Multicultural Awareness Collages

Analyzing the ways newspapers cover different racial and cultural groups can stir provocative discussions among middle school students.

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As a devoted life-long newspaper reader, I have often noticed how a particular theme, story, or issue will pervade both printed and broadcast news coverage. This media blitz can last a week or span a month or two. My middle school students and I have tracked particular themes over a given time period, such as “Children as Victims of Random Violence” or “School Personnel Using Drugs,” by creating collages of headlines and graphics (photos/graphics/ads) from a mix of dailies. These dated collages have formed a mosaic on the walls of my classroom that has helped us integrate current events and critical newspaper reading into our current issues studies.

When the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst racial incidents occurred, I decided to enter into a very touchy and uncomfortable classroom terrain: examining newspaper coverage of racial and cultural groups. The extent to which this coverage celebrated and supported the gorgeous mosaic is the subject of this article.

Eyewitness News Readers

To begin this project, I listed the following racial/ethnic groups on the blackboard: African Americans, Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Jews, Indians, Native American Indians, Haitians, Dominican Republicans, Puerto Ricans, Greeks, and Irish. I asked the students to work together in “Eyewitness News Reader” teams to make predictions on how many news items newspapers would devote to a particular ethnic/racial group and what news sections these groups would appear in. I gave the news reader groups three to five minutes to confer and come up with their predictions.

Once the groups had conferred, I asked each one to share their predictions as well as the rationale behind the group’s final consensus. We listed the predictions for each ethnic group on the board next to each group.

I then gave each news reader group two different daily newspapers, two manila file folders, a scissor, and a glue stick. I gave the students 20-25 minutes to check and confirm their own predictions by going through the newspapers. Then I distributed a “Multicultural Awareness News Investigation Task Sheet.”

Each group selected one student to record on the task sheet the number and headings of news sections that contained mentions of racial groups. In addition, one student cut out the headlines, photos, or graphics that featured these mentions. Finally, one group member “collaged” the headlines, photos, and graphics onto opened manila folders. I provided markers if these “cultural currents” artists wanted to embellish their collages further.

After the students independently reviewed their newspapers, each group shared its reactions to the actual number of multicultural references in the news. Groups analyzed the accuracy of their predictions and some of the news factors that affected them.

Next, the students focused on the list of ethnic and racial groups we had initially explored. I asked teams to spend five minutes reviewing their findings and examining their collages to decide whether the references they found were positive, negative, or neutral and to what extent they presented a valid or stereotyped image of the group. The students were also allowed to make an initial determination of insufficient evidence if they felt they didn’t have enough citations to make a judgment.

Finally, once the students had discussed the nature and validity of multicultural images projected in the news on their own, we opened the discussion up to involve all our teams. First I asked each team to hold up and display its collages. Then I requested that whoever spoke for the team be sure to refer to the specific collages as the team’s evaluations were presented.

Cultural Images

As various class members presented their views, we listed them on the board. The students debated one another’s judgments by comparing...
them to news reports. We did reach consensus on several issues on this first multicultural awareness newspaper investigation. Among these were:

- The images and citations of blacks in the news that day were mostly negative. Many visual/verbal references to black people dealt with crime, low academic scores, and poverty. The only positive article dealt with an athlete.
- There were few references to Hispanics, Indians, Greeks, or Native American Indians that day. Therefore, there was insufficient data to make a judgment on how those groups were described.
- The Chinese were most favorably covered, with an emphasis on academic success and artistic ability. Many students, some of whom were Chinese, worried about news perpetuating a too favorable, unrealistic stereotype. Was this just as bad as a denigrating stereotype? The students were divided on this question. The same issue came up with the image of Japanese economic success.
- Was every reference to “Israel” a reference to Jews? Several students volunteered to research that one.
- The only story on Dominican Republicans in New York City was part of a series on sons of immigrants who played on an after-school baseball team. One of my students said he had heard several stories of poor Dominican Republican students who had found success on baseball teams. None of the other students could ever recall a story on this group that didn’t deal with baseball. Was that a desirable stereotype or could baseball expertise possibly be the only news-worthy aspect of the Dominican

Republican in New York?

Uncovering Deeper Issues

Students opted to do an in-depth multicultural news awareness study of specific groups. They spent two weeks collecting references, preparing collages, and evaluating their findings. They shared these with reporters and community members in a multicultural news awareness forum. Then, two students set up a database of multicultural stories and references.

Several students collected news photos and graphic depictions of only one group. They called their photographic survey “Multicultural Images in the News.” These students found that through selection of images, the news media could perpetuate, create, or defuse stereotypes.

We are now investigating Fourteenth Amendment “Equal Protection” aspects of our initial researches. Students are extracting various potential Fourteenth Amendment violations from local news, such as housing discrimination and job discrimination. They are exploring these cases with our local ACLU chapter to find out the legal ramifications.

Although many “uncomfortable,” provocative, and tense remarks surfaced during our study, we had some breakthrough discussions of some pressing social issues. Through cultural currents collages we began to formulate a perspective on the state of our dynamic news mosaic. Such student-centered investigations and studies initiate students, teachers, and community into necessary multicultural social dialogue. Power and metacognition to our 21st century ethnically diverse citizens!

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