A Different Kind of Reading Instruction: Using Visualizing to Bridge Reading Comprehension and Critical Literacy

Given the current instructional and assessment climate, as well as the proliferation of packaged literacy curricula, many English, language arts, and literacy teachers are creating contexts for students to learn a range of reading comprehension strategies. The strategies are based on more than 25 years of reading comprehension research on the processes of proficient readers (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Duke & Pearson, 2008). They include making predictions, summarizing, asking questions, making connections (e.g., text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections), monitoring for meaning (i.e., rereading parts of the text that are unclear, using context clues), making inferences, determining importance, and visualizing (Brown, 2008; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Pressley et al., 1994; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999).

When I taught literacy at a comprehensive urban high school, I supported students in acquiring and internalizing reading strategies. Yet, even as I witnessed the ways in which students became more reflective readers and engaged in metacognitive conversations about how they were reading, I wondered whether mastery of reading strategies was becoming an end in itself, rather than the means to critical literacy.

I am aware that definitions of critical literacy, as well as approaches to teaching (for) critical literacy, vary. Critical literacy can refer to the capacity to “speak back” to written texts, considering questions such as who wrote the text, for whom, and in what context; whose interests might the text serve (Luke & Freebody, 1997); and whose experiences, meanings, and perspectives are privileged (Kamlar, 2001).

It can also mean the capacity to “read the world” (Freire, 1987) and question the basic assumptions of society (Christensen, 2000, 2009; Shannon, 1991). I posit that both understandings of critical literacy are important, for they suggest that reading can be made more meaningful, relevant, and powerful if individuals explore the word and the world (Freire, 1987).
Through critical literacy, people can generate deeper and different understandings of texts; question social and economic realities; and reimagine the status quo.

Now more than ever, adolescents need to become critical consumers and producers of texts and make informed life choices as they encounter and navigate an increasingly complex and ever-changing world (Luke, 1998; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). Therefore, rather than offer more reading strategy instruction, teachers must offer a different kind of instruction—that defines reading strategies as a set of resources for exploring both written texts and the texts of students’ lived realities.

However, relatively little has been documented on the ways in which reading strategies can become tools for critical literacy (for an exception, see McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), prompting the question: How can teachers bridge reading instruction and critical literacy education? In this article, I illustrate how a reading comprehension strategy can become a tool for critical literacy, focusing on the specific strategy of visualizing.

I was able to document adolescent readers’ visualizations while researching a voluntary, after-school book club for seventh- and eighth-grade girls attending an urban school. Though questions about how adolescent readers visualize texts and what happens when they share their visualizations were not the foci of my study, I noted how the girls, in sharing their visualizations, were really sharing how they “see” people and the world and why they see in the ways that they do.

I learned from adolescent readers how visualizing can be a tool for reading comprehension and critical literacy, and how reading strategies can serve larger purposes such as supporting students to understand themselves as readers and human beings (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2009).

The Book Clubs

To offer evidence of how visualizing can become a tool for critical literacy, I draw on and share data collected from a yearlong qualitative study of three after-school book clubs for early adolescent and adolescent girls. In the study, a middle school literacy teacher, 23 seventh- and eighth-grade girls, and I participated in a voluntary, after-school book club.

All 23 girls attended a K–8 public school in a large Northeastern city. The school is 48% black, 29% white, 13% Asian, and 9% Latino. Approximately 50% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Of the 14 seventh graders, there were seven white, five black, one Asian, and one self-identified biracial student. Of the 9 eighth graders, there were two white, four black, one Asian, and two self-identified biracial students.

Based on the girls’ grade-level and after-school schedules (e.g., yearbook meetings, babysitting responsibilities), they were placed into one of three book clubs (see the Table). Five girls (2 seventh graders and 3 eighth graders) left the book club after four months. All student names are pseudonyms.

Throughout the course of one academic year, each book club met once every two weeks to discuss a student-nominated and selected text (e.g., novels, short stories, song lyrics). The meetings took place inside the school building, and lasted approximately an hour. The girls’ literacy teacher (Ms. Heather) and I participated in the book clubs.

Though Ms. Heather and I facilitated the conversations, asking the girls, “What do you mean by that?” or “Do people have any thoughts or comments about the book,” we did not establish an agenda for the book clubs. We did not prepare discussion questions, encouraging the girls to bring their questions and interests to the group. Describing the structure of the book club, a seventh grader commented, “We get to decide on the questions and we get to answer the question instead of the adult supervising asking us questions or telling us the answer.”

It is important to note that the girls already knew and applied a range of reading strategies, weaving visualizations, predictions, text-connections, inferences, and questions into the fabric of the book club conversations. In an interview, Veronica, an eighth grader, said,

Anyone can write a summary. But, are you inferring, are you synthesizing, and are you visualizing the characters in your mind, are you questioning the characters and are you questioning the author, are you making connections, like text to text, text to self, text to society, text to nature—all those connections.
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Veronica and other students knew that they were expected to make inferences, synthesize, question the character and author, make text connections, and visualize the characters. The fact that many of the book club participants were considered proficient readers might raise questions for teachers of struggling readers. That is, they might wonder whether and how struggling readers can use reading strategies as a critical literacy tool.

All too often, critical literacy education is reserved for “advanced” students (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). However, I agree with Comber (2003) and others (see Edelsky, 1999; Luke, 1998) who argued that critical literacy should be an integral part of literacy education for all learners, regardless of ability and age.

Even struggling readers bring questions, knowledge, insights, and perspectives to literacy events (Christensen, 2009), and are capable of social critique (Fine & Weis, 1998; Weis, 2000). Moreover, Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) suggested that students will be more motivated to acquire literacy skills and strategies if they are encouraged to treat texts as representations of the world, meant to be explored, challenged and even rewritten.

Theoretical Frameworks

In my study, I conceptualized reading as a social and critical practice (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Reading is not a set of free-floating skills, independent of social contexts and devoid of ideologies. It is embedded in communities, ways of life, and human relationships (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Street, 1995). As such, reading can be seen as a socially situated activity pursued within a context for a specific purpose (Gee, 2000).

People, even those deemed low-literate, are recognized as having experiences that involve consuming and producing texts and making meaning. I also see reading as a critical practice. That is, reading is not simply a matter of being able to produce interpretations that are textually grounded. Rather,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Texts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Book club #1</td>
<td>Casey, Debbie, Lauren, Jessica, Rebecca</td>
<td><em>Flowers for Algernon</em> (Keyes, 1968)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday seventh grade</td>
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<td><em>A Basket of Flowers</em> (von Schmid, 1755)</td>
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<td><em>Little Prince</em> (Saint-Exupéry, 1943)</td>
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<td><em>The Soloist</em> (Lopez, 2008)</td>
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<td><em>Schooled</em> (Korman, 2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book club #2</td>
<td>Carol, Elizabeth, Inez, Mary, Sid, Stella, Sue, Veronica, Yolanda</td>
<td><em>Alanna: Song of the Lioness</em> (Pierce, 1997)</td>
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<td>Thursday eighth grade</td>
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<td><em>Bones</em> (Burke, 1999)</td>
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<td><em>The Host</em> (Meyer, 2008)</td>
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<td><em>The Soloist</em> (Lopez, 2008)</td>
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<td><em>We All Fall Down</em> (Cormier, 1991)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book club #3</td>
<td>Amy, Caitlin, Clarissa, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Molly, Stephanie</td>
<td><em>Secret Life of Bees</em> (Kidd, 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday seventh grade</td>
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<td><em>Mick Harte Was Here</em> (Park, 1995)</td>
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<td><em>Speak</em> (Anderson, 1999)</td>
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<td><em>The Soloist</em> (Lopez, 2008)</td>
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<td><em>Dateable</em> (Lokadoo &amp; DiMarco, 2003)</td>
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reading should prompt people to question their taken-for-granted worldviews (Edelsky, 1999; Shor, 1999), and lead to different and deeper understanding of themselves, each other, and their realities (Horton & Freire, 1990).

However, reading does not always prompt people to take up new and alternative perspectives. It is often difficult for the solitary, individual reader to interrogate her own interpretive frameworks and try on new ways of reading (Martin, 2001).

If such is the case, how can students develop deeper and different understandings of the word and world? One response is that there must be dialogue during and after the act of reading (Freire, 1970). Freire claimed that critical education is possible through dialogue: "Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 81).

Hence, I also drew on social constructivist perspectives in my study. Social constructivism (Au, 1998; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1985) acknowledges that learning occurs in and through social interactions, and that dialogue is a problem-solving and meaning-making activity (Miller, 2003; Wells, 2001).

Through dialogue, students are prompted to reflect on and reconsider their beliefs (Horowitz, 1994), and to articulate more clearly or defend a position (Bruffee, 1993). And it is through dialogue that students’ readings are more likely to get challenged, reconsidered, and deepened (Blau, 2003; Hynds & Appleman, 1997). Therefore, I conceptualized the book club as a site for adolescents—through dialogue—to practice reading as social and critical.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

As a researcher and facilitator of the book clubs, I entered the site as a participant observer, negotiating the way I positioned myself vis-à-vis Ms. Heather and the girls. I drew on ethnographic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) and case study (Merriam, 1998) methods. I recorded fieldnotes of the book clubs, and I audiorecorded the meetings.

Although each session was audiorecorded and transcribed, I documented the book club participants’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as expressions, body movements, postures, and eye contact. I also used a diagram to mark the girls’ seating arrangement, noting where and with whom girls chose to sit.

I conducted weekly observations of the girls in their literacy classes. The classroom observations focused on the girls’ literacy practices, such as their use of texts (i.e., what kind of texts are used and how), and on the ways in which the girls positioned themselves and were positioned as literacy learners.

I also conducted three rounds of semistructured interviews with the girls. The interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes and occurred after school. The first round of interviews focused on the girls’ in- and out-of-school literacy practices, expectations for the book club, and reasons for deciding to participate. The second and third round of interviews focused on the girls’ experiences of the book club. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. Lastly, I collected documents and artifacts, particularly student-generated work.

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive. I did a focused reading of the data, identifying ways that data could be chunked and coded. Then I inductively generated descriptive codes to capture the range and variation of what emerged from each primary data source (e.g., book club transcripts, interviews, fieldnotes of literacy class).

For the purposes of this paper, I primarily draw on my analysis of the book club transcripts. From the book club transcripts, I coded the girls’ comments about the text (e.g., evaluation of texts, identification of symbols, visualization of characters and scenes, summaries, predictions, theme of the book, text-text connections, text-self connections, critiques of the text). I then grouped the codes into the category of “text-based comments.”

I also analyzed the girls’ interactions with each other, developing codes for how the girls responded to and engaged each other (e.g., apologizing, agreeing, supporting, disagreeing, challenging, asking each other questions, asking for clarification, inviting others to join the discussion, teasing each other, ignoring other members’ comments). I was interested in learning the ways in which girls engaged with texts and with each other in the after-school book club.
In rereading the book club transcripts, I noticed how responses to texts (i.e., “text-based comments”) also revealed the readers’ identities, feelings, or theories about the way the world is and should be. That is, reflected in the girls’ readings of and comments about texts were their emotions, subjectivities, and worldviews.

Thus, I paid particular attention to whether a text-based comment could also be coded as subjective claim (i.e., fears, desires, and feelings invoked by a text), a normative–evaluative claim (i.e., statements about the way the world should be), or an identity claim (i.e., readers’ social, cultural, and historical locations; Carspecken, 1996).

For example, the eighth-grade book club read *We All Fall Down* (Cormier, 1991) and discussed the race of Buddy and Jane. The comment, “I know a lot of white boys like that. I kind of see him like my cousin” was coded as “visualizing character.” The comment was simultaneously coded as an identity claim because the speaker implies that she is white.

Veronica, an eighth grader, visualized the different characters of *Twilight*, specifically Jacob (a werewolf): “He has abs and muscles. And his chest is open a lot. Every time I read about him, I am like, ‘Oh my god!’” This statement was simultaneously coded as a “visualizing character” and identity claim because Veronica was putting forth her identity as a heterosexual girl. It was also coded as a subjective claim because she was conveying excitement, curiosity, and desire invoked by the character of Jacob.

Data were triangulated using multiple sources of data, including interviews, transcribed book club conversations, and classroom observation data. Different data sources revealed that many of the girls relied on and valued the strategy of visualizing. For instance, during an interview Lauren, a seventh grader, commented “I will read to see how it [book] is in my head. How it looks in my head.”

According to classroom observation data, Ms. Heather asked seventh and eighth graders, on different occasions, to question the author, identify marginalized characters, and visualize the protagonist and antagonist. Data triangulation also involved examining data from each book club separately, and then across the three book clubs, thereby determining whether my findings (i.e., visualizations reveal the students’ subjectivities or worldviews and can prompt meaningful discussions on race and gender) resonated across the different book clubs. I also asked participants for clarification whenever necessary.

I asked each girl to articulate what she hoped to communicate to adults who might read the study, positioning the adolescents as collaborators rather than “objects” to be studied. An eighth grader shared, “I would say like, we have minds of our own. We know what we’re talking about. Some of us know what we’re talking about. Like, we really understand. We’re not naïve.” A seventh grader offered a similar comment: “Although we’re all technically kind of young, we know a lot about what’s going on; what adults are thinking, what’s happening in the world.”

Visualizing—from text-connections and evaluations—was the third most common type of text-based comment. From my analysis of the girls’ visualizations, insights emerged about not only how visualizations can lead to rich conversations among students, but also how visualizations are informed by and reveal the readers’ identities and worldviews. In the next section, I share and discuss these insights.

“I Kept for Some Reason Imagining Her as White”

Wilhelm (1997) called visualizing “seeing the story world”—readers create mental images and envision settings and situations. Visualizations have also been called “movies of the mind” (Elbow, 1995). Examining book club transcripts, I learned that talk about race often occurred after the girls visualized book characters.

Wanting to “see” the characters, the seventh and eighth graders offered details on characters’ hair and eye color, height, weight, levels of attractiveness, and even skin color. For example, members of the Thursday seventh-grade book club were visualizing the protagonists of *The Secret Life of Bees* (Kidd, 2002):
14-year-old Lily, the black housekeeper Rosaleen, and the three sisters of the Pink House.

Amy: I imagine all the sisters as chubby except for June. I don't know why.

Clarissa: August, on the chubby side. June, slightly. And then May, like skinny.

Amy: Really?

Clarissa: Yeah, I don't know why.

Stephanie: I imagined May skinny. I imagined August, not thin, but not chubby either. You know?

Helen: Rosaleen is big, like really big, like really kind of scary.

Karen: What's really weird is that in the beginning of the book when Rosaleen was living with Lily and T-Ray, I kept for some reason imagining her as white when I remember that she was specifically black. But when they move in with August, May and June, I keep remembering that Lily is specifically white, not black. I have a hard time imagining separate skin colors with people who are living together.

Amy: I felt kind of bad for Lily, because even though skin color is not an important thing, she probably still thought about it a lot because it was a big issue back then. She probably felt out of place a lot of times, and I would have too.

Clarissa: Yeah, it's like in that period, it's like skin color was a big thing. But if it was like now, it would be fine. Like, it would be like, "Oh, so what?"

Amy: I mean now it wouldn't be a big deal because of skin color. Not all black people are like this, but like some people, some African American people, they have a different way of living. They talk different, they put their hair different. I would also feel out of place that way.

Helen: Are you done?

Amy: Yeah.

Helen: OK, I was just going to say, I find it disturbing that racism is still really apparent. People are all like, it's better, but...The other day, my brother was on the trolley, and this group of kids were making fun of him because he's biracial. Oh you don't even know what you are [...] It's really weird. My brother was like, I've never been that angry before at people.

Neither Ms. Heather nor I asked the girls to discuss race as it related to the novel or to the girls' lives. In other words, the girls both initiated and sustained the conversation. Amy and Karen, both white girls, tried to picture not only Lily, but also themselves living among black women.

Thus, there are two layers of visualizing. The first involves envisioning a literary character, and the second involves envisioning the self. Imagining herself living among African Americans, Amy confessed, “I would also feel out of place that way.” The girls' comments reflect the contradictory belief that skin color both matters and does not matter.

Amy claimed that skin color is not important; yet, she is aware that race can make a person feel like an outsider, and she acknowledged that race influences the ways that a person might relate to a group of people. Admitting, “I have a hard time imagining separate skin colors with people who are living together,” Karen also acknowledged that race can be used to classify and separate groups of people.

Clarissa, Amy, and Karen also presented a narrative of racial progress, namely that race is not as salient an issue today as it was during the 1960s. Helen, however, offered an oppositional story (Goodson, 1995), disputing the narrative of progress and offering a different perspective.

Goodson categorizes stories as either stories of domination or opposition: Oppositional stories represent the experiences of traditionally silenced groups or individuals, and give voice to the less powerful. Acknowledging that racism still exists,
Helen challenged the dominant view of color blindness. Drawing on personal experience, or rather, the experience of a family member, she argued that racism still exists and that race matters.

The conversation also revealed the girls questioning each other (e.g., Amy asking Clarissa, “Really?”), expressing agreement and disagreement, and evaluating peers’ ideas. Concerned that she might be interrupting, Helen asked “Are you done?” During book club, Stephanie would often ask, “Am I talking too much?” or “Did you still have something to say?”

During an interview, Clarissa described the book club members’ interactions, “Like when we share our ideas, we don’t call it, ‘She took my idea’ or ‘She took their idea.’” Clarissa understood discussion as a moment of sharing: In claiming, “We don’t call it, ‘She took my idea,’” she suggests that the girls saw the ideas and interpretations they generated as communal knowledge.

The seventh- and eighth-grade girls acknowledged and saw people as raced. Adolescents exist within and navigate a racialized society. To put simply, race is lived and experienced. However, discussions of race and racism are often marginalized and muted (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Documenting a racially diverse middle school, Jervis (1996) discovered that students’ questions about race were often unaddressed. Educators (e.g., hooks, 2003) have commented on the consequences of addressing issues of race and racism: chaos, confusion, guilt and resistance.

How can teachers of adolescents begin generative classroom conversations on race and racism? McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) recommended that teachers ask “challenging the text” questions, such as “What ethnic group or race is most common? What race is not present?” (p. 64).

From the girls’ book club conversations, I learned that inviting students to visualize literary characters is another way to initiate conversations on race. Teachers and students can do more than determine the racial identity of characters, however. Drawing on students’ visualizations, teachers can also support students to realize that they “see” texts from a perspective shaped by their own social and cultural identities (Blau, 2003).

**Where Do Visualizations Come From?**

It is not insignificant that Helen is biracial. According to Blau (2003), all readers are situated—that is, they “occupy social roles and identities in a particular moment and setting” (p. 139).

The book club discussions revealed that each of the girls’ lived realities and identities—as biracial, black, or white—shaped how they experienced and understood the text. In other words, the girls’ visualizations can be attributed to their particular social roles and identities. The transcript below is part of an eighth-grade book club meeting on Robert Cormier’s young adult novel, *We All Fall Down*. Veronica tried to visualize Buddy and Jane, the book’s protagonists.

Veronica: I want to get the appearances down. I can’t imagine both of them. Is Jane tall, middle, shortish?

Researcher: I don’t know. What do you guys think?

Inez: She’s like average height, brown hair.

Sue: That’s not how I pictured her.

Veronica: Yeah. In the book, it seems like, it seems like he’s [Buddy] really shabby. And like shaggy. Wine, no, not wine. But beer breath.

Inez: Yeah. In the book, it seems like, it seems like he’s [Buddy] really shabby. And like shaggy. Wine, no, not wine. But beer breath.

Mary: I picture him in brown hair.

Veronica: Are they, they’re both white.

Sue: It makes sense for Buddy in this thing to be white. The boys, cause you can just see them. White boys, a lot of times, they try to find different ways to rebel, especially when they come from good homes. They try to find a way to rebel, and it ends up becoming a problem. And it kind of sounds like, these boys here, it sounds like they [interrupted]

Inez: But is that like a stereotype?
Sue: No, I know a lot of white boys that are like that. I kind of see him like my cousin.

Mary: Sometimes you can tell if people, in a book, when they explain how they act, you can tell.

Each of the 4 eighth graders, Veronica, Inez, Sue, and Mary, offered visualizations of either Jane or Buddy, commenting on hair color, height, and even the way Buddy might smell of alcohol. Initially Veronica seemed to be asking whether Jane and Buddy are both white. The question (“Are they”), however, became a statement: “They’re both white.”

The girls’ visualizations revealed the different lenses that they used to read the race of literacy characters. Sue was seeing Buddy through a particular lens—a lens that she developed as a result of knowing “a lot of white boys.” The fact that she, a white adolescent girl, knew many rebellious white boys shaped the way she visualized Buddy.

According to Sue, it made sense that Buddy was white. She added, “I kind of see him like my cousin.” Inez, however, challenged Sue, wondering whether Sue was stereotyping white adolescent males.

The girls’ conversation revealed instances of agreeing and disagreeing (e.g., “That’s not how I pictured her”), asking questions (e.g., “But is that like a stereotype?”), responding and justifying (“No, I know a lot of white boys that are like that”). It also surfaced how girls viewed and understood people, both literary and real. Mary shared that she relied on descriptions of characters’ behaviors to infer the race, whereas Sue used the characters’ speech.

Martin (2001) argued that readers must work together to interrogate the very interpretive lenses that give meaning to the word and world. Lenses can illuminate, clarify, and magnify. They can also distort, exclude, and confirm stereotypes, however.

Inez questioned the lens that Sue was using, specifically wondering whether the lens was based on stereotypes. The eighth graders were doing more than trying to determine the race of literary characters. They were exploring and grappling with how they come to know people.

“Here’s How I Pictured Her, Like a Regular 13-Year-Old Girl”

The adolescent girls also envisioned the characters’ dress, body weight, and level of attractiveness, especially if the characters were female. Lalik and Oliver (2007) argued that body image and perceptions of beauty have real consequences for girls’ physical health and socioemotional wellbeing.

Reading and responding to The Host (Meyer, 2008), Veronica visualized Melanie, the female protagonist: “She’s like 20-something, but she’s still young. She’s really pretty. From the book, she’s really pretty.” In another example, the seventh graders were reading Speak (Anderson, 1999). Stephanie visualized the way Melinda, the female protagonist, might have dressed to the party.

Stephanie: Here’s how I pictured her. If she’s like a regular 13-year-old girl, she was probably wearing either like jeans and a maybe a little bit of a revealing t-shirt. Or like a short skirt and you know, a regular t-shirt, not even that tight. I mean, maybe she got dressed up. But, probably she didn’t.

Stephanie pictured Melinda as a “regular” 13-year-old girl. She envisioned Melinda wearing an outfit of either jeans with a “little bit of a revealing t-shirt” or a short skirt and regular shirt. According to Stephanie, Melinda was not dressed provocatively. She was a “regular” rather than a promiscuous or “bad” teenager.

Visualizing Melinda as a regular adolescent girl, Stephanie positioned Melinda as the good girl, undeserving of violence. Caitlin argued that girls should be able to dress anyway they want. She stated, “All the pressure is put on girls. I hate that. We have to worry about everything.”

Eve and Helen, however, believed that girls should dress modestly, and if a girl were to dress provocatively, she was partly responsible for the rape.

Eve: Like if you dress like that on purpose, then it’s your fault.

Clarissa: Then you had it coming
Eve: But in Melinda’s position, she wasn’t like that.

The conversation among Stephanie, Caitlin, Eve, and Helen surfaced the girls’ complicated perspectives on the issue of violence against women and questions of responsibility. The girls blamed men for inflicting violence against women, yet they also believed that women should not wear revealing clothes, thereby provoking men.

I was puzzled and troubled by their insistence that Melinda was at fault for drinking alcohol and flirting. Stephanie argued, “You guys have to remember, she flirted back.” I could not predict the girls’ responses to the text or know with certainty whether they would produce critical readings, reminding me that critical literacy is messy, complex, and full of contradictions.

Mellor and Patterson (2001) recognized the possibility that students, once encouraged to produce multiple readings of texts, are likely to put forth normative readings (e.g., a sexist or racist readings of a text). The girls questioned, yet also seemed to affirm the dominant ideology that rape victims are at fault for wearing tight clothes, drinking alcohol, or “flirting back.”

The seventh graders believed that girls should be assertive, yet also modest. Amy and others knew that they were worthy, valuable, and full of potential, rejecting the belief that girls should work for boys’ affirmation. Yet they also admitted enjoying the attention of boys. Amy acknowledged, “It feels good when he tells me I am pretty.”

Though the seventh graders did not interrogate the structural and ideological forces that shape girls’ realities, they still did important and meaningful work. Visualizing the way female characters might have looked, dressed, and behaved, the girls explored the different options and possibilities for existing as an adolescent girl, grappled with the pressure to dress and look a certain way, and acknowledged the double standard that exists for boys and girls.

**Closing Considerations: Pedagogical Implications**

As the data illustrate, visualizing can support students to become more wide awake (Greene, 1978) about people, both literary and real. It can also become a springboard for discussions on literary characters’ social and cultural identities (e.g., black woman, “regular” 13-year-old), and for inquiry into readers’ theories on race, gender, and human behavior.

Visualizing, I suggest, can lead to learning—learning defined as the process of grappling with difficult issues; making connections between and among multiple texts; and cultivating a heightened awareness of the way we see the word and world.

If perceptive and interested enough, English and literacy teachers will see students’ visualizations as a valuable resource, full of pedagogical potential. Depending on the class and students, teachers will want to introduce and use visualizing in different ways.

Some teachers might want to be more explicit, asking students to imagine the race or gender of the characters, reflect on the interpretive lenses and assumptions that students bring to the text, and explore the reasons that an author might (or might not) emphasize the characters’ racial or gender identity. Others might simply invite students to visualize characters and then facilitate the conversations that follow.

Individual teachers will make moment-by-moment decisions on ways to invite and build on students’ visualizations. However, in this section, I want to offer a few suggestions on how English and literacy teachers can both elicit and build on students’ visualizations and use visualizations to bridge reading strategy instruction and critical literacy.

First, teachers should ask students to visualize parts of the text (e.g., characters, settings, events) that interest, engage, and challenge adolescent readers. In other words, it matters what students are asked to visualize. The book club participants visualized characters’ skin color, and if the characters were female, imagined the way they might be dressed, suggesting that issues of race and gender were important to these adolescent girls of diverse racial backgrounds.
Duckworth (2006) wrote that tools develop once students have “something real to think about; and if they don’t have anything real to think about, they won’t be applying the tools anyway” (p. 13). Teachers must be mindful of what they invite students to visualize, and whether their invitations will prompt students to think about and discuss real issues.

Second, teachers should create more opportunities for students to discuss visualizations among peers, whether through book clubs, literature circles, or reading groups. During the eighth-grade book club meeting, Sue visualized Buddy to be white, sharing the thought process by which she made sense of Buddy’s racial identity. This prompted Inez to question the way that Sue was visualizing Buddy.

Adolescents need the support of other readers who will listen and ask how they see the text and why they see it that way. In and through dialogue, students’ visualizations are more likely to get interrogated, reconsidered, and deepened.

Third, literacy teachers can use visual images more often and strategically to bridge reading comprehension and critical literacy. Hull (2003) argued, “Many educators feel ambivalence about a reliance on the image as a core part of communication. This is despite the fact that visualization plays a crucial role in reading and writing alphabetic texts” (p. 231).

For example, as a way to discuss Anderson’s Speak and to surface issues around responsibility for sexual violence, teachers can invite students to read an image that depicts an adolescent girl and boy drinking at a party. Students can construct written narratives to explain who is in the image, what might be going on, and whether it matters that the girl is drinking or wearing revealing clothes.

Last, though I make the case for visualizing as a powerful tool for critical literacy, other reading strategies such as making text connections, predicting, summarizing, or making inferences are useful and effective tools as well.

For example, teachers can support students to unpack their predictions or inferences, guiding students to the realization that no reading is ever neutral. Students realize that they, as readers, bring to texts a wealth of experiences, worldviews, interests and desires, interpretive frameworks, and knowledge of narrative structures.

Teachers can also ask students to summarize texts, identifying and then separating the important and unimportant details. During the process, students can become more aware of their own priorities as a reader and the priorities of the author. These are just two of many possibilities for bridging comprehension instruction and critical literacy education.

The poet Audre Lorde (1984) once wrote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112). A reading strategy does not need to be an uncritical tool. A tool is uncritical only to the extent that students are drilled to practice its use, and positioned as passive users rather than thoughtful, agentive and creative ones.

Teachers can and must support students to acquire a range of literacy tools. More important, they must create conditions for students to explore the possibilities and limitations of each tool and use the tools to question the word and their worlds.

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**More to Explore**

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