Using Visual Literacy to Help Adolescents Understand How Images Influence Their Lives

Debby M. Zambo

One day when Charlie (a pseudonym) was sitting in his wheelchair he heard several of his peers making mean comments about his looks. Incidents like this occurred often in Charlie’s life and he typically sat quietly and accepted them. Like many adolescents with physical disabilities, Charlie thought his peers were right. He believed that because he was in a wheelchair and did not look or behave a certain way he deserved to be rejected. Charlie, like the peers who taunted him, let media images of movie stars, models, and athletes determine standards of beauty and ability for him.

Scenes like this are enacted every day in schools across our country and abroad. Students with physical disabilities face challenges because of the way they look, communicate, or behave. What children see—the visual—is often central to what they think, and in today’s world the thinking of adolescents is being influenced by images more than ever before (Janks, 2000; New London Group, 2000). Both still and moving images are capturing the attention of adolescents and teaching them many things (Rose, 2007). Images teach adolescents about the world and how others experience life. But images can encourage harmful thoughts. Adolescents use images of movie stars, models, and athletes to determine standards of beauty for themselves and decide who will make a good friend (Safire, 2000).

This article provides a strategy educators can use to teach adolescents about visual literacy, or how to read images and think critically about what they see. This strategy is designed for students both without and with physical disabilities. Students without disabilities are targeted because they often use images to set standards of beauty for themselves and their peers, including those with disabilities. Students with physical disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy, seizures, muscular dystrophy, traumatic brain injury, ambulatory problems, etc.) are targeted because they, like Charlie in the opening scenario, often feel the injustice images promote.

Adolescents’ Thinking, Social Development, and Images

Adolescence, more than any other phase in development, is the time when individuals focus on looks and compare themselves to others. Nowhere is this more evident than in the friendships they form (Lynne, Graber, Nichols, Brooks-Gunn, & Botvin, 2007). Adolescents choose their friends based on a number of factors such as sociability, values, and interests; but just as often, they choose their friends based on their appearance or physical prowess. No matter how much educators and others would like to think otherwise, attractive and athletic adolescents are typically more popular with their peers (Abound & Mendelson, 1998). One reason posed for this is the images they see around them in their world (Safire, 2000). In today’s media-driven culture, images of movie stars, models, and athletes are all around.

The benefits of physical attractiveness carry over into students’ perceptions of personality. When adolescents see attractive individuals they tend to believe they have more positive traits like friendliness, competence, and intelligence (Lynne et al., 2007). The opposite is also true when adolescents look different, especially when they have a physical disability like Charlie. Peers come to believe they are less capable or less able to be a friend. This distorted way of thinking causes stu-
Instead of thinking critically about images and the social and cultural forces that surround them, adolescents are rejecting peers simply because they do not look like the movie stars or athletes images contain.

Mendelson, 1998; Hardman, Drew, & Eagan, 2006). It also causes students with physical disabilities to be excluded because their peers are being influenced by unrealistic views of beauty. Instead of thinking critically about images and the social and cultural forces that surround them, adolescents are rejecting peers simply because they do not look like the movie stars or athletes images contain. The words of Gina, a student with cerebral palsy, capture this idea.

Kids think that because I’m not glamorous or athletic, because my body does not move or balance like it should I am weird. But I’m not; I can learn, succeed, and really care about my friends. The popular kids just don’t ask me out no matter how nice I try to be.

Safire (2000) used the termed lookism to describe the behavior of those who become prejudiced against individuals who do not look or act in a certain way. A study conducted by Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, Berrymn, and Hollowood (1992) suggests that adolescents with disabilities experience peer rejection not because of their disability but because standards of beauty and normalcy are so high. From Gina’s quote it is evident that many adolescents who look or act differently are experiencing lookism. They are being left out of activities because of the way they look, and this eventually takes its toll. Rejection damages self-confidence, lowers self-esteem, and can even lead to mental health problems (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1998). Rejected adolescents isolate themselves from others or they engage in unsavory acts [Talbot, 2002]. Friendship and being accepted contributes to psychological well-being as Michael, a student with a spinal cord injury attests,

I don’t move like Trevor Ariza or Kobe Bryant but I can still play basketball. Kids just have to get to know me. They have to get past the typical image of male athletes and see me for who I am and what I can do.”

Students like Michael can build their esteem when teachers or other adults take action to help them and their peers think critically about what they see [Evans et al., 1992; Safire, 2000]. Although not all adolescents reject peers with physical disabilities—and no one strategy can provide all the answers for every child—from my experience working with adolescents I have come to realize how important it is to help them learn how to step inside images and understand how images affect their lives.

Visual Literacy: The Critical and Affective Reading of Images

Learning how to read images—that is, visual literacy—is as important as learning how to read texts. Some, like those at the New London Group (2000), believe individuals need to develop visual literacy. They need to know how to interrogate and critique an image’s purpose and emotional
effect. Yenawine (1997) clearly conveys this idea in the following quote.

Visual literacy is the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification—nam ing what one sees—to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphorical, and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. (p. 845)

Visual literacy can be used to promote critical thinking and Janks (2000) noted that deep and critical thinking is needed in adolescents’ lives. Too often adolescents focus on surface values and become convinced that what they see is real. Adolescents make quick judgments and say mean things without giving matters much thought. Therefore it is important to help adolescents discover their personal theories about individuals with differences. Adolescence is a good time to teach critical thinking, but research indicates it is rarely part of the curriculum in our schools or in therapy (Klaczynski & Narasimham, 1998).

Visual literacy has many layers and complexities but to best meet the needs of adolescents, its critical and affective aspects will be featured. The critical reading of images demands that the social and political ideologies surrounding them be made transparent, that the experience of those captured be exposed. The critical reading of images connects to social justice because it questions and challenges dominant points of view. When images are critically read, individuals and objects representing power are exposed and those who are oppressed find their voice. Issues of equality, acceptance, and justice are considered when adolescents consider how individuals are portrayed (Rose, 2007). The critical reading of images is an important skill to develop because without it adolescents without physical disabilities will not realize how images alter their perceptions and influence their choice of friends. The critical reading of images is also important for adolescents with physical disabilities because this type of literacy helps them understand why their peers judge them in cruel and unfair ways. Critical visual literacy can help students with physical disabilities, like Charlie, Gina, and Michael think critically about how they are positioned in society and how they consider themselves. This can lead to advocacy and speaking up for themselves.

But just as important as reading an image critically is coming to terms with one’s affect, or the emotions that one feels. Reading an image affectively and emotionally requires viewers to put themselves inside the scene and experience what those captured see, think, and feel. Affective reading of images asks adolescents to feel the emotions the image evokes and take an empathetic point of view. According to Callow (2008), the affective reading of images places adolescents in touch with their emotions and helps them understand the things that are important to them. If an image moves adolescents emotionally, then their thinking is likely to change and they are likely to take action and stand up for what is right (Beck, 2005; Rose, 2007).

Learning to read images both critically and affectively helps adolescents develop insight into important issues that affect their lives.

Steps to Teaching Visual Literacy

Visual literacy can easily fit into any curriculum or program because it promotes deep thinking and can be embedded in content areas (e.g., justice in social studies, critical analysis of literacy, or health in physical education). Visual literacy links to critical thinking and promotes research, reading, and writing skills. I have found the following six steps to be key.

Step 1: Decide on an Issue and Select Image

The first step is preparation. Decide on an issue you want the adolescents you are working with to think critically about, then select an interesting and developmentally appropriate image to use as a focus. I have found recurring issues in adolescents’ lives that are influenced by images and are often included somewhere in the curriculum. These include:

- **Lookism:** being excluded because one does not look like certain people or have an ideal body type (e.g., athletes, movie stars, or models).
- **Ability:** being ridiculed or excluded because one has a handicap or disability.
- **Ethnic or racial identity:** being excluded because of one’s race or culture.
- **Family:** being excluded because of one’s family’s structure.
- **Gender:** being harassed or put down because of preference or lifestyle
- **Socioeconomic status:** being rejected because one does not own objects of status (e.g., latest electronic gadgets; name-brand clothing or shoes).

This list is not exhaustive. As you work with adolescents it is likely you will find many more. It is also important to note that even though this article focuses on adolescents with physical disabilities, other adolescents with challenges (e.g., students with learning disabilities or behavioral and emotional struggles) often face the same or different issues. Therefore, it would be possible to select an image that portrays their issues and adapt the steps for them.

No matter who the students are, the image can be still (a photograph) or moving (a video). When I work with adolescents I like to use photographs because they are abundant and because their stillness captures individuals in a specific place and time. Students typically have many photographs they have taken and they often have access to photos in their favorite magazines. Teachers also have access to photographs from various Web sites such as Google images (http://images.google.com/) and AltaVista (http://www.altavista.com/). An example of an image that could be used to cover lookism with students with and without physical disabilities appears in Figure 1.
Learning to read images both critically and affectively helps adolescents develop insight into important issues that affect their lives.

Step 2: Have Students Carefully Look at the Image’s Details
After you have selected an image, ask the adolescents to examine it carefully. Allow 5 to 10 minutes of pure gaze time, or time to look carefully with no talking. Although I suggest this amount of time, I encourage you to modify it based on the images’ complexity and the attention spans of the adolescents with whom you are working. After an adequate amount of gaze time begin to discuss what was seen. Talk only about what is visible; discuss only the facts. Do not make any interpretations or critical or affective judgments at this point. Some questions for careful looking include the following:

- How many people are there?
- Who is there? (age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.)
- Where are they positioned?
- What do they look like?
- What era or time period is being displayed?
- What are they doing?
- What objects are there?

For example, a discussion of the image in Figure 1 might sound like this: “In this image I see one boy in a wheelchair. The boy is wearing a dark blue shirt and blue jeans. He is looking out the window. The walls are painted dark blue. This photo could have been taken today. His wheelchair and dress are modern.”

Step 3: Provide a Captivating Link to the Issue and Image
After adolescents have carefully examined the image and focused on its details, read a related text (poem, song, story, or fact) to get them thinking about the issue. An example of a poem I wrote that I used to spark interest in the photograph in Figure 1 follows.

Passing Time
Sitting, watching, waiting as time goes by
Just me looking for a friend as a soldier looks for his platoon
Assistance just out of reach, voices out of rhyme
Enemy fire into my heart as I am set aside one more time
Set aside, watching, waiting as if I were transparent, as if I were not there
When will this watch ever end?
When will my platoon come?
When will I get my time, my voice, my friends?

I used this poem, with the photograph, to elicit critical and emotional responses from the adolescents in my classroom. If poetry is not the style of the adolescents with whom you are working, then use a book like Some Kids Use Wheelchairs (Understanding Differences) by Lola M. Schaefer (2008). This book provides facts about children in wheelchairs along with insight into their lives. No matter what supplemental information is used,
make sure it connects to the image, is developmentally appropriate, and arouses curiosity.

**Step 4: Engage in an Open Discussion**

Initiate conversation with questions that promote critical thinking and lead to investigations. Images are rarely neutral or devoid of the social, cultural, or political contexts in which they are created and viewed (Rose, 2007). Step 4 is designed to encourage adolescents to make their social and political ideologies transparent, and make their implicit, taken-for-granted, thoughts known.

Unfortunately, making adolescents’ viewpoints transparent is not always a simple or straightforward process because of complex issues like those listed in Step 1 (lookism, ability, gender, etc.) often evoke emotional reactions instead of critical thought. Adolescents often form personal theories about important issues and it is not easy to help them move their thinking forward. However, it can be done if they step inside the image and participate in an open dialogue of what life is like for those captured. Preferably this discussion should occur in small groups and with questions that are not literal (one right answer). Personal opinions and experiences become the starting point to expose hidden biases and stereotypes that should lead the adolescents to understand the need to investigate different perspectives or find evidence for their viewpoints. An example of such direction is provided in the following discussion about the image in Figure 1. You will notice the voice of Charlie, from the opening scenario, in this dialogue.

**Teacher:** I want you to look carefully at the boy in the photograph. What do you think life is like for him?

**Chase:** His life is rough. He is just sitting in that chair. It’s like in the poem he can’t get out and go be with the other kids. I understand why though. No one likes to be with kids who are hampered by a chair. They are medically fragile and I don’t want to be around when they collapse or fall down.

**Charlie:** Your view is totally wrong, Chas. I’m in a wheelchair and as far as I know I’m pretty strong and healthy. I have a spinal cord injury from something dumb I did. Sure I have issues, but I try to stay healthy and strong so your opinion is just a stereotype. Unfortunately, most kids think like you. They have no idea what guys like me are like. So I really identify with that guy in the picture.

**Teacher:** How does being in a wheelchair go against ideals of strength or beauty that some individuals hold?

**Crystal:** Kids in wheelchairs sure don’t look like Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt or move like Kobe Bryant.

**Charlie:** People typically just don’t associate beauty or strength with a guy in a chair.

**Juan:** I have cerebral palsy and I can vouch for that. Kids reject me because of the way I look. My jerkiness and stiffness makes kids think I’m strange. I can relate to that guy in that wheelchair just sitting there looking out. No one cares because movie stars, athletes, and rock stars set the pace.

**Michael:** It’s all about image. You know the beautiful people—Paris Hilton wearing designer clothes.

**Teacher:** You’ve given us your views based on your experiences and they are interesting. But, besides personal experience do you have any evidence to back up your claims? What information can you provide to show your views are right, or best?

**Charlie:** I just have my experience. I know what it’s like for me.

**Teacher:** Where would you look to make your ideas stronger?

**Charlie:** What about organizations for kids in wheelchairs? Let’s look at their Web sites.

**Juan:** Or books. We can look at books like the one the teacher showed.

This vignette reveals the value of asking good questions to help adolescents expose their opinions and understand the need to back them with evidence. When adolescents talk about important issues and notice gaps in their thinking, they likely will want to investigate matters and learn more. The four adolescents in the previous scenario decided to investigate what life is like for individuals in a wheelchair, and their search took them to the Web site of the Muscular Dystrophy Association: Helping Jerry’s Kids (http://www.mda.org/publications/Quest/q83grow up.html) where they found an article written by Tara Wood titled Growing Up Healthy, Staying Healthy, and Taking Charge that helped them learn these facts: Young people with neuromuscular conditions, like any other member of society, have a right to

- Be informed about their medical condition.
- Manage their health care.
- Be independent—make their own decisions and be responsible for their lives.
- Make the most of their lives.
- Voice their thoughts and expect others to listen.
- Build relationships.

When adolescents investigate what life is like for individuals in images, their opinions become confirmed or they get challenged with facts and evidence. This moves thinking forward and broadens critical thinking skills. Adolescents without physical disabilities come to realize what life is like for their peers with disabilities just as students with physical disabilities come to understand why their peers judge them in cruel and unfair ways. Open dialogue and investigation help adolescents become less prejudiced against peers who do not act, think, or sound certain ways. Table 1 contains a list of questions that can be used as a starting point to elicit critical thinking along
Table 1. Questions to Elicit Critical Thinking and Standards to Measure Replies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Intellectual Standards to Assess Quality of Replies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>• Why was this image made?</td>
<td>• clarity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is in the image and what is life like for him/her?</td>
<td>• precision</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is omitted/blocked from view?</td>
<td>• accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What point of view is being privileged?</td>
<td>• relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What point of view is being dismissed?</td>
<td>• depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does this image privilege a certain look, gender, class, race, or culture?</td>
<td>• breadth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is life like for those captured?</td>
<td>• logic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is this a true picture of the way things/people really are?</td>
<td>• significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is this view distorted or are stereotypes/biases portrayed?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the image portray your view?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>• How do you know your views are right/best?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What if someone disagreed with your perspective what would you say?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What evidence could you provide to show your views were best?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What research would need to be conducted?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Is one viewpoint better than another, if so why?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do experts really know the answer to this question?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>• Do you identify with the individuals pictured here?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How does this individual’s life compare to yours?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you like/dislike about this image?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How does this image make you feel?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• If this image makes you unhappy what actions might you need to take?</td>
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with a set of Intellectual Standards that can be used to judge the quality of responses adolescents may provide. The Intellectual Standards are drawn from the work of Paul and Elder (2007) and include the ability to express one’s ideas with the following:

- Clarity—stating views in clear and concise words
- Precision—being exact and on target
- Accuracy—providing ideas that can be verified for accuracy
- Relevance—staying on the topic
- Depth—expressing the complexities of the issue
- Breadth—supplying a wide range of information on the issue
- Logic—showing reasonable thought
- Significance—stating the big/significant ideas.

**Step 5: Reflect**

Looking at images with a critical eye helps adolescents broaden their views but their experience with an image should not stop there. Adolescents should move to emotional reading to come to understand the emotions an image evokes. When adolescents look at an image and express how that image makes them feel, they come to understand what is deep inside them—the things that really matter and how they really feel. Step 5 should be performed privately and a personal journal should be used. Journal entries can be shared with the teacher or they can be marked for privacy. Educators can use shared journal entries to design and supply needed support. For example, adolescents who read anger into images may need anger management or social skills training, and students who are very reticent in expressing their emotions may need training in assertiveness. These needs can be included as part of an adolescent’s individualized education program.

**Step 6: Assess**

In today’s age of accountability it is important that teachers with adolescents make effective use of their instruction time. However, learning will shut down if hostilities are present or if students feel isolated and alone. When adolescents with disabilities feel excluded, they withdraw or become behavior problems. When adolescents without disabilities exclude peers, they miss opportunities to learn about how others think and feel. Therefore, it is important to document effective use of classroom time and ensure progress is being made. Keeping track of what adolescents can and cannot do helps teachers plan lessons, focus on important issues, and document advancement or needs. The assessment tool in Figure 2 can be used for this purpose. It contains each step of the process and places to document their use. This data can be used quantitatively or qualitatively.

It is important to assess students’ thinking and emotions each step of the way. However, it is also important to think beyond the present and consider transfer of these important skills. Learning to think critically about images will do little good if it is con-
**Figure 2. Assessment Tool for the Steps**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Issue being faced</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>looks</td>
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<td>ability</td>
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<td>ethnic/racial identity</td>
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<td>gender</td>
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<td></td>
<td>socioeconomic status</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
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After gaze time the adolescent is able to state the facts. He/she can tell:

<table>
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<th>Facts</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Number of people</td>
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<td>Who is there</td>
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<td>Where they are</td>
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<tr>
<td>The era/time period</td>
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<tr>
<td>What they look like</td>
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<td>What they are doing</td>
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<td>The objects there</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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**Supplemental link/text used:**

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<tr>
<th>Connections made</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<th>Difficulties</th>
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**Participation in discussion:**

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<tr>
<th>Opinions stated</th>
<th>Evidence for opinions</th>
<th>Ideas are (Check all that apply)</th>
<th>Opinions in need of evidence/investigation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>clear</td>
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**Critical thinking:**

**Ability to see and explain issues of power**

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- Explains why the image was made
- Who is in the image/what is life like for him/her
- Who is omitted/blocked from view
- The point of view being privileged
- The point of view being dismissed
- The looks, gender, ethnicity, etc. being privileged
- The truth of the image
- The distortions/stereotypes in the image

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**Ability to think critically**

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- Can express how/why their views are right/best
- Can provide evidence for their views
- See the need for investigation/research and can state what needs to be examined
- Can provide a counter argument to disagreements
- Recognizes better viewpoints and why they are better
- Considers expert opinions

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**Ability to express affect**

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- Identifies with individuals pictured
- Expresses likes/dislikes
- Expresses emotions
- Is able to express actions and advocate needs

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<th>Evidence of transfer to other situations:</th>
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fined to one particular classroom or one particular time. It is important to teach for transfer, or using what is learned in one situation to solve problems in another context. Erik De Corte (2003) noted that teachers encourage transfer in the following ways:

- Repeat opportunities and provide time to encourage thinking patterns to become automatic.
- Support constructive learning and allow adolescents to build their own ideas.
- Help adolescents see the value in this way of thinking; teachers should provide encouragements and support.
- Ask expanding questions, demand evidence for ideas, and help students learn where to access reputable ideas they can use for evidence.
- Encourage self-regulation; adolescents should gain gradual control for their actions and their thoughts.
- Create a classroom culture where all voices are heard.

It is important for students to transfer what they learn in school to their lives outside. Learning visual literacy in a classroom without transferring it outside of this context does little to help students succeed.

**Final Thoughts**

Adolescents today live in a visual world and form opinions about their peers based on what they see. Images carry power. They can distort thinking or they can be used to help adolescents learn what life is like for peers with disabilities. This article featured adolescents with physical disabilities but the steps could just as easily be used with students with other challenges. Looking carefully at images, engaging in dialogue, and thinking critically encourages adolescents with and without challenges to think about their position in the world and consider who and what they care about. It helps them consider issues of equity and inclusion and this, in turn, may lead to social justice like it did for Charlie and his peers.

Things have changed for Charlie because he and his classmates have learned visual literacy skills. Charlie and his classmates have looked at various images, stepped inside those scenes, and tried to understand what life was like for those portrayed. Opportunities to engage in open dialogue and encouragement to provide evidence for opinions have helped Charlie and his peers think critically about the images they see and consider how images influence the friendships they form. Thanks to careful planning and monitoring, Charlie’s teacher has been able to move the thinking of all students forward. Things are better for Charlie now and he has gained self-confidence to voice his views. But just as important is the fact that Charlie’s peers without physical disabilities have gained a more realistic perspective of Charlie and they now give him the respect he deserves. Thanks to critical visual literacy life is better for Charlie and it is better for his peers.

**References**


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