
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

Multicultural Music Resources

Live musical performances featured at the 1990 Symposium on Multicultural Approaches to Music Education sponsored by MENC (Music Educators National Conference), the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Folklife Programs, and the Society for Ethnomusicology, have been captured in a new video series produced by MENC.

The series includes videos on teaching the music of the American Indian, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, with practical teaching ideas and examples for use in the classroom. Price: \$39.50 each.

- The accompanying book, *Teaching Music With a Multicultural Approach*, features music examples, lesson plans, and resource lists for studies on the music of Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and the American Indian. Compiled by William M. Anderson, 1991. 48 pages. Price: \$14.50.

- *Sounds of the World* audiocassettes include volumes on Latin America, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Each volume includes three

cassettes containing narration, interviews, and performances by immigrants who have maintained the musical traditions of their native cultures. Teachers' guides accompany each set and provide historical and musical background, pictures of instruments, and suggestions for using materials with elementary, secondary, and college-level students. Price: \$42 each.

- The book, *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* features a pragmatic approach to teaching world music traditions in upper elementary through high school levels. Includes illustrations, diagrams, music examples, resource lists, and ideas for integrating multicultural music study with other subjects. Edited by William M. Anderson and Patricia Shehan Campbell, 1989. 344 pages. Price: \$39.50.

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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 read 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 newsworthy aspect of the Dominican

Republicans 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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