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ABSTRACT

In "Kids at Work," Russell Freedman explores the world of child labor during the years 1908-1918 when Lewis Hine, "teacher-crusader," worked as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). Hine's writing and the photos he gathered from across the country revealed a "shocking reality that most Americans had never seen before." Russell Freedman's intertwining of three distinct sources of information--facts, photographs, and the focused experience of a single individual--provides readers with the basis for compassionate imagining, a blending of both knowing and caring about the past. Freedman uses storytelling techniques such as vivid, detailed scenes; characters developed through the use of small but "telling" details; and personal anecdotes. Readers cannot fail to be moved by the numerous photographs taken by Lewis Hine. Using "direct eye" contact with the observer, Hine showed viewers the conditions under which children worked in mills, canneries, mines, farms, and factories. "Kids at Work" focuses on children's quality of life as a result of industrialization in the United States. Freedman helps bridge compassionate imagining with contemporary concern--child labor has not vanished from America. It exists today in children of recent immigrants and migrant farm workers. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Telling Lewis Hine's Story: Russell Freedman's *Kids at Work*

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Telling Lewis Hine's Story: Russell Freedman's *Kids at Work*

In the years before World War I, this country witnessed and tolerated a condition referred to as “industrial slavery” (Wormser, 1996). Two million children under the age of sixteen worked in factories, mills, mines, and canneries—some as young as four years old. They worked for twelve hours or more, for outrageously low wages, doing work that was dangerous, dreary, and dull. Unlike the apprenticeship work of previous generations, this work did not prepare them for a better, more prosperous life; instead, it prepared them for more of the same. As industries expanded, factory owners needed an ever larger supply of cheap labor. They rationalized that by employing children they were providing them with safe, purposeful work. After all, in some cases, weren't they working right alongside their parents?

The true stories of child labor at the turn of the century, while quite vivid and disturbing, are remote from the everyday experiences of most of the children we teach. They don't work in mines, factories or canneries; they don't work twelve to sixteen hour days; and they don't work at dangerous, jobs under hazardous conditions. The challenge, then, for authors like Russell Freedman, is to help children connect with this experience. As they learn about the lives of children who lived almost one hundred years ago, they broaden their concept of childhood—what it has been and what it is, and what it could be.

In *Kids at Work*, Russell Freedman explores the world of child labor during the years 1908-1918 when Lewis Hine worked as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). Hine's writing and the photos he gathered from across the country revealed a “shocking reality that most Americans had never seen before” (Freedman, 1994a, 5). It is Russell Freedman's skillful intertwining of three distinct sources of information—facts, photographs, and the focused experience of a single individual (in this case the social reformer Lewis Hine)—that provides readers with the basis for *compassionate imagining*, a blending of both knowing and caring about the past. A closer look at these sources will show that they are not only additive, but that they contribute to the cumulative impact of the book.

The Sources of Compassionate Imagining in *Kids at Work*

Facts

Developing compassionate imagining requires access to the facts. What happened? To whom? When? Why? How? Until recently, reading for the facts, or taking the efferent stance, has been regarded as passive and detached. The process of accumulating information has been associated with memorization and regurgitation of information. It has been termed uninspiring and coldly cognitive.

This is no longer the case. We are beginning to understand that information-seeking can be a truly motivational experience that not only satisfies our curiosity but also leads to greater personal understanding. Exploring factual material enables readers to “find themselves” in the content rather than “lose themselves” in the story (Alexander, 1997). Historical narratives, in particular, provide the background for situating ourselves in the flow of history. They satisfy children’s “need to know” (Levstik, 1986) about truly dramatic and complex events that still reverberate with our experiences today.

A new perspective on reading—one that moves beyond the dichotomy of either efferent or aesthetic reading, or even a combination of both—means that we also need to encourage responses to social issues emerging from the world beyond the individual (Allen, 1997; Creighton, 1997; Yenika-Agbaw, 1997; Zarnowski, 1995). To develop such a critical perspective, readers need the facts.

Russell Freedman understands that information can be motivating. He assumes a storyteller’s stance in order to write about history in a compelling way (Freedman, 1992, 1993, 1994a). According to Freedman, “I think of myself first of all as a storyteller, and I do my best to give dramatic shape to my subject, whatever it may be” (1994a, 138). From this stance comes his use of storytelling techniques, namely the use of vivid, detailed scenes; characters developed through the use of small but “telling” details; and use of personal anecdotes. Each of these techniques are used in *Kids at Work* (1994b).

First, there are the *vivid, detailed scenes*. The book opens with the following description:

Manuel is five years old but big for his age. When the whistle blows at 3 o’clock in the morning, he pulls on his clothes and hurries to the shrimp and oyster

cannery where he spends the day peeling the shells of iced shrimp. He has been working as a shrimp-picker since he was four. (p. 1)

Other descriptions include scenes inside a cotton mill:

The machinery made such a racket, workers had to shout to be heard above the din. And because heat and moisture helped keep the cotton threads from breaking, the mill windows were always kept closed. The hot, steamy air was filled with dust and lint that covered the workers' clothes and made it hard to breathe. (p. 35)

A glass factory is described as follows:

The temperature of molten glass is 3,133 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature in the glass factories ranged between 100 and 130 degrees. Fumes and dust hung in the air. Broken glass littered the floors. It wasn't surprising that cuts and burns were the most common injuries. (p. 54).

It is descriptions like these that help the reader envision the setting.

A second storytelling technique consists of revealing facts about characters through the use of *"telling" details*. We learn details about Lewis Hine who disguised his identity, "posing as a fire inspector, or an insurance salesman, or an industrial photographer who was after pictures of buildings and factory machinery" (p. 26). He "often resorted to tricks in order to get the pictures he wanted.... Hine knew the height of each button on his vest from the floor, so he could measure a child standing alongside him with no one being the wiser" (p. 29). These small but significant bits of information help us understand that for Hine gathering data was his most important concern, and that the ends—even when they included trickery—justified the means.

We learn that Hine related well to his young subjects, communicating a caring attitude. Freedman tells us that when asked why all his children appeared to be so beautiful, Hine replied, "I only photograph beautiful children" (p. 86). He seemed to have a reassuring manner that convinced children that he was on their side.

Finally, we learn that in his later years, Hine modestly recommended a much younger colleague and friend who was seeking employment as "a new and better Hine" (p. 86). He did this even though he was in desperate need of work. Through detailed glimpses such as this, full of "telling" details, readers develop insight into Louis Hine's character.

A third storytelling technique consists of facts revealed through the use of *anecdote*. To show us the uncaring attitude of mill operators, Freedman tells us about an incident reported by Hine. “‘We don’t have any accidents in this mill,’ the overseer told [Hine]. ‘Once in a while a finger is mashed or a foot, but it don’t amount to anything’” (p. 35).

To show the terrible conditions in the glass houses, Freedman reports that workers refused to allow their children to work there. One worker told Hine, “I would rather send my boys straight to hell than send them by way of the glass house” (p. 57). Such anecdotes—short yet powerful—bring the facts of child labor to life.

Photographs

Readers of *Kids at Work* cannot fail to be moved by the numerous photographs taken by Lewis Hine. What is it about them that still remains so moving after all these years? Among the reasons critics offer for their powerful impact is Hine’s use of the *direct eye*. Not only are most of the children shown in a straight forward, frontal position, often softened by light shining down upon them, they also make eye contact with the observer. Using this direct eye, Hine showed viewers the conditions under which children worked in mills, canneries, mines, farms, and factories. He showed how “people who walked to work at six in the evening when all families were supposed to be sitting down to dinner. It was the eye that told people what went on inside the areas of life they never experienced. But never softly. Never meekly” (Gutman, 1974, 46). As critics have pointed out, Hine showed middle class viewers that despite the brutal conditions and terrible settings, “the children of the poor were not unlike their own” (Curtis & Mallach, 1984, 25). Looking at these pictures this still seems true today.

In addition, these photos also show us the conflict between the aesthetic and historic. The purity of the child, classically posed, contrasts with the unsuitable surroundings. The nobility of the human will clashes with the factory and the gate. Hine was completely aware of this. He purposefully joined his social convictions about the evils of child labor with his photographic purposes. “Photographically he learned that the image which packed the most powerful social punch was that with the strongest aesthetic

impact, because this was the image that most effectively made the public a witness to the scenes of degradation that filled his angry vision these years” (Rosenblum, Rosenblum, & Trachtenberg, 1977, 128).

Then, too, there is the sheer volume of the photographs and the extensiveness of Hine’s reporting. In **Kids at Work** there are photos on every other page. And while they are drawn from mills, farms, mines, factories, and streets, they all argue the same point: Child labor is wrong; child labor is evil. Even this convincing sample is but a small portion of the more than 5,000 photographs that Hine took for NCLC as he traveled across the country, covering as much as 50,000 miles a year. As one critic notes, “it was the mass and weight of Hine’s evidence that was so convincing” (Goldberg, 1993, 175).

The Focused Experience of a Single Individual: Lewis Hine

Biography, the life of a single individual played out against the large backdrop of society, provides a third source of compassionate imaging. By studying the lives of individuals, children come to understand that one person can make an impact for good or for evil.

In **Kids at Work** the story of child labor is told through the life of Lewis Hine, *teacher-crusader*. His life story is an extraordinary case of social efficacy. Freedman not only refers to Hine’s work as a crusade, but he emphasizes that Hine was at heart a teacher. Braving danger, Hine set out to make changes—to enlighten. As Freedman explains, “As Hine traveled, he discovered that investigating child labor was like entering an armed camp. Owners and managers regarded the little man with a big box camera as a troublemaker” (p. 24). Who would not root for this social reformer risking his safety to protect children, a perfectionist constantly worried that since he was resorting to tricks to gain his data, the data itself must remain 100% pure?

Hine was an educated reformer, who can also be thought of as a *sociologist-photographer*. He had studied sociology at Columbia University and was clearly sympathetic to the progressive movement. His art served his social agenda. For Hine, the camera was an “instrument of truth....He was absorbed by social results, not technical perfection” (Rosenblum et al., 119). In a chapter entitled “Making a Difference,”

Freedman tells us, “Hine’s photos were meant to shock and anger those who saw them. They were intended to mobilize public opinion, and that is exactly what they did” (p. 72).

Finally, Hine was a *spiritual-crusader*. Referring to his own work, Hine remarked that “...the human spirit is the big thing after all.” His dedication to moral principles is clear. According to his friend Walter Rosenblum,

“...Hine regarded his work as a moral responsibility....And the greatest of all crimes, the exploitation of children as laborers, would wither the hope and grace of the young. This degradation was to become his obsession; it would give him no rest. No matter the weather or his state of health, Hine was in the field documenting the misery of exploited children” (Rosenblum et al., p. 12).

The career of Lewis Hine—teacher-crusader, sociologist-photographer, and spiritual-crusader—connects readers to the past and provides entry into compassionate imagining.

From Compassionate Imagining to Contemporary Concern

When reading **Kids at Work**, readers can draw on the three sources I have mentioned to develop compassionate imagining: facts told in an interesting way from the perspective of a masterful storyteller; photographs that make a lasting impression because of the clash of the aesthetic and historical; and biographical information about a crusader against evil.

This book puts the spiritual, moral, and ethical concerns of ordinary children at the center of the conversation. Not politics or power; not weapons and warfare; not expansion or empires—**Kids at Work** focuses on the quality of the life children lived as a result of industrialization in this country. It speaks to our basic concerns about health and well-being—what Nell Noddings (1992a, 1992b) refers to as an “ethic of caring,” a focus on matters of spiritual concern. Nodding’s challenge to structure the curriculum not around disciplines but around caring is consistent with Hine’s insistence that “the spirit is the big thing after all.”

As we read books dealing with social issues, books that designed to promote compassionate imagining, we need to raise questions that support a curriculum of caring, one concerned with the human spirit. We need to ask questions such as: What does this book teach us about being more compassionate? What does it say about social change

and how it comes about? What parallels does this story have for me and my life, and the lives of people I know? What about the lives of people I don't know?

Freedman helps bridge compassionate imagining with contemporary concern. He tells us that the crusade is not over. There is more work to be done. He reports:

Compared to conditions in 1904, when the National Child Labor Committee was founded, gratifying progress has been made. Still, child labor has not vanished from America. It exists today among the children of recent immigrants who toil next to their mothers behind the closed doors of sweatshops; among a half-million poverty-wracked children of migrant farm workers; among hundreds of thousands of youngsters who hold jobs prohibited by law, or who work excessive hours while attending school. (p. 97)

As Freedman ends the book, he reminds us that the National Child Labor Committee is still working and that yearly awards are now being given in the name of Lewis Hine. This is a timely and significant reminder that compassionate imagining, while a noteworthy goal, is but the foundation for contemporary concern.

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