

# Behind the Lens: Sourcing Historical Photos with KidCitizen

Bretton A. Varga, Ilene R. Berson, Michael J. Berson, and Bert Snow

In a third grade classroom, the teacher prepares to read a story with her students. She begins introducing the title of the story and then discusses the name of the author and perhaps the illustrator. When introducing a new text, this classroom practice explicitly models the skills of proficient readers who recognize that the author is a person who communicates values, beliefs, and attitudes in his or her work. Skilled readers reflect on an author's purpose for writing and try to understand why authors have characters act the way they do. This process of identifying authorship, purpose, and perspective aligns with the practices we integrate into shared reading, and these literacy strategies need to be activated when exploring informational text as well. Nonfiction texts and images offer an especially powerful resource to ignite in learners a passion for critical thinking and inspire an interest in questioning, inferring, and actively seeking out information about the author's message.

Discerning the intent of the author of a historical document is critical as we seek to interpret it. Disciplinary literacy uses specialized skills that seek to maximize student engagement and achievement within specified subject areas.<sup>1</sup> In social studies, one of these critical skills is "sourcing." Sourcing involves exploring who produced a document to better understand that person's motivations for choosing an event to focus on and how to represent it.<sup>2</sup> Sourcing also considers the intended audience. Historians establish the circumstances of a source's origins before moving on to subsequent questions in their historical inquiry.

Although young learners have frequently engaged in reading activities that begin with the introduction of the author, the rationale for considering the role of the author may not be explicitly discussed. "Understanding the historical context of a primary source is critical for understanding the attitudes and influences that shaped the creation of the primary source. If not placed into historical context, a primary source's true meaning might be misinterpreted."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, models of instruction may have primarily focused on sourcing of text without exploring other historical resources, such as photographs. Sourcing is a cornerstone of historical thinking, but teachers may benefit

from resources that scaffold this foundational skill in the historical inquiry process. KidCitizen is a free set of digital interactivities that introduces a unique and exciting way for elementary age students to engage with history through primary source inquiry.<sup>4</sup> It is a part of the Congress, Civic Participation, and Primary Sources Project, supported by a grant from the Library of Congress. The design of each research-based activity fosters young learners' skills in historical thinking and disciplinary literacy. The KidCitizen episode "Snap a Photo: Agent of Change" offers students in grades three through five a compelling introduction to sourcing historical photos. A variety of embedded activities throughout the episode identify aspects of a primary source that reveal a photographer's point of view, or purpose in taking the image.

## Who Created this Primary Source?

Primary sources are filled with clues that may reveal information about life long ago. However, many students ignore source information and need guiding questions to help them recognize a photo as a resource with a creator who had a purpose.

In each KidCitizen episode, an "anchor photograph" from the Library of Congress is presented to engage students and inspire them to investigate further. The episode "Snap A Photo: Agent of Change" introduces students to some of Lewis Hine's photos capturing child-working conditions during the Industrial Revolution in the United States. Children analyze the primary sources and piece together evidence to determine how Lewis Hine exposed child labor through his photos and advocated for change.

Ella, the spirited character (screenshot, p. 29) who accompanies students through the online inquiry, poses the essential question, "How did photographers help convince Congress to pass child labor laws?"

A photo of Lewis Hine himself taking a photograph of a group of children opens the "Snap a Photo" episode. This digital, interactive lesson begins to scaffold student learning by asking them to carefully observe the image to locate the camera Hine is using, and then "click on the camera to continue."



In doing so, young learners start to engage in the inquiry process through the incremental construction of conceptual knowledge. In our contemporary context, children associate photos with digital cameras and smartphones, so the initial task of “finding the camera” focuses children’s attention on the piece of equipment, now an historical artifact (a camera that uses film), that reveals distinctions between past and present.

Students then engage in an activity focused on spotting clues about the presence of the photographer himself or herself in an image. For example, a photographer’s reflection may be captured in a window, or part of his or her shadow may appear along an edge of the image.<sup>5</sup> Detecting these clues requires careful observation skills. Students locate the shadow of a photographer who will later be identified as Lewis Hine as he works on the streets of Indianapolis. Hine’s shadow offers perspective on the subject of his photography, contrasting in size with the small stature of the child laborer who posed for him.

### **Why was the Photo Taken?**

While students might detect traces of a photographer captured in the image, the photographer’s intended message and audience (who he hopes would view the photo) may not be obvious. Our guide Ella introduces an activity that engages learners in considering many different reasons why people take photos. Ella prompts students to use visual cues to make inferences as they match a snapshot with the photographer’s purpose for documenting a familiar event (i.e., birthday, first day of school,

family photo, etc.). Interaction with this collection of primary sources activates children’s background knowledge about photography. Furthermore, this activity provokes student thinking about other possibilities as to why a photo might be taken.

Once students have defined what a camera is and considered reasons why people take photos, the episode returns to the anchor photo of Hine and the children. After announcing “Let’s meet Lewis Hine!”, Ella prompts student interaction with the photograph, revealing background information about the photographer. Throughout this interaction, students learn that Lewis Hine was a teacher in New York, traveled around the country, and took more than 5,000 photos. His reasons for capturing the photos were not to present an objective portrayal of children’s lives, but rather to create compelling documents of the victimization of child workers throughout the nation.

As students consider why Hine chose his subjects, they discover that he documented what life was like for children who were required to work instead of going to school. However, not all the questions Ella proposes have direct answers or responses in the episode. Throughout their inquiry, students can apply this newly acquired information to make inferences. For example, despite learning about Hine’s intentions for taking pictures of child laborers, children are left to wonder why he opted to engage in this work (i.e., he was a teacher who cared about the wellbeing of kids). Moreover, students may reflect on how Hine’s credentials situated him as a credible source for information on the lives of children.

By sourcing the primary author in the episode, students can then begin to purposely make connections between the subjects and the content of Hine’s photos. In another activity in the episode, a photo is displayed with a stack of possible captions off to the right. The subject of each photo is a child laborer. Students are asked to match the caption that best describes what is happening in the photo. Each picture takes place in a different setting, unique to specific geographical locations Lewis Hine photographed.

This digital learning experience began with the activation of prior knowledge of cameras, or for some students, construction of new knowledge. Once this connection was established, the episode transitioned to learning about the creator of the anchor photograph. These two disciplinary skills presented students with tools that could be used to construct a series of historical inferences, all directed back towards answering the essential learning question of the “Snap a Photo” episode: “How did photographers help convince Congress to pass child labor laws?”

### What is the Photographer’s Point of View?

Students initially may view a primary source and interpret it at face value, but they must look beyond the intended meaning to consider the bias or point of view of the creator of the resource. Students must apply careful observation skills to source and contextualize primary sources within an historical timeframe.<sup>6</sup> The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) hired photographers to capture sympathetic depictions of child labor, images that were intended to generate reform. One of the tools employed in these investigations was the creation of images and essays to illustrate for the public the challenge confronted by child workers. Lewis Hine, who had previously photographed immigrants on Ellis Island and children in New York City, played an important role in the NCLC’s effort. Hine spent several years traveling around the country, photographing children working in mines and factories such as cotton mills and canneries.<sup>7</sup>

In our contemporary context with streamlined digital cameras, it is easy for children to not realize how challenging it would be for Hine to capture candid scenes with his bulky equipment.<sup>8</sup> To gain access into workplaces, he often disguised himself as a salesman or industrial machinery photographer, since owners did not want the working conditions in their establishments exposed to the public. Whenever possible, he recorded children’s names and ages as well as other details for the captions of his photos to ensure the authenticity of his images when he shared them with public officials.

When he could not gain access, Hine took photos of the children as they entered or departed a factory after a long workday. These images vividly illustrated the physical and mental toll the work had on the children.<sup>9</sup> His photo of a ten-year-old girl inside a mill in New England became emblematic of the injustice and exploitation of child labor.<sup>10</sup> Hine displayed his

images in exhibitions, magazine articles, lectures and pamphlets to convince people of the injustice of child labor. The NCLC used his images to great effect, generating public support for legislative reforms.

Building students’ knowledge of the historical context of Hine’s work provides critical information for students to analyze why he created these primary sources and the attitudes and influences that shaped his approach. Hine selected evidence from his rich treasure trove of photos and often used captions with persuasive text to make the best case for convincing the public and then pressuring Congress to pass child labor laws.

Leading up to one of the final activities in the episode, Ella introduces a document that Lewis Hine created. Hine paired his photos with excerpts from recorded conversations with his subjects to create photographic essays. This assemblage of photos and written descriptions made the issue of child labor more compelling. In the episode, Ella notes the importance of the captions to enhance Hine’s pictures. She explains that his writings “helped raise awareness” and “encourage increased laws and enforcement of labor practices.” This information helps prepare students for the culminating exercise in the episode.

In this task, students are asked to match sections from one of Hine’s reports to a photo he took of child laborers. While brief, the portions of text are complex. To successfully make the correct match, students need to use the multi-modal literacies the digital interactive has scaffolded throughout the episode. By interacting with Hine’s words and images, children must consider what descriptive captions provide the best evidence to convince readers and make the most compelling case against child labor.

### Classroom Extensions

The episode “Snap A Photo: Agent of Change,” which is designed for students in third to fifth grade, addresses multiple dimensions of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*.<sup>11</sup> Several curricular strands from the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies are also integrated into the learning experience as students develop their multi-modal literacy skills and critical thinking.<sup>12</sup> As Dimension Two of the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc (“Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence”) reminds us, by the end of fifth grade students are expected to “use the information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.”<sup>13</sup> Through a scaffolded learning experience, the episode provides students with applied practice in analyzing primary sources and sourcing the information as part of historical inquiry, which reflects a social studies curriculum theme **● TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**. Teachers may build upon the disciplinary skills introduced in the episode by having students participate in collaborative learning experiences to explore and conduct source work with other historical evidence.<sup>14</sup> In small groups

the class may analyze different photos depicting the hardships encountered by child laborers and reflect on why Lewis Hine felt it was important to capture such images. As students explore the episode and learn about sourcing, they also apply skills to “infer the intended audience and purpose of a historical source from information within the source itself” (D2. His.11.3-5).<sup>15</sup> A teacher may prompt students to consider this question: What story is Lewis Hine trying to tell in the picture? As with any inquiry, student responses often will provoke new questions that may lead to further investigation of the resource. For example, as students explore Hine’s photos, a teacher may share more about Hine and his work, introducing concepts of social justice as the class considers how Lewis Hine used photos in a way that advocated for (social) change ● **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**. Teachers may also engage students in conversations about race and gender roles in the images ● **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY** and how, as young citizens, they may become involved with advocating for causes in which they are interested or passionate ● **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**.

After allowing time for small group discussion, teachers may formatively assess learning by asking each group to write a caption for their photo. Invite each group to share their captions and talking points with the entire class. During this whole group instruction, brainstorm and list commonalities in the images as well as differences. Students may consider whether all the images are trying to convey the same message. The teacher may then pose the question: “What emotions are present in the faces of the subjects?” Use the responses to assist in generating an overall theme for all four photos. A sample theme could include: “Hine’s pictures show children managing to survive despite the daunting conditions surrounding them.” Finally, facilitate a group conversation that ranks the images according to how well they support the intended purpose of persuading Congress to pass child labor laws.

As a summative assessment, students may construct a poster by selecting an image that provides the most compelling evidence to support Hine’s message and draft accompanying text intended to persuade others against child labor. Students may subsequently identify their own questions for further investigation and develop strategies for how they might answer them. These ongoing inquiries may engage the class in corroborating sources, identifying other resources that either support or challenge the claims made by Hine.

Moreover, the Teacher’s Guide that accompanies the KidCitizen episode “Snap a Photo” lists additional digital resources (**Sidebar**, p. 32) that may be used for extension activities. This collection includes photos of several oversized exhibition panels that were placed in public spaces during the early 1900s. These photos can inspire student conversations about how Hine’s images were employed to sway public opinion. Ask students to consider the time-period, and then chart their reactions towards a panel. Have them consider the effectiveness of these panels and where they might have been placed to elicit reactions from people (e.g., conferences, exposi-

tions; universities; the halls of government; places of worship; street corners near the offices of the factory owners).

## Conclusion

Primary sources may offer raw glimpses into the past, but without understanding why the document was created and why the creator chose to portray events in a specific way, children will be unable to properly situate the document in an historical context and access the complete story the resource is trying to tell. Every time a child encounters an historical photo, he or she has an opportunity to imagine engaging in a conversation with the photographer. Wondering about the creator’s purpose makes the conversation that much richer. Once students learn that historical photos contain clues, they may begin to slow down their process of looking. Subsequently, they may draw on these clues to discern a photographer’s perspective and possible bias. Through careful analysis, students may uncover how sources are used as evidence that supports a particular perspective. They can consider the reliability of the source within the historical context. Most notably, children may focus their eye to reflect on what a photographer selected as worthy of documentation to best support his or her intended message. They can consider whether there is a gap between the information captured and other interpretations or representations. By scaffolding students’ sourcing skills, KidCitizen offers children powerful experiences to develop as critical thinkers, historical inquirers, and engaged learners. ●

## Notes

1. Ilene R. Berson, Michael J. Berson, Danielle V. Dennis, and Rebecca Powell, “Leveraging Literacy: Research on Critical Reading in the Social Studies,” in *Handbook of Social Studies Research*, Meghan M. Manfra and Cheryl M. Bolick, eds. (Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 414.
2. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001), chapter 3.
3. Stephen Wesson, “Selecting Primary Sources, Part II: Considering Historical Context,” (Library of Congress, 2011), [blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2011/07/selecting-primary-sources-part-ii-considering-historical-context/?locl=blogtea](https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2011/07/selecting-primary-sources-part-ii-considering-historical-context/?locl=blogtea).
4. KidCitizen app and teacher training resources, [www.kidcitizen.net](http://www.kidcitizen.net).
5. Library of Congress Flickr photostream “Photographer in the Picture,” [www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/sets/72157626966535635](https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/sets/72157626966535635).
6. For more details on instructional strategies using sourcing and contextualizing, see Avishag Reisman and Sam Wineburg, “Teaching the Skill of Contextualizing in History,” *The Social Studies* 99, no. 5 (2008): 202–207; Rebecca Newland, “Primary Sources and Research Part II: Sourcing and Contextualizing to Strengthen Analysis,” (Library of Congress, 2014), [blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/03/primary-sources-and-research-part-ii-sourcing-and-contextualizing-to-strengthen-analysis](https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/03/primary-sources-and-research-part-ii-sourcing-and-contextualizing-to-strengthen-analysis).
7. Russell Freedman, *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* (New York: Clarion Books, 1998); Chaim M. Rosenberg, *Child Labor in America: A History* (London: McFarland, 2013); “National Child Labor Committee (NCLC)” (Social Welfare History Project, 2011), [socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfare/child-labor/national-child-labor-committee](http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfare/child-labor/national-child-labor-committee).
8. James Curtis, “Making Sense of Documentary Photography,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* (June 2003), [historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos).
9. “Lewis Hine 1874–1940” (International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum), [iphf.org/inductees/lewis-hine](http://iphf.org/inductees/lewis-hine).
10. Hine photographed the young girl, Addie Card, who worked in Bennington, Vermont, during the summer of 1910. See [www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004001719/pp](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004001719/pp).
11. *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and*



*History* (Silver Spring, MD: 2013), [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3).

12. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
13. K. Swan et al., Video presentation (12 minutes) about “The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History,” *Curriculum and Instruction Reports* no. 1 (2013), [UKnowledge.uky.edu/educ\\_reports/1](http://UKnowledge.uky.edu/educ_reports/1).
14. David Hicks, Aaron Johnson, Melissa Lisanti, Stephanie van Hover, Kelly McPherson, and Sharon Zukerwar, “Junior Detectives: Teaching with Primary Sources as a Bridge to Disciplinary Literacy,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 1 (2016): 9–15; Kate Sampsell-Willmann, “Student-Centered Reading of Lewis Hine’s Photographs,” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 3 (2014): 387–419; Stephen Wesson and Cheryl Lederle, “Helping Students Visualize the Process of Change with Historic Images,” *Social Education* 77, no. 6 (2013): 292–297.
15. C3 Framework, p. 48.

**BRETTON A. VARGA** is a social studies teacher at Booker High School in Sarasota, Florida and a doctoral student at the University of South Florida. [brettonvarga@mail.usf.edu](mailto:brettonvarga@mail.usf.edu)

**ILENE R. BERSON** is a Professor of Early Childhood in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. [iberson@usf.edu](mailto:iberson@usf.edu)

**MICHAEL J. BERSON** is a Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida and a Senior Fellow in The Florida Joint Center for Citizenship. [berson@usf.edu](mailto:berson@usf.edu)

**BERT SNOW** is a consultant, creating game-based learning experiences in education and business. [bertsnowandco.com](http://bertsnowandco.com); [snow.bert@gmail.com](mailto:snow.bert@gmail.com)

## Resources for Teachers

Selected from [www.kidcitizen.net/teachers-guide-snap-a-photo](http://www.kidcitizen.net/teachers-guide-snap-a-photo)

### Lesson Plans

About Life: The Photographs of Dorothea Lange Curriculum  
[www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom\\_resources/curricula/dorothea\\_lange/lange\\_lesson\\_plan\\_index\\_01.html](http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/dorothea_lange/lange_lesson_plan_index_01.html)

Child Labor in America from the Library of Congress  
[www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/child-labor/procedure.html](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/child-labor/procedure.html)

Childhood Lost: Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution  
Resource Booklet  
[www.eiu.edu/eiutps/Childhood%20Lost%20Resource%20Booklet.pdf](http://www.eiu.edu/eiutps/Childhood%20Lost%20Resource%20Booklet.pdf)

Childhood Lost: Child Labor in the United States, 1830-1930  
from Teaching with Primary Sources –MTSU  
[library.mtsu.edu/tps/lessonplans&ideas/Lesson\\_Plan—Child\\_Labor\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States.pdf](http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/lessonplans&ideas/Lesson_Plan—Child_Labor_in_the_United_States.pdf)

Giving Voice to Child Laborers Through Monologues from NCTE  
[readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/giving-voice-child-laborers-289.html?tab=4#tabs](http://readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/giving-voice-child-laborers-289.html?tab=4#tabs)

Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee Teacher’s Guide  
[www.leeandlow.com/uploads/loaded\\_document/437/JamesVanDerZee\\_Teachers\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.leeandlow.com/uploads/loaded_document/437/JamesVanDerZee_Teachers_Guide.pdf)

Work, Lyddie! Work!  
[score.rims.k12.ca.us/activity/lyddie/](http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/activity/lyddie/)

### Trade Books

Burgan, M. *Breaker Boys: How a Photograph Helped End Child Labor*. Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2011.

Freedman, R. *Kids at work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor*. New York: Clarion Books, 1994.

Loney, A. *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* New York: Lee & Low Books, 2017.

Otfinoski, S. *The Child Labor Reform Movement: An Interactive History Adventure*. New York: Capstone Press, 2013.

Rosenstock, B. *Dorothea’s Eyes: Dorothea Lange Photographs the Truth*. Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2016.

Weatherford, C. B. *Dorothea Lange: The Photographer who Found the Faces of the Depression*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman, 2017.

Weatherford, C. B. *Gordon Parks: How the Photographer Captured Black and White America*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman, 2015.

### Resources Based on Library of Congress Images

Child Labor and Lewis Hine (Flickr Album)  
[www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/albums/72157631320489950](http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/albums/72157631320489950)

Childhood Lost: Teaching with Primary Sources.  
[www.eiu.edu/eiutps/childhood\\_set.php](http://www.eiu.edu/eiutps/childhood_set.php)