready for that. An important part of Kalceff’s screenwriting practice here was considering how a young person articulates transgender identity. Consequently, then as a writer, Kalceff moved to next consider how to authentically convey the moment when that identity is first asserted via a ‘coming out’ announcement or event. In order to capture this in the production in a relatable way, Kalceff looked to her leading actress Evie, for inspiration:

I think the thing with the trans stuff is that a lot of adults don’t understand it anyway and so I tried to think “how would Evie explain this to anyone?” and tried to just use her voice and the language that she would use but without dumbing it down. Evie is very forthcoming and very clear about who she is and clear in explaining things and so I didn’t want to talk around the issues; I didn’t want to dumb it down or use “kid”

language. I just feel like kids that age don't get enough credit, and they understand things. I think the "age-appropriate way" is by using the voice of those characters.

Kalceff's careful articulation above of her mode of address is important. By not wanting to use what she calls 'kid language', but also trying to maintain a mode of address that would be relevant to a young audience, her writing needed to be extremely precise. Her assertion of the need for 'age-appropriate' ways to express the voices in the work again aligns with existing scholarship and best practice in children's television writing including that from Martin (2017) and Krcmar & Cingel (2017).

Findings from practice: Writing for diversity and inclusivity

First Day is ultimately the story of a young girl starting high school, making friends, discovering who she is and being brave enough to share that authentic self to the world. While this is a single case study, it provides screenwriters and screenwriting scholars an opportunity to gain insights into a pioneering endeavour in Australian television. Through the interview with Julie Kalceff above, we can see that there is significant value in presenting diverse characters in universal stories. While there may be personal barriers to this inclusive practice (e.g., fear of getting it wrong, not knowing where to start or where to go for help, and the desire to tell stories from one's own lived experience rather than someone else's), *First Day* illustrates that there is a desire and need for inclusive storytelling in Australian television.

By taking on board the insights gained from the interview with Kalceff, an approach to writing children's television can be proposed; one that focuses on diversity and inclusivity by using marginalised characters in universal stories. The diagram (Figure 1) below demonstrates the synthesis and connectedness of three key aspects of Kalceff's screenwriting practice (researching, writing and consulting) and illustrates the interconnected processes involved in

writing inclusive and diverse children’s television. The research process is focused on understanding the lived experience of the marginalised person and how that can be understood by connecting it to a universal experience. The consultation process is necessary to understand the lived experience and to ensure authenticity in the story and how the characters are represented. The writing process communicates the authenticity within the universal experience. The overarching aim of this process or approach is to connect the audience to the marginalised characters and story.

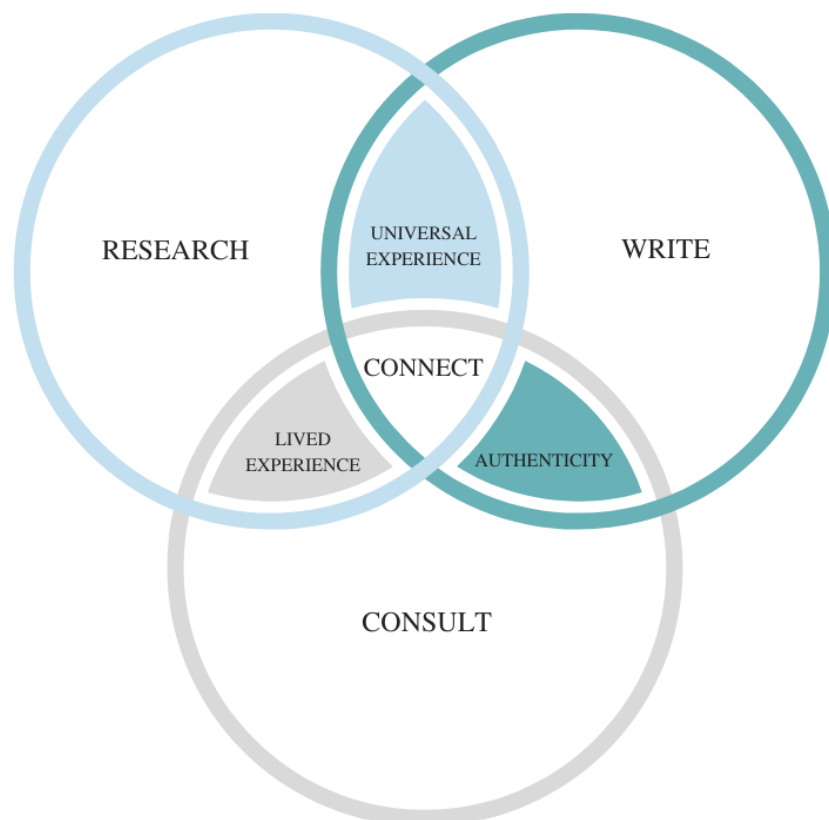


Figure 1: A process for writing inclusive and diverse children’s television

Kalceff’s process illustrated in the diagram above could be used or adapted to a process of including of any minority or marginalised group. While this article has focused on transgender representation in children’s television, it could be used for the inclusion of other LGBTIQ+

identities; for racial and cultural minorities; or for those with disabilities. In previous research on race and gender in teen television, it was shown that diversifying characters in previously stereotyped portrayals, the audience is presented with contrary views and ultimately change their preconceptions. For example, when young women grew up watching Dana Scully use her STEM knowledge to solve crimes on *X-Files*, many young women decided to study and enter STEM fields (known as the Scully Effect). Similarly, characters like Raven Reyes on *The 100*, showed young Latinx and disabled viewers that you did not have to be white and able-bodied to be the “smart” one in the room (Krikowa 2018). The counter-stereotypes became important for women of diverse backgrounds to see themselves represented on screen in meaningful and inclusive roles. The larger questions around what authenticity looks like onscreen centre around diversity and inclusivity, not just from a position of gender, but from positions of sexuality, race, class and disability (Krikowa 2018; 2019).

When crafting LGBTIQ+ characters, Pullen encourages screenwriters to ‘explore your environment and to find a pathway for potential audience engagement’ as a screenwriter’s personal processes, experiences, convictions and attitudes infuse the script and are readable by audiences (2014: 284). According to Jason Lee, the task of screenwriters is to find ‘a path of revelation, about our characters gaining deeper psychological insight, such as an epiphany into who they really are, or who they become’ (2013: 67)^{iv}. There are inherent rewards for those writers who take the time to research and consult with people with the lived experience they are depicting in their stories. As Hart notes from her research on screenwriting on intersex identity: ‘audiences want to learn more about the human condition, especially via courageous characters at the limit of self (2016: 17). Pullen argues that screenwriters must go beyond limiting, stereotypical representations, and represent LGBT characters ‘as an everyday social type’ (2014: 273). The presence of trans children and teens in shows like *First Day* is important because they provide role models and an opportunity for television to prompt family

conversations and potentially create safe spaces for gender non-conforming children and adolescents (Capuzza & Spencer 2017: 222). By using a screenwriting process, such as the one provided above, screenwriters can approach their projects with an eye to being more inclusive in their storytelling and foreground characters from diverse backgrounds in ways that the wider audience can come to understand and feel a connection with.

Conclusion

Children's television can be an important space for exploring diverse characters and issues as these stories typically include themes of change, growth, acceptance and belonging. Children relate to the diverse characters due to the nature of the universal liminal experience. By foregrounding marginal characters in a time when the targeted viewership can relate due to their own impending liminal experience, screenwriters can explore the universal social, psychological and physical trials facing young people in contemporary society, and in the process, break down stigmas surrounding LGBTQ people. The interview with Julie Kalceff on her experience writing *First Day*, provides valuable insights into the process of writing inclusive and diverse children's television. While there are obvious limitations to single case study analyses, the voices and opinions of practitioners are important sources of knowledge for screenwriting and television studies and there is immense value in recounting the personal reflections of screenwriters about their perceptions of best practice (Redvall & Cook 2015: 134). The more we can gain insight from those at the frontlines writing and producing innovate and important work, the more the industry at large can benefit from those experiences and insights and feel encouraged to do the same. As Screen Australia notes, 'the ultimate aim is that *all* of the many and varied voices in the Australian community have the opportunity to be represented through screen content' (2016: 2). Hopefully *First Day* is the inspiration Australia and world needs to embrace diversity in television and screen media.

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ⁱ See Sandercock (2015) for an analysis of *Glee* and *Degrassi*; Owen (2016) for an analysis of *I am Jazz* documentary reality series; and Miller (2019) for an analysis of transgender representation in US sitcoms.

ⁱⁱ See critics such as Beirne (2008: 7), Gamson (2002: 340) and Walters (2001: 10).

ⁱⁱⁱ An important part of this larger public discourse around transgender representation is the commercial success and critical acclaim of US television dramas including *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*, as well as the increase in the number of reality television shows such as *I am Cait* and *I am Jazz*.

^{iv} See also Henderson (2011) for analysis of gender and race in the writer's room.