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Positive Futures Network
P.O. Box 10818
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-0818
206/842-0216
www.yesmagazine.org

FAX: 206/842-5208
subscriptions: 800/937-4451
email: yes@yesmagazine.org

Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

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).



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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: bread, toast, butter, holes, smile, face.

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 (Is that a smiley face in the bread? Did someone carve the smiley face in the bread or was it really just there? Why is this a big deal?) That's curiosity or wonder—the intermixing of observations and questions. 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:

Ruth Kaiser, founder of the Spontaneous Smiley Project, sees smiley faces in everyday life: macaroni salad, playground equipment, tree branches, and sourdough bread.

Photo by Ruth Kaiser.

Photo facts:

The Smiley Project has thousands of people worldwide photographing and posting the smiley faces they find in everyday objects. If the project had a single message, Kaiser says, it would be: "Pay attention, because all the time we're surrounded by stuff that's really great, and all kinds of reasons to be happy and thankful."

If it's happiness you're seeking, it's not the sunny Bahamas but Denmark where you'll find it. The University of Leicester study used 80,000 responses from people worldwide to create a world map of happiness. Denmark was number one, followed closely by Switzerland and Austria. The US was 23rd. Zimbabwe and Burundi were at the bottom.

Researchers continue to explore the effects of positive thinking and optimism on health. Health benefits include: increased life span, lower rates of depression, greater resistance to the common cold and reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease.

Each American consumes, on average, 53 pounds of bread per year.

Step Three: What next? (jumping off the facts)

Learning more about a photo leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.

1. What things (objects, people, places, experiences, etc.) in your life make you feel happy or totally alive?
2. How does going through struggle help us feel more happiness?
3. What is the difference between being happy and being content? Which would you rather be?
4. What percentage of your diet is grains (wheat, corn, rice, etc.)?

More resources around the image

See a smiley slide show and an article about the Spontaneous Smiley Project at www.yesmagazine.org/smiley-project

Check out the science of happiness at www.yesmagazine.org/happyscience

Find more articles on happiness and the good life at www.yesmagazine.org/happiness

Thank you to educator Barry Hoonan for contributing to and shaping this lesson.