

# BEYOND MEDIA STEREOTYPING. MEDIA EDUCATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISCLOSE EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION

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## Abstract italiano

Questo articolo presenta un intervento di media education contro la discriminazione e per promuovere atteggiamenti positivi verso la diversità. L'intervento è stato realizzato in Italia nel 2013-14 nell'ambito del progetto europeo e-Engagement against violence e ha coinvolto circa 25 studenti impegnati in attività di analisi e produzione mediale sulle strategie mediali di costruzione dell'altro e sul *reporting diversity*. L'articolo illustra e discute i risultati dell'intervento, e fornisce alcune considerazioni conclusive sul ruolo della media education nella promozione di atteggiamenti antidiscriminatori<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Though this paper has been jointly conceived by the authors, Francesco Fabbro has written the sections: Research questions and methods; Context, participants and specific objectives; Discussion; Conclusion.; while Maria Ranieri has written: Introduction; Theoretical background; Process and Results.

## Parole chiave

Media education, diversità, discriminazione, partecipazione, scuola secondaria

## English Abstract

This paper presents a media education intervention against discrimination and to promote positive attitudes towards diversity. The intervention was carried out in Italy in 2013-14 within the wider context of the European project e-Engagement against violence and involved about 25 students who were engaged in media analysis and production activities around media othering strategies and reporting diversity. The paper illustrates and discusses the results of the intervention, and provide some conclusive considerations on the role of media education to promote anti-discriminatory attitudes.

## Keywords

Media education, diversity, discrimination, participation, secondary school

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the concepts of media representation and diversity with the double purpose of showing, on one hand, how media are powerful means of conceptualization of diversity related issues, and on the other hand of pointing out the importance of an educational work to be carried out at school to develop not only critical understanding of othering strategies in the news media but also the capacity of representing and giving voice to diversity as a value in contemporary societies. As well known, media literacy education represents a strategic approach to promote both students' critical understanding of media and their active use for participatory citizenship (Buckingham, 2003; Cappello, 2009; Hobbs, 2010). However, the literature and the practices about media education and diversity are still limited. In this paper, we present and discuss an educational intervention focused on media strategies of representing the 'other' and on reporting diversity. The intervention was carried out within the framework of the European project e-Engagement Against Violence (e-EAV), a two years project (2012-14) funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the University of Florence. In the following, we firstly introduce the theoretical concepts and background, then we illustrate the intervention and evaluate its results. The paper concludes with some considerations about the role of media education to promote students' awareness of media strategies of discrimination and develop their capacity of express and appreciate diversity.

## 2. Theoretical background

The concept of representation as defined by Cultural and Media Studies in the '70's is of fundamental relevance in media education. As well known, the main idea is that media do not represent reality, but re-present it by a selection of some events and / or views rather than others. As Hall and colleagues observed (1978), news itself is the final product of a complex process starting with a systematic selection of events and issues based on socially built categories. From a pedagogical point of view, the media interpretation process carried out by students is crucial since, echoing Eco (2012), the 'battle' for the survival of individuals as responsible human beings in the communication era will not be won exclusively where communication does start, but rather where it goes. In media literacy education, such a 'battle' is often realized through the analysis of media text aiming at promoting students' reading abilities and critical knowledge (Masterman 1985; Buckingham 2003). Moving to the specific issue of how diversity is represented in news media, a pivotal notion refers to the construction of stereotypes about the 'other'. Yanovski (2002) identified

five main techniques to build negative representations of the other in the news media. The first technique consists in the transformation of negative individual case into a generalized prejudice: very often journalistic pieces start with specific cases and then generalize to larger social group, producing negative stereotypes once a negative individual feature is extended to a whole group.

The second technique refers to the accumulation of mainly negative information about a given group or category. Providing many information, pictures and descriptions related to a social group is not a way of building a prejudice by itself. It becomes so, when the majority of elements used to tell facts about given categories of people includes negative features.

A third technique consists in combining the name of the group with a negative or even offensive judgement on group's members. For example, when news media in countries where Islam is not majority regularly use labels like 'fanatical', 'fundamentalist', 'intolerant' to describe people of Muslim religion.

The fourth technique relates to the negative exploitation of the past. When the past is used to describe a negative feature like something long or all along belonging to the history/tradition of that social group. It is a way to state that 'they are and will be always like that because were always like that'. Here the prejudice is built by selecting some controversial parts of the history of a given social group to define its nature.

Lastly, the fifth technique refers to the equalization between group and nation-state. The equalization between one group's image and that of the state is a rather common action. Also in news media people are often identified in terms of nationality but when such generalization stands out as the main identification means internal differences in each national group are denied and once again we fall back into the stereotype.

Can we tell and represent diversity in news media in a different way? The answer is, of course, positive, as professionals embracing the philosophy of 'Reporting Diversity' have demonstrated. This expression refers to the writing of journalistic reports about groups that are different from 'our' group – that is to say, the 'other' -, without having necessarily this diversity leading to a qualitative opposition 'good/bad' or 'civilized/non-civilized'. In other words, it is a journalistic practice that is respectful towards diversity, which refers to the 'other' without stigmatizing him/her, by including also his/her point of view (Yanovski, 2002).

In this context, the current paper presents the results of an educational intervention on media education against discrimination, that were implemented in an Italian school with the aim of promoting students' ability to analyze and produce news media, while respecting diversity. In the following, we shall present the specific objectives of the intervention, the procedure, the main results as well as some considerations on the experiences carried out.

### 3. Research questions and methodology

A participatory action research strategy (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) was adopted with the aim to engage teachers and students in an educational process of changing media practices towards diversity and improving their skills for civic engagement and citizenship.

The main research questions were:

1. Do media education activities addressing discrimination contribute to enable young people's critical understanding of the relationships between media messages and different forms of discrimination? How?
2. Can media education provide young people with the participatory and media/citizenship skills to question and combat discrimination? How?

In order to answer these questions, a series of tools (students' satisfaction questionnaire, pre- and post-test, focus groups, interviews, observations, teachers' logbook etc.) to assess pre-existing views, take notes on the process, and evaluate the final outcomes were used.

Afterwards, qualitative data analysis was carried out through three main interacting and cyclical procedures indicated by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display and drawing verifying conclusions. Hence, qualitative data (transcriptions of focus groups, teachers' logbooks, pre- and post-test, students' productions) were analyzed through ex-post categories that were identified through a repeated process of reading and analysis.

### 4. Context, participants and specific objectives

#### 4.1. Context

The educational intervention here presented was carried out in a school in Florence, during the scholastic year 2013-2014. As anticipated, the activities were realized within the framework of the European project e-Engagement against Violence (e-EAV, [www.engagementproject.eu](http://www.engagementproject.eu)), coordinated by the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence and funded by the Daphne program. The overall aim of the project was to increase young people's and teachers/educators' awareness about contemporary forms of discrimination and on how digital media can be employed to foster or contrast discriminatory discourses. The project involved almost 500 students from seven European countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Slovenia, United Kingdom) in the experimentation of innovative educational materials about media and citizenship education, with a particular focus on: Information reception and production (module 1); Audiovisual fiction and ideologies (module 2);

Videogames and citizenship (module 3); Political communication and propaganda (module 4); Online activism and networking (module 5).

Since media literacy education aims not only at enabling young people's critical understanding of media, but also at encouraging their critical participation as media producers in their own right (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010), each of the five modules mentioned above included both media analysis and production.

Within this context, the school tested units from module 1. This module focuses on how news media represent, rather than reflect, the social world. Its analytical section concerns verbal and visual stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, race and disability embedded in different non-fictional media narratives, particularly newspaper articles, TV newscasts and information blogs. The production oriented activities, instead, invite students to make choices about how to represent real events, especially in relation to the issues of discrimination and violence. Hence, students are encouraged and supported to engage with collaborative production of information, most notably through the creation of a 'participatory journal' inspired to the practices of participatory journalism.

In the paragraphs below, information on participants will be provided as well as a description of the specific objectives of the units tested in the school.

#### 4.2. Participants

Participants were 20 students (5 males and 15 females) aged 15-16 from a II° Grade of a Junior Secondary School, two teachers (one teaching Italian and one English as a second language) and one researcher. The group was described by teachers as problematic with two students with specific learning disorder (dyslexia and stammering), one African student who had been adopted by an Italian family and who was depressed, and one lesbian student from Philippines who could not keep in the classroom for more than a few minutes, coming and going all the time.

#### 4.3. Activities and specific objectives

The activities were carried out in the multimedia lab, which was equipped with a sufficient number of PC, a video projector and the Internet connection. The activities in the classroom were mainly managed by the researcher supported alternatively by the teachers. In the multimedia lab there was also a technical assistant who provided some support. Both teachers and researcher reported their observations in a logbook.

Four units of Module 1 were tested in four different sessions lasting 2 hours each in the period March-April 2014. The units were:

*Unit 1 – Analyzing representations in news media*

The objective of this unit was to ask students to reflect on how news media represents and interprets reality. It started by asking the students to answer two questions: one about the realism of images they see in the news media, the other about the influence that such images have (or do not have) on themselves and on others. It proceeded with the analysis of two different images corresponding to different framings of the same situation. It ended with self-reflection on interpretation and judgments made by the students in their analysis and by re-writing the answers given at the beginning of the unit.

*Unit 2 – How to recognize negative stereotypes in news media*

This unit aimed to encourage students to reflect on how news media might create negative stereotypes. It started with a game aimed at clarifying the crucial role that stereotypes play in describing people's identity. It continued by presenting five types of negative stereotyping typically used in news media to represent minority groups and/or the most fragile and disadvantaged people. It ended with an analysis of stereotyping performed by students. This was followed by group self-reflection on the completed work.

*Unit 7 – Reporting diversity: how to write an article without stereotyping the 'other'*

This unit encouraged students to reflect on the concept of reporting diversity and on how to write journalistic articles without resorting to stereotypical images of the 'other'. The unit started with students reading and discussing an article emphasizing stereotypes. The unit continued with a writing exercise in which students had to modify the article, paying attention to the use of stereotypes. It concluded with self-reflection and the reading of an alternative article that offered a very different perspective.

*Unit 8 - First steps in creating a participatory journal*

The purpose of this unit was to promote students' collaboration and participation capabilities through the planning of a participatory journal on the topic of diversity at school. It started with individual consideration of personal media practices to develop an understanding of how actively students participate in media consumption. It continued by asking students to plan preparation and production of a participatory journal addressed to school and local community. It ended with an activity of collective reflection on the work done.

## 5. Process and results

Several data and information were collected during the experimentation around issues and affordances, students' participation and reaction, learning outcomes and productions. In the following, we report on the main results of the activities and then discuss some emerging trends.

### *Issue and affordances*

Time was reported as a very critical issue together with and technical aspects. Indeed, sometimes the activities required less time than planned, other times they required more time, particularly when the computers or the Internet were not working. In the first case, an additional activity was proposed, in the other case the researcher suggested continuing the activity at home, but the lesson suffered for the waste of time. As a consequence students' interest decreased. Moreover, the speed of browsing was not always adequate with negative consequences on activities based on online search of images, article or new information.

Another issue was the lack of interaction with the school as a context where the testing was taking place. Apart from some contacts with teachers, the researcher did not have any relations with the headmaster or other teachers. The school was involved in several projects and initiatives and the overall impression was that the school was over-stimulated. The risk, in this case, is that the testing of media education remains an extemporary experience that cannot bring to a systematic introduction of this subject within the teaching practice.

Moving to the most significant learning situations, it must be noted that in the first phase of testing, the class showed an adequate capacity of reading and decoding the stereotypes conveyed by news media, including written texts and visual. Even students with learning difficulties participated in the activities. Particularly significant was an episode during Unit 3, where the lesbian student, who was used to come and go to the classroom showing disinterested and inappropriate behaviours, took the floor to ask if even pictures, besides texts, could be reported as an evidence of the presence of stereotypes in the article. This question led the researcher to show to the students not only the text, but also the pictures included in the article. A very interesting debate took place, given that the article was about an event that happened in Prato (Tuscany) involving Chinese workers, while the picture was a photo of a dormitory used by Chinese people but taken in Emilia Romagna. Students manifested great astonishment: if discussions held initially (Unit 1) on the manipulation of images had led them to doubt about the 'truth' of the representation, the reflection on the mismatch between the text and the image in the article was particularly effective to understand how negative representations of 'others' can be constructed.



Coming to the activities of media production carried out in the second phase of the testing (Unit 3 and Unit 4), they brought to writing five short articles that were posted on the class wiki, set up by the researcher. The work took place in small groups for a total of five groups of 4 members each. Within each group, editorial roles (ranging from the collection of interviews to the editing of the article) were established and a volunteer for each group made himself available to be interviewed, reporting on an experienced discriminatory event. The activity was not immediately taken off: indeed students showed several difficulties in thinking and talking about themselves. Of course, factors such as shyness or embarrassment influenced the activity through slowing the beginning of the work. However, it is also true that once students understood the nature of the task and, above all, the fact that everyone can be subject to discrimination, activities (i.e. interviews, writing a first draft of the article, revision of the texts, search for the title and subtitle, and publication in the wiki) took place very quickly and with great participation.

#### *Participation*

Overall students highly participated in the process. They engaged with the tasks by showing interest, answering questions, expressing their comments, achieving all the tasks proposed, helping each other. The technician, who assisted to all the lessons, commented that students were really immersed in the task. The researcher created some suspense in presenting contents and issues. For example, she used multimedia contents to discuss about stereotypes gradually revealing texts and images to increase curiosity. As noted above, in terms of participation, one of the main result of the testing was the involvement of students with learning difficulties or problematic behaviours. From this point of view, the activity was not only about how media represents diversity, but also on how media may help to include diversity at school. In other words, it was about media and inclusion, which is an important component of participation.

#### *Students' reaction*

Most students liked analyzing representations based on the images referring to the media analysis activity of a manipulated image of a soldier (Units 1). They also appreciated the discussion around the concept of identity or stereotype. One student, for example, commented that he/she liked public debates since they brought him/her «to develop my arguments, talk and express my opinions». More than one students observed that through these activities they really understood the concept of stereotype. Half of the students appreciated also media production activities referring to both writing an article and publishing it. In particular, one students noted that he/she liked media production because «it gave me a sense of

professionalism». Finally, one student stated that he/she enjoyed the activities «since they are the important things that we need to know».

However, some students faced difficulties or did not appreciate the manipulation of texts (i.e. the activity of rewriting an article) and the search for sources on the web. About rewriting, one student commented that the activity was too long, another that he/she did not like to modify the sources, while referring to searching sources online one students stated that it was too difficult. It must be noted that the activity of searching articles online was a bit frustrating since the Internet connection did not work that day and of course this influenced motivation and involvement.

#### *Learning outcomes*

Through the comparison of pre- and post-test it emerged as a first result the students realized that media are not neutral and re-present the reality according to specific point of views. In addition, almost all students provided more accurate and adequate definitions of stereotypes, not limiting to examples but showing a greater capacity to abstract from them.

Students widened their understanding of stereotypes including different types of stereotypes such as racism. Indeed, while at the beginning the idea of stereotype was mainly linked to the idea of feminine beauty, at the end they included other forms of discrimination that are implicit in other stereotypes.

More nuanced positions on the topic of reliability came out at the end of the testing. Students problematized the issue: reliability is not a feature that can be attributed to a media without considering other variables but it depends on different factors such as the sources. Moreover, they introduced further elements such as images to be considered in analysis of news media. However, the answers in the post-test, though more accurate and longer than those provided in the pre-test, were still relatively laconic. Therefore, if on one hand they show a general improved level of knowledge about how news media works and how they talk about diversity, on the other hand the level of critical analysis should be deepened.

#### *Students' productions*

Within the framework of Unit 8 the students produced five articles covering different forms of discrimination, ranging from racism to homophobia. An article entitled *Go back to your country! An Italian-American 11 years-old girl discriminated* dealt with the topic of discrimination in relation to the geographical origin and concerned the story of a student who was repeatedly teased for her origins until she was forced to change school. Another article titled *Viterbese* (the dialect spoken in Viterbo, ndr): *This is no Italian* told about the frustration of a girl from Viterbo who was criticized by her peers and about her «rage, hate and a sense of injustice» (excerpt from the student's article), linked – among other

things – to the fact that even the Florentine came from Latin, the language of the Romans.

After discrimination associated with geographical or linguistic origins, gender issues were faced in the article *Servant? No, thanks!*, where a girl denounced and criticized the «stereotype of servant woman» (excerpt from the student's article). This stereotype emerged from an act of discrimination (i. e., an invitation to participate in a party, but just to clean the rooms), perpetrated by her peers. The topic of gender discrimination was also the subject of the article *Homophobia at home* that accused the inability of the family to accept «a diversity in sexual sphere of their child» (excerpt from the student's article), telling the story of A. G., a 17 years-old girl from Florence, who discovered to be in love with a girl, but whose father did not want to accept this reality.

Finally, a last article titled *Bullying in schools* regarded the issue of disability: F. F. complained the offenses repeatedly received by a peer because of his stutter, categorizing them as an act of bullying. It is interesting to note that to the question «Have you ever talked about this with a teacher or any other person who can help you?» F. F. answered: «No, I never got to talk about it because they are events that occurred in the absence of teachers and also are issues that I do not like to talk about». Having discussed about it in the small group of peers and denounced the offenses through an article seem to indicate a rather important step forward.

## 6. Discussion

Overall, students showed improved knowledge - on a metalinguistic level - about media, particularly news media, and stereotypes, though at different levels. This emerged from the comparative analysis between pre- and post-test definitions of some key concepts (e.g. media representation, stereotype) and the descriptions of some media practices (e.g. journalism). For example, at the beginning some students were not able to provide any definition of 'stereotype', while other students showed a good level of understanding of it. Interestingly, at the end of the experimentation almost all students were able to answer all the questions and some of them provided more accurate responses as well as more diversified examples.

Through the use of active and participatory methods of teaching students developed a more critical stance toward media. At the same time, these methods proved to be a fundamental means to enable meaningful and more inclusive learning experiences. In particular, the analysis of visual materials proved to be really engaging and able to support the development of critical reading/viewing skills.

While the acquisition of a specific meta-language around media / discrimination and the development of a more critical stance toward media characterized, though to different degrees, the learning experiences of both groups, critical understanding about strategies of stereotyping and related forms of discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) did not emerge as a dominant trend. Indeed, we collected mixed evidence of the ability to critically interpret (media) discourses that are likely to reinforce different forms of prejudice. On the one hand, during the analytical activities students proved to be able to recognize stereotypes embedded in different media narratives quite easily and at the end some of them showed a better understanding of the links between media and discrimination. On the other hand, beyond this general recognition, a deeper understanding of 'othering discourses' was more difficult to achieve for some groups of participants. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that understanding of the links between othering media discourses and discrimination is a complex competence, which is more likely to be developed through a long term process rather than through a brief educational experience. Nevertheless, in many cases there were episodes of learning in which a more critical understanding of othering media discourses and discrimination was manifested by students, sometimes even beyond the expectations of their teachers. Generally speaking, these situations were mainly observed during group activities (including discussions), more specifically when students had the chance to address discrimination also on their own terms and in relation to their diverse life experiences and understandings about discrimination. In contrast, when the type of stereotype or discrimination was felt far from students' concerns, they were less engaged in critical reflection, often regardless of the learning methods adopted.

Media production oriented activities often turned into engaging learning situations. They contributed to develop a greater awareness of media language both in general and when used to discriminate the other. Students were motivated in making their voices heard and sharing their views, for example through short newspaper articles about episodes of sexism, racism and homophobia.

Students' products were clearly different in terms of aesthetic quality and content accuracy and this was linked to the very different levels of media-writing skills and awareness of discrimination. Indeed, in some cases the lack of writing skills and the students' detachment from the specific form of discrimination represented an obstacle to their full participation and to the creation of an effective media message. In this regard, it is worth noting that teachers' scaffolding during production activities often played a key role to enable and encourage a more equal participation.

Beyond these criticalities, generally students' media products and in some cases their critical reflections on them testified an increase of their media/participatory skills. Particularly significant were those episodes

where students addressed racial, ethnic, gender and homophobic discrimination or more generally power relations (e.g. between teachers and students) in their own specific contexts (family, school, group of peers). In these instances, media production proved to be an effective teaching strategy to support students' empowerment as active and critical citizens in contemporary democracies<sup>2</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper presented and discussed one media education interventions aimed to conjugate the knowledge of mechanisms of building stereotypes about the 'others' in news media with the development of students' awareness towards discrimination and their capacity to respect diversity. They were challenging aims which confronted, and even collided, with several and different critical issues (e.g., timing and equipment) which led teachers and researchers to modify, adapt and replan some activities. As often happens, the management of media education projects seriously stretches teachers' capacity of improvisation (i.e., his/her capacity to react creatively to unplanned events), since they are characterized by a complexity which ranges from the types of contents to the use of a variety of tools (Hobbs, 2013; Parola and Ranieri, 2010). Moreover, there is always the risk of contingency: since media education interventions are often carried out *una tantum* it is difficult to evaluate their effectiveness and sustainability (Ranieri, 2011).

Nevertheless, the interventions here presented proved to be particularly relevant from two point of views. On one hand, they favoured the development of inclusive dynamics within the class, whereby more marginal students took the floor to contribute to the activity or to denounce (verbal or psychological) episodes of violence coped with at school or outside. On the other hand, students gradually improved their capacity to think of themselves in relation to discrimination, expressing this new awareness through creative productions (e.g., the writing of a news article) and changing a situation of discrimination in an opportunity for empowerment.

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<sup>2</sup> Further analyses are available in Ranieri (2016), Ranieri & Fabbro (2015) and Ranieri & Fabbro (2016).

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