

**Professional Development Article****Visual Literacy and Visual Learning:
Integrating Visual Imagery Into
the Early Childhood Classroom**

by Kimberly B. Moore, Ph.D.

Sixteen eager preschoolers and their teachers sit in a circle, talking about their favorite things to eat. “I like apples; yes! and I like oranges; but my favorite is bananas.” The conversation continues as Ms. Kickery asks the children about their favorite fruits or vegetables. “Mine is plantain,” says Jacob. “Yuck,” says Amanda, “that’s not even anything.” “Yes it is!!” Jacob exclaims, “it’s green and it’s good.” “I never saw one—show me,” says Amanda. Ms. Kickery wishes she had a picture to show the children and makes a mental note to find one to bring to their discussion tomorrow.

Ms. Kickery understands the importance of visual literacy and visual learning in early childhood. She knows that using a picture will inspire a whole new series of conversations, information sharing, and learning for the children in her class.

Visual literacy is the ability to discriminate and interpret visual actions, objects, symbols, and other images, while gaining meaning from them. The International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) defines it as “a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences.”¹ Visual learning is the process by which children become visually literate. Through the practice of visual encoding (expressing thoughts and ideas in visual form) and visual decoding (translating the content and meaning of visual imagery), children are developing a skill that is vital for their future life success.

Children use all their senses to learn. Through visual imagery, children identify numbers and letters, find meaning in concepts and ideas, develop critical-think-

ing skills, and so much more. Visual literacy is an important skill that can be used across the curriculum: When Ms. Kickery brings in the image of the plantain, she can engage children in discussions about its color (art), shape (math), how it is grown (science), where it is grown (geography), and the fact that its name begins with *P* (literacy).

Why Is Visual Learning Important?

Visual learning is a path to visual literacy. It balances the more passive process of decoding with the active process of encoding. In our increasingly visually driven society, the ability to create and interpret imagery is as imperative as the abilities to read and write and to listen and speak. In addition to print, television, movies, and signs, young children deal on a daily basis with computers, educational video games, and the Internet—all media requiring a high degree of visual literacy to cope with a sometimes-overwhelming amount of information.

Processing information visually is a critical part of learning and brain

**Visual Literacy
Skills Include:**

- * Likenesses/Differences
- * Patterning
- * Sequencing
- * Visual Memory and Discrimination
- * Word-to-Image Relationship
- * Interpreting Imagery
- * Critical Thinking

¹IVLA Web site, www.ivla.org.



development in early childhood. New technologies such as the Positron Emission Tomography (PET) Scan and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) verify that the brain develops new synapses and processes new information, or learning, in stages. A child first sees the concrete item—for example, a ball—and then hears someone say the word *ball*: “This is a ball, see the ball roll?” Language and vocabulary develop through repetition of this process. From these beginnings, children learn to recognize words and letters, skills that lead to reading and writing. Pictures and photographs are indispensable teaching tools for this type of learning.

Six Modes of Visual Learning

The Polaroid Education Program developed six modes of visual learning. Each is a strategy that helps develop different capabilities that directly relate to specific skills that young children will need as they become good readers and writers.

Exploring: Use pictures to investigate the details of dinosaurs, the leaves on a tree, or the lines in someone’s jacket. Are they the same or different? How? Longer or shorter? Fat or thin? As children learn to distinguish a T-Rex from a raptor or a maple from an oak leaf, they are prac-

ting skills that will help them discriminate between a *b* and a *p* and a *2* and a *5*.

Recording: Photographing a field trip is a great way for children to recreate the experience at a later time. Children can develop early literacy skills when they sequence the photos: “First we got on the bus to drive to the pumpkin patch. On the way, we passed this huge crane fixing a bridge. When we arrived at the farm, we looked through the patch to find our pumpkin.” When children arrange photographs in this way, they are actually “reading” a series of photographs to tell a story, developing left-to-right patterning, and practicing visual sequencing. The ability to put together a sequence of pictures to describe an event is the same skill needed to read a series of pictures to tell a story.

Expressing: Children express their feelings in many different ways. Use photographs to record those expressions and talk about them. Do you and your friend look the same when you are happy? Sad? Scared? Take pictures of children expressing different emotions or feelings. Asking children to “read” and talk about the nuances on each face helps develop expressive language skills. Looking for subtleties in a picture of a face will help when the child later tunes into such nuances of reading as punctuation and spacing.

Motivating: Every day in your classroom, you see some new achievement, by individuals as well as the entire group. Using photographs to document those moments, then posting the pictures on a special bulletin board, will help children see each other’s strengths and share them.

Photographing children with their favorite books will help them develop a positive disposition to read. Children tend to go back to things that they have written or that are about themselves. The visual image of themselves on the cover or as the author encourages them to read it over and over.

Communicating: Challenge children to

VISUAL LITERACY

VISUAL LEARNING

use photographs to create their own story or a mural that tells a story—even a shy child can communicate thoughts or ideas through a series of photographs. Ask the children viewing the series to guess what the child is trying to express—they will begin to learn that stories can be interpreted from different viewpoints, a great critical-thinking skill.

Imagining: There are many wonderful ways to use photographs to inspire imaginative thinking. Put up a series of pictures and ask children for ideas on what could be happening in the photos. Or invite children to create a “story in the round” by passing around a photo: One child starts a story about the photo and the others add to it. Make sure you record their story. Sometime later, you can read the story back and ask them to draw a picture based on what they have heard. You will be providing a

strong lesson in the connection between words and images: Part of visual literacy is understanding what is heard and translating it into what it looks like.

Visual learning promotes visual literacy by providing children with the opportunity to practice reading, selecting, and creating images of all kinds. Visual learning projects, games, and activities that are engaging, fun, and purposeful will support children in developing visual literacy skills early in their lives. The benefits will last a lifetime.

—*Kimberly B. Moore, Ph.D., is an author and consultant with more than 20 years of experience in the early childhood field.*

Using Photography in the Classroom... Here are some visual learning ideas for using photographs to develop children's visual literacy in a variety of curriculum areas:

✱ **ONE-TO-ONE CORRESPONDENCE AND VISUAL DISCRIMINATION** Label the shelves in the block area with pictures of individual blocks so children can match shapes with blocks.

✱ **VISUAL DISCRIMINATION** Enlarge a photo, laminate it, and cut it into pieces to create a puzzle.

✱ **PATTERNING, MATCHING, AND ONE-TO-ONE CORRESPONDENCE** Create a matching game: For younger children, use several sets with two photos of the same object. Older children can match photos of

different items with the first letter of the item's name or match a number to a photograph that shows that number of items.

✱ **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND MULTICULTURAL LEARNING** Encourage families to send in photos that depict traditions of their home cultures. You can post these photos in the art, writing, or dramatic-play areas.

✱ **VISUAL PERCEPTION AND DISCRIMINATION** Place photos of buildings in your town around the block

area so children can use familiar places as models.

✱ **IMAGINATION AND SELF-CONFIDENCE** In your dramatic-play area, post pictures of adults in their work to encourage children to think about themselves in these professions when they grow up.

✱ **COMMUNITY, COOPERATION, PATTERNING, AND SEQUENCING** Display pictures of children in your classroom washing hands, eating snack, cleaning up, sharing toys, and playing cooperatively.

