

Avatar: The Last Airbender is undoubtedly one of Nickelodeon's best shows of the 2000's. Today, the show can be streamed on Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, or any mainstream online service. The show is about a group of four named team Avatar who are tasked with saving the world from the fire nation, who want to conquer the world. In the Avatar universe, the concept of "bending" exists, which is all about controlling one of four elements: air, water, fire, or earth. Bending is something that one is born with, so some people are given the ability while others are not. The Nickelodeon television series *Avatar the Last Airbender* mainly consists of characters who have bending abilities, except for Sokka, the one notable main character who was not born with any sort of special abilities. *Avatar The Last Airbender* indirectly portrays the social identity lens of having a disability through the use of Sokka throughout the series in order to prove that being 'disabled' is not a disadvantage that should discourage people

Bending is essentially a superpower, because it gives one an edge over another person who may not have it. Throughout the show, people without bending powers are not necessarily displayed as 'weak', but there is an obvious gap between a bender and a non bender. This can be comparable to how society views people with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities are not considered to be 'dumb' by anybody, however they do have a tougher time when it comes to learning certain concepts in school compared to people who do not have learning disabilities. Thus, in the Avatar universe being a non-bender is comparable to being disabled in the real world. There are certain everyday tasks that a non bender cannot carry out with as much ease as a bender would be able to. This is where the character of Sokka comes into play. Sokka is the oldest member of team Avatar, which originally only had four members total. There is Aang, the Avatar who can control all four elements, Katara, a water bender who is Sokka's little sister, and Toph, an earth bender who is blind. One interesting aspect of the show

was that Toph being blind did not make her out to be any weaker, and this was simply because of her earth bending abilities. This in itself should prove to the viewers that bending in itself is an ‘ability’ to possess in the Avatar universe, and if possessed automatically places one into the ‘dominant group’ of society.

Sokka’s personal realization did not come until later on in the show. He woke up one morning, to see everyone else on team Avatar using their bending abilities and having fun. Sokka fell into a bit of a slump seeing this, because he thought that he was of much less value to the team than the others. “You all have cool powers and I’m just a normal guy” said Sokka, when his team asked him what was wrong. “That’s not true Sokka, you have... well um...” replied the team. The rest of team Avatar clearly had a hard time trying to tell Sokka what his ability was. They eventually would reassure him into thinking that his ability was his mind, and or how he is the brains of the team, but this still did not entirely satisfy Sokka. Sokka was not able to command any of the elements at his own will, he had to make everything happen by himself, but even this was not enough sometimes. It is a struggle in even real life to work so hard at something, but to not achieve it but to see other people barely give an effort and instantly achieve it. This is what people who are in disabled groups in society go through, they put in their all to sometimes come just short, but see others around them thrive without recognition of the advantages they have been given. Sokka is the goofiest character in the show, but how he carries himself compared to the others is much different, simply because he is a non bender.

Being different from everybody around is often said to be a somewhat good thing in society, but it can also have mental impacts on people. This is exactly what Sokka went through. He would go through everyday seeing benders, and he himself was convinced that bending was a necessity to be considered ‘strong’ or ‘useful’ in the fight against the fire nation. Generally,

members of a dominant group in society are a bit oblivious of the challenges of being a part of the minority group, and this is why Sokka did not have anybody that could relate to him on a daily basis. Team Avatar did come across several non-benders that did not have the need to heavily rely on bending in order to defend themselves, but they came across as many benders that used their bending. When a person is in an environment in which they do not have anybody to empathize with, it instantly takes the 'being different' effect to a different level. Part of being different is self-acceptance, which is almost impossible to achieve without help.

In the end, Sokka was able to come to terms with the fact that he had no bending abilities. This was in large part due to his friends on team Avatar, at first they had trouble listing his strengths, but even when they did with little confidence, they later realized it to be true. Sokka was a huge part of the show, because he was the main non-bending character, so he had a certain standard to meet, which he did. The show did a great job of exploring the identity of ability/disability in a way that it is not normally viewed. When we think of ability/disability we think of mental illnesses, or physical disabilities, not who has super powers and who does not. However, it is all still the same concept. Sokka used the fact that he was a non-bender to his advantage. Since it was a bit of a fact that physically he was the 'weakest' person on team Avatar, he used this misconception to his advantage and was able to defeat numerous enemies because of it. In fact, there was a scene in the finale of the show that featured Sokka taking down a fleet of airships by himself. "He steers their commandeered airship into all the others, taking many down, and directs Toph to metalbend another to do the same" (Kreuzwieser). In this short scene, the audience is shown that Sokka does not need bending in order to contribute to team Avatar, he has his wits and also directs the other members on the team on how they should use their powers. Him also being the oldest character on the team made him the one with the best

natural instinct, as the others always relied on their bending to get them out of any messes, Sokka only had himself, which he would come to appreciate as the show progressed.

In conclusion, the show *Avatar The Last Airbender*' does a great job of portraying the social identity of ability/disability in a way for children to understand. Sokka's personal process of coming to the realization that he is different, to accepting himself with the help of his friends is illustrated in the perfect way by using slow progression in scenes and effective dialogue. The show is targeted at children, but lessons can be taken away from the show for everyone to learn.

Works Cited

Kreuzwieser, Micaela. "Avatar: 10 Times Sokka Didn't Need His Own Bending." *CBR*, Valnet Inc, 29 March 2022, <https://www.cbr.com/avatar-times-sokka-didnt-need-own-bending/>. Accessed on 2 December 2022.