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Multiple Levels, Multiple Messages: An Essay Review of Levstik & Barton's ***Researching History Education***

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Quite simply, *Researching History Education: Theory, Method, and Context* (hereafter *RHE*), by Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton (2008), is an excellent and important book, one that should be read by anyone with even the slightest interest in the theory and practice of contemporary history education—academics, graduate students, and practitioners alike. It works as a superb complement to their other recent contributions to the field, including, among others, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Levstik & Barton, 2005).

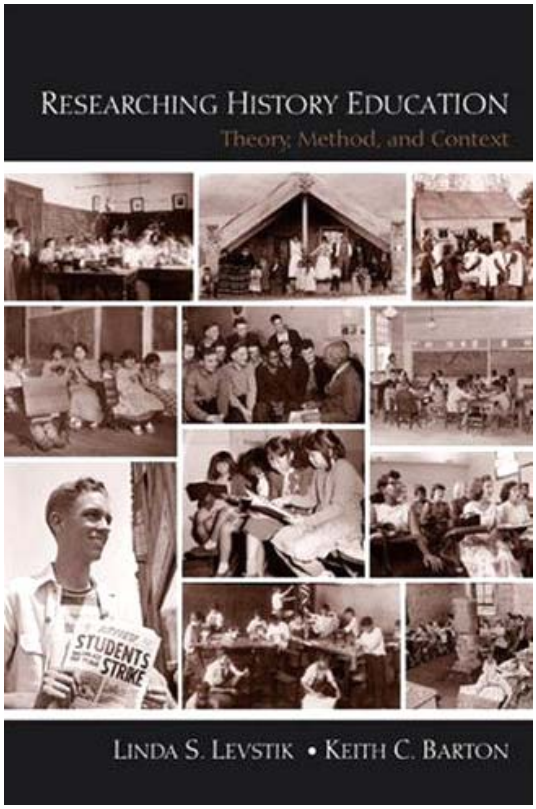
Over the past several years, few, if any, scholars have offered as many insights into history education, particularly children's historical understandings, as have Barton, a

Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Indiana University,[1] and Levstik, a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Kentucky. In essence, their research, individually and in collaboration, has sought to reorient how we look at what children can and do know about history, how they understand it, and how we might make sense of these knowledges and understandings.

Primarily a collection of previously published work, *RHE* provides both a thematic summation of Levstik and Barton's research and a fascinating set of personal, reflective, and critical narratives on their unique intellectual evolution as scholars and educators. True to its title, *RHE* explores many aspects of researching history education, not only its theories, methods, and contexts, but also, directly and indirectly, its relevance to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher education.

In this review, we first consider the setting, the complex and diverse intellectual climate, within which Levstik and Barton's work emerged. Next, we overview the book's structure and organization, briefly characterizing its several sections and chapters. Third, we present Levstik and Barton's findings and themes, particularly those most directly related to children's historical understandings and the various modes of inquiry by which Levstik and Barton explored them. Lastly, we offer our critique.

The Setting



Levstik and Barton's work (the selections in *RHE* run from 1986-2005 and are arranged more or less chronologically) began as part of a "new wave" of research in history education that developed in the wake of the "structure of the disciplines" inspired "new social studies" (NSS) movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see, e.g., Barr, Barth, & Shermis (1977); Massialas, 1992; Thornton, 2008). Though this post-NSS scholarship, exemplified by researchers such as Samuel Wineburg (e.g., 1991), Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright (e.g., 1997; VanSledright, 2002), Peter Seixas (e.g., 1994), and Barton and Levstik themselves, among others, first became prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, it remains vital and continues to add to our understandings of how children learn and make sense of history (see, e.g., Barton, 2008a; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000).

[1] Keith C. Barton was a Professor in the Division of Teacher Education at the University of Cincinnati at the time of this book's publication.

This post-NSS scholarship developed alongside and within a number of broader intellectual currents that influenced, guided, and to some extent delineated its various research agendas. These trends included: (1) moves among some cognitive researchers away from the prevailing stage theories of intellectual and emotional development associated with Jean Piaget and Erik Erickson, among others, and toward such learning theories as information processing theory, schema theory, sociocultural/sociohistorical theories influenced by Vygotsky, constructivism, and so on; (2) a renewed focus on pre-secondary students by content area educational researchers; (3) the growing importance of multicultural education; (4) a recognition by many investigators of the pedagogical importance of context and situation; (5) the "legitimation" of qualitative inquiry; and (6) the shift among some investigators from a singular emphasis on children's knowledge of formal school content to a more holistic emphasis on children's knowledge and sensemaking however acquired (i.e., through formal curriculum and instruction or though extra-school sources such as family stories, museums, and so on).[2] As Levstik and Barton make clear, each of these trends had some impact on their work, whether that impact was positive or negative and whether it occurred as a result of critique, acceptance, adaptation, or outright dismissal. Levstik and Barton's retrospective, critical reflections on what and how they were thinking relative to this multifaceted intellectual milieu are powerful, and together constitute one of the major strengths of *RHE*.

Organization and Structure: A Summary of *RHE*

RHE is arranged into six thematically organized sections, each including a previously unpublished introductory chapter in which Levstik or Barton elucidates key aspects of the two or three chapters that follow it.[3] These introductory chapters, often personal and autobiographical, generally focus on the "theory, method, and context" of the title. They offer essential insights into where Levstik and Barton were intellectually when they first contemplated and initiated their studies—what they were thinking, what they were questioning, why they were asking the questions they did, how they collaborated, how they interpreted the strengths and limitations of prevailing educational theories, what they would do differently now, what they have learned subsequently, and how their work and they themselves as researchers matured over time. Overall, these chapters are invaluable in terms of critically interrogating the empirical investigations Levstik and Barton have collected here. Moreover, they present many of the book's most unique, useful, and substantive contributions to the literature.

[2] We recognize, of course, the importance during this same period of both a competing educational climate dominated by a resurgent back-to-basics movement and a broader intellectual shift toward the acceptance of various postmodern and poststructural discourses.

[3] The formal naming of "sections" is our convention. Levstik and Barton, while clearly and appropriately organizing *RHE* into theme-based segments, neither label nor number specific groupings of chapters as such.

Levstik introduces Section One (chapters 1-3) with a chapter entitled "Narrative as a Primary Act of Mind?" in which she explores how her fascination with story, her reading of constructivism, and her engagement with the work of scholars such as Charlotte Huck (e.g., Kiefer, 2009), Barbara Hardy (e.g., 1978), Louise Rosenblatt (e.g., 1978), and Margaret Donaldson (e.g., 1979) contributed to the development of many of *RHE*'s themes, not only "the impact of historical narratives on historical thinking" (Levstik, 2008a, p. 1), the focus of this section, but also "the importance of purpose in directing student engagement with history, the power of age- and experience-appropriate historical inquiry, developing civic responsibility, and the challenges of [historical] empathy" (Levstik, 2008a, p. 7). This introduction situates chapters 2 and 3, "The Relationship Between Historical Response and Narrative in a Sixth-Grade Classroom" and "Building a Sense of History in a First-Grade Classroom," respectively, and offers a contextual grounding for the ideas and processes they address: "a literature-mediated approach to history, history in the context of theme study, opportunities to interview students in the context of an activity-based curriculum, [and the] analysis of historical narratives" (p. 6).

Linda S. Levstik

Section Two (chapters 4-6) begins with Barton's introductory chapter, "Visualizing Time," in which he recounts the origins of his own curiosity about the nature and meaning of time, the growth of his collaboration with Levstik (who served as his PhD advisor at the University of Kentucky), his and Levstik's ongoing pursuit of a more useful and discerning mode of inquiry and data collection (specifically their use of historical visual images), and their quest for a sophisticated and more comprehensive theoretical grounding for their investigations. Barton's description here of his and Levstik's rejection of Piagetian stage theory and their perceived need "to consider more fully the social context of historical understanding" (Barton, 2008b, p. 68), initially through semiotics and semiotic theory, is particularly good. Barton and Levstik's "'Back When God was Around': Elementary Children's Understanding of Historical Time" (chapter 5) and Levstik and Barton's "'They Still Use Some of Their Past': Historical Salience in Elementary Children's Chronological Thinking" (chapter 6), both exceptional studies of students' understandings of time, complete this section, in our view one of the best in the book.

Keith C. Barton

In "Making Connections" (chapter 7), Barton identifies and describes a number of themes, motives, and aims that not only preface the studies that make up Section Three—"'Bossed Around by the Queen': Elementary Students' Understanding of Individuals and Institutions in History" (chapter 8), "Narrative Simplifications in Elementary Students' Historical Thinking" (chapter 9), and "'I Just Kinda Know': Elementary Students' Ideas

about Historical Evidence" (chapter 10), all by Barton and all powerful investigations into children's historical understandings—but also demonstrate how and why these, and to some extent the studies that follow, were able to yield the significant findings they did. It is not difficult to see how certain key decisions Barton made (often in collaboration with Levstik and as a result of a great deal of thought and reading) strengthened his research. Without his careful consideration of the ideas and processes explored here, chiefly those concerning method, theory, and self-critique, Barton's inquiries would unquestionably not have been as persuasive or effective.

Barton (2008c) first lays out his overall, broad purposes for this section, including what he was attempting to do in the reported studies:

> I wanted to find out how students thought about the topics they already knew about, either because they had been studying them in class or because they had learned about them outside school. I also wanted to find out how students thought about topics that interested them or that they had selected themselves…. And, finally, I wanted to know how students' ideas about history played out in classroom contexts: How did they make sense of the history they were asked to learn in school? What connections did they make with their prior knowledge, and did these connections facilitate or impede their understanding of the content? How did their ideas change over the course of a year? As an educator, I hoped not simply to illustrate students' historical cognition, abstracted from its use in educational settings, but to contribute to a research base for teaching and learning the subject. (p. 149)

Next he recounts his methodological choice to utilize both interviews and long-term observations rather than to rely on potentially brief interviews alone, a decision that clearly and positively influenced the importance, the depth and breadth, of his findings and conclusions (e.g., providing a triangulation mechanism). At the same time, however, Barton notes the potential challenges he faced in taking on such an approach, namely (a) finding and gaining access into suitable classrooms, those "in which students' thinking would be on display, ones in which they were expected to make sense of historical materials and information" (p. 149), and (b) establishing productive, mutually beneficial, and collaborative relationships with the teachers in these classrooms.

Realizing that such study required a solid theoretical grounding, and, drawing on the influential work of Sexias (e.g., 1993, 1996), recognizing (rightly) both the advantages and disadvantages of then dominant theories of children's comprehensions of, especially, time and history, Barton took the critical step of appropriating "alternative conceptions" research and theory from science education. According to Barton (2008c):

> Rather than portraying students' thinking as irrational or deficient, this perspective assumed that students' ideas were logical ways of understanding their encounters with physical or biological phenomena—

> hence the older term "misconceptions" had been replaced with "alternative conceptions." The analogy with history is not an exact one, because students' encounters with the past are more socially mediated than their experiences with [science], but I nonetheless hoped to draw upon this perspective by looking for internal consistency in students' ideas rather than only describing their shortcomings…. (p. 155)

Still, as he continues, "in each of the following three chapters I [do] identify weaknesses in students' historical thinking, but I do so by explaining how their ideas limit their understanding of certain kinds of historical topics" (p. 155), as opposed, for example, to *merely* delineating or tallying students' errors and mistakes *qua* errors and mistakes. As with his choices with respect to method, this only enhances the contributions Barton's studies make.

Barton's third key point, the need for scholars to be unrelentingly self-critical, provides the culminating "lesson" of this chapter. For as good as the ensuing studies are, Barton knows that, and more importantly *how*, they could be better, as do all serious scholars with respect to their work. His assessment that these studies, the most recent published in 1997, were theoretically underdeveloped, while perhaps too harsh, is one that all of us should recognize and take to heart. Barton's self-criticism, taken together with his contemplations on method and theory, not only illuminates the studies that follow, but demonstrates as well how difficult and exciting doing research in this area can be. Most importantly, "Making Connections" works not only to frame the subsequent chapters, but succeeds as well to both situate his (and Levstik's) work within the post-NSS literature and to distinguish its unique contributions to this field. Barton's observations hint at the processes by which his and Levstik's work as embodied in *RHE* both challenged and advanced (and continues to challenge and advance) the study of history/social studies education.

Section Four begins with Levstik's "What Makes the Past Worth Knowing?" (chapter 11) and includes Barton and Levstik's "'It Wasn't a Good Part of History': National Identity and Students' Explanations of Historical Significance" (chapter 12) and Levstik's "Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance" (chapter 13).

In effect, Levstik orients this section according to two fundamental observations. The first is that much of what occurs in US history classrooms is "insignificant"—unengaging, dull, disconnected from students' lives—even though, in her and Barton's experiences, many young children "find the past interesting, express strong ideas about what makes history (though not always school history) worthwhile, and enjoy sharing their ideas about the past and history" (Levstik, 2008b, p. 228). Here Levstik asks: "Why such a disconnect between potential (developing historical interest and understanding) and practice (generating little historical interest and less understanding)?" (pp. 228-9). Levstik's second observation is that much of the related literature of the 1990s—especially that associated with the standards movement and with how and whether children's historical thinking matched that of "experts"—"missed a crucial component of

history education—the grounds on which children made decisions about what was historically significant (or salient or relevant)" (p. 230). She asks, "What did children and adolescents actually do when they tried to make sense of the past? What parts of the past took on significance, why, and in what contexts" (p. 230)? Barton and Levstik's "It Wasn't a Good Part of History" and Levstik's "Articulating the Silences" address these questions. The first explores the "sense [that] young people make[] of the images and ideas about history that they encounter in schools and elsewhere" (Barton & Levstik, 2008, p. 241); the second, a report of two studies, investigates "the implications of [the] disparities between who American students are—and will be in the near future—and who their teachers understand Americans to be in the context of national history" (Levstik, 2008c, p. 274).

In taking on these questions Levstik (and Barton in chapter 12) relates her indebtedness to the scholarship of historian Michael Kammen (e.g., 1993) and sociologist John Bodnar (1994; see especially his conception of "vernacular history") and shows how their work helped her refine her own theories of historical thinking, teaching, and learning. This self-portrait as theorist and careful research methodologist is personal and engaging, and it stands among the most instructive sections of *RHE*.

In Section Five Barton relates his recent work in Northern Ireland,[4] a setting that enabled him to further refine his thinking with respect to the importance of context (especially national and religious identities) relative to children's historical understandings. As he does in his previous introductory chapters, in "Challenging the Familiar" (chapter 14) Barton both recreates the processes by which he selected and developed his research methodologies and offers insights into the often difficult theorizing that positioned the reported studies. And because of this section's distinct focus, Barton is able to situate his theoretical and methodological comments within the complex of peculiar possibilities and obstacles inherent in international work, most fascinating, perhaps, to those of us who have never engaged in such scholarship. His treatments of (1) the research potential of not knowing (or at least pretending not to know), that is being able to relate to research subjects as an outsider who is "ignorant" of taken for granted cultural and historical knowledge; (2) the significance of context with respect to comparative work; and (3) the importance of establishing relationships with colleagues who work full time in the host country are especially effective and instructive. The two Northern Ireland studies, "A Sociocultural Perspective on Children's Understanding of Historical Change: Comparative Findings from Northern Ireland and the United States" (chapter 15) and "'You'd be Wanting to Know about the Past': Social Contexts of Children's Understanding in Northern Ireland and the U.S.A." (chapter 16) complement and extend Barton's related work in the United States. Together, these studies explore Northern Irish "students' ideas about the purpose of history, their concepts of change and causation, and the sources of their ideas…[with] the first [chapter

[4] Full disclosure: Author Vinson served as discussant for an American Educational Research Association session presented by Barton and Allan McCully on their research in Northern Ireland (see Barton & McCully, 2008).

15] focusing on students' understanding of the process of historical change…[and] the second on their ideas about history's purpose and the source of their ideas" (Barton, 2008d, pp. 292-299).

The final section, introduced by Levstik's "Border Crossings" (chapter 17), includes two studies: "Crossing the Empty Spaces: Perspective Taking in New Zealand Adolescents' Understanding of National Identity" (chapter 18), by Levstik, and "Digging for Clues: An Archeological Exploration of Historical Cognition," by Levstik, A. Gwynn Henderson, and Jennifer S. Schlarb[5] (chapter 19). Here, Levstik describes her own efforts at international scholarship and pursues the connections between doing archaeology and building historical understanding. As with Barton's reflections on his work in Northern Ireland, Levstik's observations on her studies in New Zealand present an interesting and useful angle on the difficulties and possibilities of international research. (Many readers, for example, will envy New Zealand's streamlined IRB system.) In terms of her (and Barton's) cross-cultural work, Levstik provides one of *RHE*'s major conclusions:

> Each nation offers its children a past shaped by current concerns and future goals as well as cultural conceptions of the nature of history and history pedagogy. To a large extent, then, research on children's historical thinking investigates the ways in which students appropriate or resist these cultural constructions of history and analyzes the affordances and constraints of the tools available to students for that purpose at a particular moment in time. (Levstik, 2008d, p. 359)

This is an ongoing theme of the book, one that Levstik and Barton address in various settings within the US as well as in Northern Ireland and New Zealand. It is a topic that they consider with exceptional care and complexity.

Levstik and colleagues' cross-disciplinary, archaeology-history research is most notable in terms of showing how archaeology can contribute to what historical knowledge students construct—children's historical understandings—and how it can be used by teachers in history (and social studies) classes. As Levstik (2008d) writes:

> The students in the archaeology study offered a telling comment as they compared archaeology to history. They described archaeology as investigatory, a process of finding and fitting the pieces of a puzzle together. History, on the other hand, struck them as a finished story—the product of archaeological or documentary investigation. The investigation appealed to them considerably more than learning finished stories….The question remains, then, how teachers might capitalize on students' enthusiasm for archaeological investigation in service of deeper

[5] At the time of this study, Henderson was an archaeology educator for the Kentucky Archaeological Survey and Schlarb was an elementary school teacher who taught an archaeology class to multiple classes of fifth graders.

> understandings about the interaction of humans, tools, and environments over long stretches of time and space. (Levstik, 2008d, pp. 364-365)

In fact, Levstik's (2008d) conclusions to some extent nicely summarize one of the major points of *RHE*:

> …development in historical thinking is not a stable progression, but the product of often contending aims and assumptions about how and what the past means in the present. Perhaps, then, one contribution research makes in regard to historical thinking is to help us carefully consider the consequences of the various histories to which children have access, not just in one cultural setting, but in global context. (p. 365)

Findings and Themes

Levstik and Barton cover a great deal of ground in *RHE*; their findings cut across and are frequently significant to a number of related areas. Rather than focus here on their many specific findings—a task beyond both the purposes and scope of this review—we choose to emphasize just a few of their most important ones.

Since *RHE* is a retrospective of Levstik and Barton's work, the meaning and impact of their specific contributions must be read historically and must be understood and positioned, at least in part, within the state of the field (history and social studies education) as it existed in some setting of space and time. Such is the case with the first set of Levstik and Barton's themes which we have categorized generally as those most directly related to scholarship and the practice of research.

One such theme is the importance of researcher identity (or "story"). Levstik and Barton, for example, clearly demonstrate the impact of certain key intellectual influences, commitments, and curiosities, both on their own character as scholars and on the direction and development of their research. They reveal connections between what they were thinking at a particular time and why, what, and how they were conducting their studies. Interestingly, they suggest how their studies might have been different had they been carried out today in light of the continuing evolution of their thought. What is most important, perhaps, is how they show subtle influences, ones they might not have been aware of at the time, ones only manifested through reflection and hindsight. This is different from, though equally important to, the contemporary practice of researchers "positioning" themselves.

The second, related theme is the importance of intellectual growth and reflective self-criticism. Both Levstik and Barton reconstruct the courses of their development as researchers, showing how, for instance, the unsuitability of prevailing learning theories and dominant methodologies led them to seek out or construct other, more appropriate ones (e.g., social context-oriented theories, their method of using historical photographic images, and so on). They demonstrate the causes and effects of decisions that distinctly affected their work. This self-critical, thoughtful orientation is evident throughout *RHE*,

as readers can see the historical and contextual unfolding of related, often interconnected, investigations. Levstik and Barton know that their work has a past, a present, and a future, a fact that they use purposefully and to admirable effect.

Levstik and Barton also present both the benefits and difficulties of several significant elements of their work, including collaboration, international and cross-cultural research, and interdisciplinary study. They argue that while these practices can be complicated, their potential payoffs make engaging in them worthwhile. As *RHE* shows, they can lead to a productive and influential body of scholarship. Levstik and Barton's insights here should be relevant to all of us who do and interpret research.

Levstik and Barton's second set of findings and themes deals with children's historical knowledge and understanding, the principal concern of *RHE*. Here they argue that even very young children (a) can and do "know" history; (b) create contextualized and situated historical understandings; (c) are capable of historical sensemaking and reasoning; and (d) are able to produce knowledge as historical (and archaeological) researchers. Levstik and Barton maintain that history teaching and learning are contingent processes, ones in which student (and national) identity (as created culturally and individually by students themselves and as presumed normatively by teachers and the curriculum and instruction of formal schooling) makes a difference. History education, therefore, is not an absolute, predictable, one-size-fits-all system of rights and wrongs. Such findings, as reasonable as they may sound to most readers, still contest the dominant order of history/social studies education, challenging the various stage-oriented, disciplinary, uncritical, and back-to-basics approaches favored by many current standards-based reform advocates.

A third set of findings and themes addresses history teaching itself. Levstik and Barton make several points that are often discounted by educational "leaders" but that are nonetheless crucial to contemporary history (and social studies) education. Simply, what they promote is a history teaching based on the notions that (a) there are a multitude of good history educations; (b) learning and understanding history is an active and dynamic process; (c) the field of history is inherently multidisciplinary and multifaceted; and (d) high-stakes standardized test scores do not necessarily represent what students know and understand about history. If *RHE* makes no other contribution than to get the managers of today's public schooling to at last take these ideas seriously, then Levstik and Barton have performed an indispensable and long overdue service to the field.

Critique

RHE is an important book, one that succeeds on multiple levels, and Levstik and Barton are to be commended for compiling these studies in one volume. *RHE* deserves a wide readership. Of the many strengths of *RHE*, several stand out as perhaps most relevant with respect to Levstik and Barton's intended and most likely audience. The first, simply, is that *RHE* collects a significant body of work by two of the leading researchers in history/social studies education. Given the impact and potential impact of

Levstik and Barton's investigations, having these studies all in one place should benefit students, teacher educators, other researchers, and classroom teachers alike.

With respect to instruction, *RHE* should prove appropriate for a variety of courses, undergraduate as well as graduate. Methods students, for instance, could read selections of *RHE* for examples of good history teaching and for insights into how children learn and understand history. This might become increasingly important as a number of states move to certify teachers in the separate social studies disciplines instead of or in addition to social studies itself. At the graduate level, it would, obviously, provide a useful and provocative set of readings for courses in history and social studies education. It would, further, be an excellent text for courses in research methodology, particularly those in qualitative techniques. *RHE* demonstrates how "real world" research is done, its rigors, its development, its usefulness, and its position with respect to methodologies, theory, critique, policy, context, and classroom practice. Its addresses the positives and negatives of international and cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, and collaborative research with intelligence, care, and sophisticated examples. Levstik and Barton's explorations of the significance of story, autobiography, and reflective self-criticism are exceptional, and would, we think, be of interest to graduate students and practicing scholars in a range of fields and specializations.

We recognize that some readers may take issue with the book's length, over 400 pages, and that some may find its focus on history education—as opposed, say, to social studies education—too narrow. We, however, would disagree. In terms of the first criticism, readers could, of course, pick and choose specific chapters for their specific purposes, whether as classroom reading assignments or as an in-depth introduction to this field's scholarly literature. In our view, though, *RHE* works best when read from start to finish, as the connections between studies and the evolution of thought demonstrated in the section introductions are integral and crucial components of the book. Regarding the second criticism, first, history education is a dynamic and diverse discipline in its own right, one that clearly warrants a scholarly volume of this sort. Second, Levstik and Barton's work is multidimensional, and their studies are as applicable in many ways to the fields of social studies and elementary education as they are to history education per se.

Perhaps recognizing the fact that Levstik and Barton accomplished the goals they set out for *RHE* in a way that is well-written, interesting, and informative is the finest praise we can offer. In their words:

> We generally adhere to the belief that a research report should be an analytical argument…rather than the story of an investigation….[Thus] there is normally little reason to explain how we became interested in a topic, how questions changed over the course of a study, or how we established access and rapport….Yet these are precisely the kinds of topics that we think deserve a place in our field's public discourse, and we think one of the best ways to reflect on them is through narratives that recount our experiences. We hope that this volume may encourage other

> researchers to find a place for their own stories. (Levstik & Barton, 2008, p. xiii)

So do we. And we have no doubt that Levstik and Barton's *Researching History Education* has and will continue to provide such encouragement.

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