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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 take a quick 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).



EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

Trouble in the Fields

Step 1: What do you notice?

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the image offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at a photograph to reinforce its title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words.

In response to the question, “*What do you notice?*” you may hear: *silhouette, white puffy scarecrow, nighttime, field*

Step 2: What are you wondering?

After you’ve heard your students’ first observations, you may hear a peppering of questions: *What is that ball coming out of the right hand? What is the scarecrow stuffed with? What are the flickers of light in the background? Was this photo taken at Halloween?*

This is a good time to reveal the photo’s caption and other information about the photo. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption

“Santa Maria, CA. Strawberry field scarecrow. ‘When I first arrived, I had no shoes when I worked in the fields. I used to sleep by a tree because I didn’t have money for rent. I barely made money for food. But everybody goes through this, there is a lot of suffering and that’s it. Irene Lopez, 51, field worker.’”

Photo by Matt Black for his project, “The Geography of Poverty.” Photo courtesy of Matt Black’s Instagram.

Photo facts

- California harvests enough strawberries that, if laid berry by berry, would wrap around the earth 15 times. It provides America with 88 percent of the nation’s fresh and frozen strawberries.
- Strawberries are hand-picked and packaged directly into clamshell containers by fieldworkers before being shipped straight to the supermarket.
- Roughly 10,000 people work in Santa Maria’s surrounding strawberry fields, earning \$1.25 per box picked. The average

annual income for a farmworker is \$11,000, which is the second lowest paid job in the country (after domestic labor).

- Strawberry farms in California use 90 percent of the developed world’s methyl bromide, a pesticide that’s been linked to cancer, developmental problems, and the hole in the ozone layer.
- In 1975 under civil rights leader and activist Cesar Chavez, the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed, granting farmworkers in California the right to unionize. 92 percent of California farmworkers are Latino, and 77 percent of these farmworkers are not U.S. citizens. Today, only two percent of farmworkers nationwide unionize.

Step 3: What next?

1. Put yourself in Irene’s shoes—or her children’s. What would be the toughest thing about this kind of life for you?
2. After learning that strawberries—and most fruit and vegetables you eat—are picked by somebody exposed to pesticides and in poverty, does this impact your views (and actions) on what produce you buy? Where in your community can you buy produce that is “ethically” grown and affordable?
3. California provides most of the fruits and vegetables in the U.S. Its water drought has forced strict conservation measures for residents and businesses. Imagine a dry California and a sharp decline in crops. Where will Americans get their food? Will other states pick up the slack? Will you grow your own food?
4. The use of pesticide methyl bromide—dubbed the “phantom gas”—has two conflicting interests: economic survival of agribusiness and protection of human health. Big Ag warns that without pesticides like methyl bromide farmers will go out of business, farm workers will lose jobs, and cost of produce will go up at the grocery store. What are alternatives to using methyl bromide? Would you be willing to pay more for strawberries if the cost was passed to the consumer?
5. The majority of California’s farmworkers are undocumented immigrants. What is the difference between undocumented immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers? How are these groups of people viewed and treated differently?