



LESSON PLAN

Understanding Blindness



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

Broken Screen

BY GAIA SQUARCI



Understanding Blindness



Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

Society holds misconceptions about the visually impaired, yet the blind can communicate well and perform skills with independent mobility, becoming productive citizens.

Background

The term blindness can be defined across a wide spectrum. A person who is blind has severe visual impairment and may have difficulty performing ordinary tasks, regardless of the use of glasses and contact lenses. Blurred vision, blind spots, or tunnel vision could be some characteristics of vision impairment. Eye diseases, such as glaucoma—which causes optic nerve damage—can also cause vision loss. In 2012, the World Health Organization estimated that of the 285 million visually impaired people in the world, 39 million were officially blind. In the U.S., The National Federation for the Blind estimates that around 6.6 million Americans are currently living with a visual disability. The total number of legally blind students, ages 16 and up, enrolled in high schools in the U.S. is over 60,000.*

This photo essay depicts lives of the sightless, including both the blind and visually impaired, in New York City. Some of the people highlighted in the photo essay include a blind employment lawyer, a computer teacher, a karate teacher for the visually impaired, and a waiter at a restaurant in midtown Manhattan. Some of the individuals face employer inequalities as well as various discriminations based on social misconceptions of blindness.

The Lighthouse International School and The Whitney Museum, both based in New York City, are organizations featured in the photo essay. The Lighthouse International School is a leader in helping people with vision loss. They have developed an integrated pre-kindergarten school where visually impaired children can learn alongside their sighted peers as well as a renowned music school, which helps learners of all ages pursue their interests in music while overcoming the challenges of vision loss. The Whitney Museum hosts a monthly Verbal Description and Touch Tour where the blind can experience art using senses other than sight.

*[“Blindness Statistics.”](#) National Federation for the Blind, August 2014.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Art
- English Language Arts
- Philosophy
- Photography

COLLEGE

- Art
- Philosophy
- Photography
- Sociology

THEMES

- Valuing diversity
- Social misconceptions
- Adaptability and resilience

MATERIALS

- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Civ.7.9-12. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior on individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the photo essay by asking students if anyone knows a blind person. Explain that students will be looking at a photo essay that shows the lives of the sightless and the visually impaired in New York City. Ask students what it could be like to navigate the world with a disability, such as being blind, deaf, or a wheelchair user. What could be some qualities that a person with one of these disabilities could gain? What could be some qualities they could lose?

Introduce the following myths about blindness. Ask students if these statements are true or false:

- Blind people see only darkness.*
(False) Only 18 percent of people who are visually impaired are totally blind.
- People who are blind cannot read printed materials.*
(False) Technology has enabled various kinds of print to be more accessible. Screens and texts can become magnified and enlarged.



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- People who are blind have special gifts, or a “sixth sense.” *
(False) Blind people rely on their senses of touch, hearing, taste, or smell, which become sharper to compensate for their loss of vision.

[*American Foundation for the Blind.](#)

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to view the photo essay in pairs or groups of three. Invite them to look for specific details in the photos that reflect a blind person’s perspective. You may want to share with students that this photo essay is an invitation to experience how a blind person might perceive the world. Some characteristics in the photographs include examples of depth perception, the ability to see light and dark, and fragmented images. Describe that some of the blind individuals highlighted in the photo essay include:

- A karate teacher
- A waiter at a restaurant in midtown Manhattan
- An employment lawyer
- A computer teacher

For most individuals, sight is how they interpret the world. People who are blind and visually impaired experience the world in different ways, relying more on their other senses such as hearing, touch, or smell.

Delving Deeper

Lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Ask students what they noticed from the photo essay. What was their first impression of these photos? If there is a visually impaired student in the class, ask if he can share his experiences with the class.



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- Some of the blind people featured in the photo essay include a computer teacher, an employment lawyer, a karate teacher, and a waiter. What do you think could be some physical or emotional challenges these individuals face daily at their jobs?
- One photograph features a blind waiter serving food in a pitch-black dining room at a restaurant. What could this experience provide for those who are blind and for those who are not?
- “People were scared of me,” says a blind lawyer featured in the photo essay. “Many big companies refused me when their managers met me in person and realized that I was blind.” Why do you think big companies are afraid to hire a sightless person? Do you think this is fair? Why or why not? What do you think could be some of society’s misconceptions around blindness?
- What do you think the photographer wants us to know about people who are blind?
- If you could rename the title of this photo essay, what name would you give it?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story:

1. Photographer Gaia Squarci said, “There is an invisible wall between the sighted and visually impaired. One of the women I interviewed has been blind since she was 4 years old. She told me sighted people are almost scared to deal with the blind. Being blind is like speaking a language. If sighted people don’t find eye contact – which is the first hint of communication – they feel lost and they don’t engage.”* What do you think about this statement? Why might sunglasses, worn by a blind person, make a sighted person feel more comfortable?
(CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)



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2. The Verbal Description and Touch Tour of the 2012 Biennial at the Whitney museum, captured in the photo essay, as well as traffic lights provided with sound are ways society can enhance services for the blind. What could be some other innovative solutions to improve access to the world environment for the blind? (NGSS.HS-LS2-8)
3. What are some ways the photo essay exemplifies how the blind experience the world around them? If you were a museum director creating an exhibit for the blind and visually impaired, how could you utilize these observations of the blind? What elements would you include in the exhibit? Include specifics in your design. For example, would you include an audio tour? Would there be buttons or no buttons? Do you think the exhibit is a civic responsibility—a service for blind citizens? Why or why not? (C3.D2.Civ.7.9-12)

*David Gonzales, "[Guided by Blindness](#)." *New York Times: Lens Blog*, March 22, 2013.

Resources

Caroline Casey, "[Caroline Casey: Looking past limits](#)." TED Talk, December 2010.

Rosemary Mahoney, "[Why Do We Fear the Blind?](#)" *The New York Times*, January 4, 2014.

[Whitney Museum of American Art: Verbal Description and Touch Tours.](#)

[The Lighthouse International School.](#)