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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers quickly glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



Knock, Knock. Who's There?

Step One: What do you notice? (before the facts)

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the photograph offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at the picture to reinforce their interpretation of the picture's title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words outside of the image. You may hear: *painted doors, a brick wall, "we are ALL people too," a heart, a white patched crack in the building, a sidewalk, "BILL."*

Step Two: What are you wondering? (thinking about the facts)

After you've heard what your students are noticing, you'll probably hear the peppering of questions: *Why are the doors there? What's behind them? Is it an art project? Who is "we" in the sentence? How do the doors stay up?* This is a good time to reveal the photo's caption, accompanying quote, and facts about the actual situation. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption:

"Doors were donated to form a privacy wall for residents of the latest tent city for homeless people in downtown Portland, Ore. The homeless encampment, named by its residents "Right 2 Dream Too," is home to about 70 people." Photo by Orlin Bertsch

Photo facts:

This photo shows a wall of donated doors in front of a tent city where people experiencing homelessness can find a place to sleep. The encampment is next to a busy highway in Portland, Ore. Behind the doors are tents, tarps, camping stoves, and cardboard boxes.

The residents—who call themselves "Dreamers"—named this area, "Right 2 Dream Too" or "R2DT" after a local artist painted the words: "The right to rest. The right to sleep. The right to dream too." R2DT was established on World Homeless Day, October 10, 2011. 25,000 people have been helped through the support of R2DT. The group is working to have the campsite designated as a transitional housing accommodation under Oregon

law, as they have been fined repeatedly for violating recreational camping ordinances.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that in a study completed in January 2012, 633,782 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States.

People experience homelessness when they can't find housing that they can afford. People cannot afford housing for a variety of reasons, including physical and mental illness, job loss, and family conflict. When young people are sleeping outside, in tents and boxes, they often struggle in school, and suffer additionally from loss of restful sleep, malnourishment, poor medical care, and decreased self-esteem.

Step 3: What next?

1. Think about your home. What are you grateful for? What makes you feel safe and secure? If you don't have a comfortable home right now, what do you need? If you do have a comfortable home right now, how might you be able to help others who don't?
2. What are the laws regarding homelessness in your city or town? Is there an organization like Right 2 Survive in your area?
3. Sleep is an important thing for our minds and bodies. How do you feel when you don't get enough sleep? Is it harder to concentrate? Does it affect your mood?
4. Did you notice that the phrase 'people experiencing homelessness' was used instead of 'homeless' in the "Photo facts" description? 'People experiencing homelessness' is an empathetic phrase that puts people first, and emphasizes that they're going through a temporary situation. Are there labels that you've used to describe groups of people? Are they OK with that?