

**KEITH C. BARTON**  
Indiana University

# Agency, choice and historical action: How history teaching can help students think about democratic decision making

## **ABSTRACT**

*At the heart of both historical understanding and democratic decision making is agency – the ability to act on decisions in order to bring about desired goals. Students are rarely exposed to the concept of agency in school, however. In order to better understand the complexity of historical agency, students need exposure to a wider range of historical actors than has traditionally been found in history curricula, and they need to consider the societal factors that enabled or constrained their actions. They also need to recognize that people in the past were not simply acted upon by historical forces but were themselves active participants in events and trends of the day. Such participation involved not only large-scale political involvement but everyday actions and decisions influencing the historical development of cultures and societies. No nation or group, however, acts in complete unison, and students also need to learn about the diversity of perspectives and behaviours that characterized people in the past. By thinking about these issues, students should be better prepared to think about their own lives in the present, about their*

## **KEYWORDS**

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*ability to contribute to societal change and continuity, and about the consequences of their actions. This is one of the ways in which history education can contribute to students' ability to engage in democratic decision making. Studying history in isolation, however, may not be enough to enhance students' participation in society. Instead, students need to develop a metacognitive awareness that agency is a lens for making sense of any social topic, past or present. They also need opportunities to explicitly connect historical agency to the choices that face people today as they respond to social, economic, political and environmental issues.*

Decision making is at the core of democratic participation (Engle and Ochoa 1988): in a democracy, people are expected to make choices that affect the future of the society – choices about which political candidates or public policies to support, choices about how to relate to other people, choices about how to go about their lives. Moreover, to say that people make such choices implies that they have *reasons* for what they do. In a democracy, citizens are not expected to act in a particular way because they have been told to do so (that's for totalitarian societies, not democracies), or simply because things have always been done that way (that's for pre-modern ones). Instead, democratic citizens are expected to engage in thoughtful, reasoned judgement, individually and collectively, in order to reach well-informed decisions that form the basis for action. A major task of schooling – and its chief contribution to citizenship – is to help young people learn to make *good* decisions – decisions that are carefully reasoned, based on evidence and logical thought, and grounded in a realistic understanding of how the social world operates. This kind of choice and decision making forms the basis for *agency*: the ability to act on decisions in order to bring about desired goals (whether those involve changing aspects of society or conserving them).

History education should contribute to students' ability to engage in democratic decision making, because agency is at the core of historical study. After all, questions of 'who, what, and why' are the stock-in-trade of history – identifying main characters, describing their actions and trying to explain why events played out as they did. By studying how people have acted on their decisions in the past, students should be better able to make well-informed decisions in the present. Yet students do not often hear the term *agency* at school, and educational researchers have paid less attention to the concept than to related ideas such as evidence and perspective. The *who* and *what* of history – even the *why* – may seem too elementary, too tied to particular narratives, to raise many questions about historical thinking and learning. Agency, however, is anything but simple. When we begin thinking about historical agency, we confront a swarm of questions about who and what we consider worthy of attention in the past, as well as about how we evaluate historical actions. And when we think about how to include historical agency in *teaching*, we are forced to consider the implications of our instructional choices for students' understanding of the present, and of their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy (den Heyer 2003; Peck et al. 2011). Thinking about what happened in the past, after all, is just another way of thinking about what can happen today.

## **AGENCY AND THE 'SUBJECTS' OF HISTORY**

How might learning history better prepare students to think about their ability to take action in the present? Let us begin at the beginning, with the *subject* – the subject of history, and the subject of sentences written about history. Who

is history about? Who gets placed at the beginning of sentences, as the actors – the agents – of history, the ones who initiate action and are responsible, both implicitly and explicitly, for historical events, patterns and processes? For most of us, this is probably the most familiar question about agency, because we all recognize that written history has traditionally been about elite white men and their supporters. These were the people who appeared to deserve attention as the initiators of important historical actions – thus the common observation, ‘History is written by the winners’. Yet these days, most historical accounts include a wider range of actors than those long ago. Post-World War II historians have increasingly emphasized women, minorities, immigrants, the poor and other marginalized groups – literally moving them from the margins to the centre of historical writing. Similarly, historians of formerly colonized nations now study more than the representatives of colonial governments and their allies; they also study ‘subaltern’ populations – people far removed from official political and economic power. This expansion of historical agency is not only characteristic of the work of professional historians but can be found in museums, monuments and popular culture. History is more diverse than it used to be; or more accurately, different perspectives and experiences in the past matter more, to more people, than they used to. History is no longer written exclusively by (or about) the winners.

Expanding and diversifying the range of people who are seen as historical agents is crucial to helping students think about their own roles in society (Peck et al. 2011). On the one hand, when students do not see people like themselves reflected in the curriculum, they may lack motivation to study the subject in the first place – or, if required to do so, may fail to take it seriously (Barton 2009). If students never study history, or never attend to it meaningfully, they will never develop the historical understandings that contribute to informed decision making. Moreover, if they only study a narrow range of historical actors, students who do not see themselves reflected there may think that they have a limited ability to participate in the wider society. Why would girls, ethnic minorities, the poor or others think that they could play an important part in contemporary events if they have never seen examples of people they identify with having done so in the past? Why would they develop a sense of political efficacy if they rarely encounter role models of public involvement? Schools, after all, present the most officially sanctioned version of social knowledge, and if that version of society has no place for a diverse range of actors, students may understandably conclude that their participation is neither possible nor desired.

Expanding the range of historical actors in the curriculum, though, is important not only for students who identify with marginalized groups but for all students. Studying the history of indigenous people, for example, is important not just in classrooms with students of indigenous heritage. All students, from all backgrounds, need to understand how diverse people have contributed to history. For students from more privileged backgrounds, this may help counter assumptions that they are the ‘natural’ leaders of society, that their concerns are universal ones, or that others’ perspectives amount to a form of identity politics or special pleading. By learning about the participation of other historical actors, that is, they may develop a better awareness of how others have influenced history, as well as a more honest and accurate understanding of their own agency – including both the privileges they enjoy and limits on their ability to impose their will on others.

Simply including greater diversity, however, does not necessarily alter how we think about agency, because it is possible to include marginalized

groups in history without actually making them actors. Instead, they may be portrayed as largely passive victims, the objects of actions carried out by those in power (Seixas 1998). This is particularly tempting when considering the lives of people who suffered from brutal institutional regimes or oppressive social systems – women, the enslaved, colonized populations, religious minorities and so on. Even grammatical structures can position such groups as subordinate, as when they are characterized as having been ‘enslaved’, ‘colonized’ and so on. Our natural sympathy for the abuses people suffered, or for the constraints on their lives, can lead us to highlight what was done *to* them, rather than what they themselves *did*. Yet no matter how brutal the oppression, no matter how pervasive the constraints, people always have taken action to pursue their goals: women decided how to allocate their time and resources, slaves developed vibrant cultural traditions, indigenous populations created alliances with or against colonizers and so on. Historical scholarship increasingly recognizes what has long been obvious in traditions handed down within communities: no group has a monopoly on action.

Portraying people in history as victims, on the other hand, does no one any favours. Students who identify with African ancestry, for example, often are embarrassed or ashamed when Africans are presented as the helpless victims of slavery (Levstik and Barton 2011; Traille 2007). As one student put it, ‘At my old school they made me feel bad about being black when we did the slave trade. They talked about all the diseases that the slaves had. You should be proud about your history. They made me feel ashamed’ (Traille 2007: 33). It is unlikely that this teacher, or any other, aimed to make students feel ashamed, yet this is often the message that students take away from the study of people in history who were subjected to oppression. If they study only how Africans were enslaved, how Jews were persecuted, how indigenous people were swindled or how women’s roles were constrained, then oppression becomes the defining characteristic of everyone other than the ruling elite. Given that contemporary society is still characterized by significant inequalities, students may well conclude that the ability of the marginalized to take control of their lives remains hopeless. Students’ ability to act in the present would be better served if, when studying historical instances of oppression, they also learned how people resisted, took action and found spaces to make satisfying lives for themselves. A full understanding of history requires appreciating not only the constraints on people’s lives, but how they operated within (and against) those constraints – and this kind of understanding is also a prerequisite for informed action in the present.

At the same time, it is important for students not to overestimate the ability of people in the past to struggle against oppression. Students are often puzzled by why all slaves did not revolt or escape, why all Jews did not resist removal to camps or even why all blacks did not leave South Africa during apartheid. To understand how people took action, students also need a realistic understanding of the powerful societal factors that limited and channelled their agency. Economics, ideology, practicality and brute force all placed limits on the extent to which people in the past both conceptualized and acted on their goals – just as they do today. Such societal factors are not necessarily negative; think, for example, of how the US Civil Rights movement depended on the institutional structure of African American churches, or how the GI Bill in the United States enabled a wider range of socio-economic classes to go to college after World War II. Understanding historical agency requires that we constantly keep in mind this tension between people’s ability to act and the

reality that they will do so within a wider context over which they may have little direct control (Barton and Levstik 2004; Damico et al. 2010). As complex as this understanding is, it is a necessary component of preparation for democratic civic participation.

### AGENCY AND THE 'ACTS' OF HISTORY

Other questions arise when we expand our ideas about agency to those who have not previously been considered important actors in history. First, what counts as an action? Because the development of history as a profession – and history in schools – originally was tied to the rise of the modern nation state, historical accounts for many years focused primarily on events that took place on national or international scales and that involved national institutions. As a result, school history has traditionally devoted attention to warfare, international relations, political and constitutional developments, and changes in industry. As long as these remained the focus of history, the subject was necessarily about rich white men, for they held power in those spheres of society. Recognizing the agency of women, minorities and others requires redefining what actions are worthy of study. This is what historians have been doing in recent decades, as they devote attention not just to formal political structures but to all the ways in which people lead their lives – their domestic relations, childrearing, work practices, religious beliefs, world view, consumption patterns, forms of entertainment and so on. Expanding the *who* of history depends on expanding the *what*.

African Americans, for example, were not the agents of history only when they escaped slavery to become outspoken abolitionists; women were not agents only when they took part in the Suffrage Movement; indigenous people were not agents only when they battled settlers or the military; working people were not agents only when they fought the captains of industry. These groups and others were also agents of history when they moved and built homes, adopted new work practices, became more literate, developed artistic traditions and regional cuisines, had smaller families, used emerging technologies, changed their fashion in clothing and so on. At first glance, these may seem mundane when evaluated against the standard of international relations or constitutional law. Yet when we think about how the world has changed over the centuries, many of the most significant differences lie precisely in areas of work, technology, education, domestic relations and so on. Achieving the right to vote was a major change in the lives of women, for example, but just as significant were incremental but far-reaching transformations such as smaller families, the rise of companionate marriage and expanded labour opportunities, as well as the continuation of many forms of gender inequality *despite* the right to vote. As feminists have long noted, the personal *is* political, and in order to participate in society today, students need to understand that history is not only made when they engage in the dramatic transformations of public life, but also when they make decisions in their personal lives that affect other people, both near and far.

A second question relates to whether we study historical actions of individuals or of larger groups. Opening up historical agency – seeing beyond the lives of the powerful, who have usually been accorded an exclusive role as historical actors – primarily involves expanding our ideas about *which* people, and *which* actions, are found in the narratives we create about the past. But thinking about historical agency also requires considering what *kinds*

of agents and actions are placed at the centre of historical narratives. In the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle wrote that ‘the history of the world is but the biography of great men’ (Carlyle, 2001 [orig. 1840], p. 28). This perspective is still common. One of the most popular forms of historical writing in the United States, in fact, consists of biographies of the founding fathers – a genre looked down upon by many academic historians despite (or perhaps because of) its popularity. Even if we expand the cast of characters to include women, minorities and other groups who have been left out of history, we often still find ourselves focusing on the lives of individuals. By contrast, many historians these days emphasize the impact not just of individuals but of collective groups and social movements – industrial workers, urban crowds, rural farmers, popular political movements and so on. This reflects an expansion of ideas about what kind of agent has the ability to affect history: it is not just individuals who are worthy of attention, but groups of people.

Understanding that historical actions involved collective efforts of many people is also critical for students’ ability to participate in democratic society. Although great deeds of heroic individuals – in history or in society today – may be interesting and inspiring, democratic participation depends just as much, if not more so, on actions of people who are not famous, and perhaps not especially heroic. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr, were important leaders, but the Civil Rights Movement would not have succeeded without the many people who lacked both fame and oratorical skills but who marched in protests, came to meetings, duplicated flyers, donated money and so on. The ability of any one individual to have a dramatic impact on society is necessarily limited, but democracy depends on collective action of many individuals, usually as part of coordinated efforts – through political parties, labour unions, interest groups, neighborhood associations and other social organizations. As young people think about their own ability to influence society, they need to understand that such collective efforts have always been an important component of history, and that their impact on the world does not require that they themselves develop into famous heroes – a status few can (or want to) achieve. We can all join with others, though, to take action that will profoundly influence our society locally, nationally and globally.

One particular form of collective action deserves particular attention. In talking about the past, we often refer to institutions (nations, international alliances, religious denominations) as though they were the agents of history. We place them at the beginning of sentences, and we talk about them as though they had the power to take action: ‘Germany invaded Poland’, ‘The NATO alliance deployed troops to Afghanistan’, ‘The Catholic Church revised the liturgy’ and so on. We all know that abstract entities such as a nation cannot actually *do* anything: It is groups and individuals within an institution that are taking action and who act or speak on behalf of the institution. Moreover, within such an institution – a country, a religious denomination, a social movement – there are always differing factions, each with its own perspective on what should be done. Any nation, for example, includes people with a variety of different ideas about the actions of their government, and any government itself includes people with different interests and perspectives, even in non-democratic regimes. Referring to an institution as an actor, then, is a shorthand way of saying that certain groups or individuals were able to implement their ideas by requiring that others act in particular ways. ‘Germany’ did not invade Poland; rather, German troops did so, acting on the orders of the political leaders who at the time controlled the German

government. Although the name of a country might be used as the subject of a sentence, the actual agency implied in such a sentence is far more complex.

These complexities and distinctions, however, are not always clear to students. In talking about international events, for example, students often talk as though it is nations themselves (or alliances of nations) that take action, and they attribute human motivations and intentions to these institutions; they talk about entire countries, that is, as though they were angry or wanted to expand. At the same time, they tend to ignore or downplay distinctions within countries; they characterize the entire populace of a nation as though it were of one mind, with little attention to internal differences or varying access to power. What teachers and textbooks may regard as a shorthand way of referring to historical action – placing nations and other institutions in the subject position of sentences – often is interpreted literally by students.

Thinking that nations have emotions or that they act in unison obviously is incorrect historically, but it also limits students' understanding of agency in the present. If students believe that nations think and act in unison, then it makes little sense for them to go against the tide or to develop independent judgements about the wisdom of actions carried out by established leaders. Moreover, it places them in a position whereby they can more easily be manipulated by those who do have power – or aspire to it. If students are told that the national interest is advanced or threatened by a particular event or policy (foreign war, immigration policy, a trade agreement, etc.), then failing to support a given course of action seems treasonous. If, however, they recognize that such statements reflect not 'national' interests, but interests as conceived or represented by a particular portion of the population (such as members of a given political party, economic class or interest group), then alternative actions become more reasonable. Similarly, if students think that national populations are monolithic entities that think alike, they may fail to see the legitimacy (or effectiveness) of challenges to dominant ways of thinking. If students are to be agents of democratic participation, they must recognize that it is both feasible and even desirable that they think and act in ways different than their neighbours. History is potentially a rich storehouse of examples of such diversity and dissent, but these examples are not always a prominent feature of students' exposure to the subject.

## **AGENCY, MORALITY AND CHOICE**

Agency is at the core of moral judgements about the past (Peck et al. 2011), yet sometimes school history avoids or obscures the role of human agency. Some historical accounts do not focus on individuals, *or* groups, *or* institutions, but instead emphasize the impact of economic, demographic or environmental factors (changing climate patterns, increased population density and so on), or historical forces and ideas (such as nationalism, communism or religious beliefs). In these kinds of accounts, people may be completely missing, or they may appear only as examples or illustrations of the real historical agents – the forces that move history forward. Human choice and decision making may be invisible in such accounts, as people and societies simply respond to the inexorable demands of forces over which they have little control. The role of human agency, then, is highly limited, and historical trends (if not specific events) may seem inevitable. For example, students with an extensive knowledge of the events leading to World War II sometimes conclude that the rise of Nazism was inevitable. Given the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles,

anger over reparations, economic depression and the failure of the Weimar Republic, they think, the appeal of totalitarianism could not be resisted: It simply had to happen, unfortunate as it was.

Seeing human events as inevitable, though, wreaks havoc with democratic participation: If people have no control over the world, there is no reason to take part in public life. For students to understand that people today – individually or collectively – can make a difference in the world, their study of history must provide them with examples of how people have made a difference in the past. They must, that is, see that the decisions made in history affected later events, just as the decisions people make now will affect the future (Barton and Levstik 2004). Rather than simply studying historical ‘happenings’, then, students need a chance to approach historical events with an eye towards the consequences of human choices. Although events rarely turn out exactly as people intend, history nonetheless happens as the result – sometimes in unexpected ways – of human choices. Studying history, then, should lead to better choices, by helping students understand consequences (intended and unintended) of choices made in the past. Students might consider, for example, whether the Nazis would in fact have risen to power if more church leaders had spoken out against them, if German industrialists had not supported them or – perhaps most significantly – if people had not voted for them. These are the kinds of questions that historians argue about and speculate over, and students also need to engage in these kind of ‘what if’ questions. Natural disasters provide another example of how the role of human agency may not be obvious to students. Although events such as tsunamis or hurricanes are natural and inevitable, humans are responsible for the regulations and preparations that mitigate their damage, as well as for the humanitarian and environmental responses to such events. No matter what broader forces exist in the world, people nonetheless make choices about how to prepare for and respond to those forces.

Sometimes, though, historical accounts omit the role of human agents in order to avoid clarifying who was responsible for particular actions – especially when historical events might reflect badly on a nation or its leaders (Damico et al. 2008; Peck et al. 2011). This practice is evident when accounts employ grammatical constructions such as the passive voice (e.g. ‘Bombs were dropped on Tokyo’ rather than ‘The U.S. military bombed Tokyo’) and nominalization (e.g. ‘Atomic bomb explosions were responsible for over 100,000 deaths’ rather than ‘The United States exploded atomic bombs and killed over 100,000 people’). In these situations, agency is omitted because it would raise difficult moral questions; by avoiding agency, one can avoid dealing with morality. This is another way in which historical events can appear to have ‘just happened’, rather than having been the result of conscious choices of people in the past. If no choices were made, then no one can be held accountable.

Ironically, well-meaning attempts to avoid ‘presentism’ in teaching history can have the same effect of evading judgements of accountability. Teachers often claim that people in the past can only be judged by the standards of their day, not by our own contemporary perspectives. This reasonable effort to understand values that differed from our own, however, can make it appear that people were so much a product of their times that their actions were simply the natural and blameless result of differing world views. From this standpoint, slave-owners appear not to be culpable for their participation in the institution, because in their day the practice was considered acceptable. By the same token, Europeans such as Columbus cannot be held accountable

for their treatment of Native Americans, because they were simply the unwitting participants of a world view in which non-Europeans were considered an inferior species. Again, when actions are inevitable, there is no one to blame; indeed, issues of accountability are not even part of the discussion from this perspective.

This avoidance of moral judgement, though, oversimplifies important elements of historical agency. First, it ignores the issue of power, which is always at the heart of agency. Some individuals and groups have the power to compel acquiescence to their world views, whether others share their values or not. Slaveowners and conquistadors may have considered themselves superior to Africans and indigenous people, but that may not always have been a perspective shared by those who were the object of their abuses. To say that 'slavery was acceptable then' (as students and teachers often do) is hardly accurate; it would be more accurate to say that those who benefited from slavery went to great lengths to convince themselves and others that it was acceptable. On the other hand, there certainly have been periods and places in history (and today) that are characterized by relatively widespread acceptance of roles that contemporary westerners might consider inequitable; most obviously, gender norms often reflect disparities that both men and women have considered appropriate and acceptable. In these cases, moral judgements may be more meaningfully directed towards a structural or ideological system than towards the individuals who acted within it. From our present-day standpoint, we can still judge a system of inequality unjust even if those who were part of it did not see it that way.

Yet it is also important to note that even within such unequal structure and ideological systems, there is often dissent, and it is this dissent that makes moral judgements more salient. In evaluating the actions and beliefs of people in history, it is important to identify which choices were open to them. If some people took one course of action, and some took another, then clearly they were not so constrained by society that their actions were inevitable. If for example, economic forces presented a series of options to people in the colonial and antebellum United States, and some chose those involving enslavement of Africans while others did not, then clearly choices were available, and we can make judgements about people's actions accordingly. Similarly, if some Spaniards in the sixteenth century considered Native Americans worthy of the same treatment as other humans, while some did not, then there was no monolithic world view that determined people's actions; they had choices about what to believe and what actions to engage in as a result of those beliefs. By understanding these choices – the differing perspectives and actions at a given time in history – students can make more informed judgements about morality. The link between morality and agency lies precisely in the issue of choice (Seixas 1993), and it is when people have choices that we hold them accountable for their actions.

Holding people accountable – ourselves and others – is also a part of democratic participation. In order to make decisions, people must recognize that they are responsible for their choices. Cheating on one's taxes cannot be justified by saying that 'everyone does it', nor can racist, homophobic or xenophobic beliefs be justified by pointing to prevailing norms. Similarly, people need to be able to make judgements about the accountability of others: political corruption cannot be ignored simply because 'that's the way the system works', nor can abuses of human rights (torture, police beatings, civilian casualties during warfare, etc.) be justified because 'these things happen' or

because ‘it had to be done’. Things do not just happen, and no events are inevitable: they are the outcome of conscious choices (whether intended or not), and students need experience evaluating the choices people have made in history.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Agency is complex because relationships among all these factors are complex; individuals, groups, institutions, ideas and other forces interact in multiple, overlapping and even contradictory ways, and understanding historical events requires taking all of them into account. This is asking a lot, particularly for young people who are just beginning to encounter the systematic study of history. They may focus on one type of historical agent at the expense of others, or they may not fully grasp the intricacy of these webs of historical relationships. And they may not be helped in this effort by textbooks or other materials that distort historical agency, particularly by using the passive voice or by downplaying responsibility for historical actions. That is why teachers and researchers need to pay particular attention to students’ developing ideas about agency.

Sorting out the complexity of historical agency is not just an academic task, though, not just something that is necessary in order to understand the past as historians do. Agency is more important than that, for agency is at the heart of the public sphere. To participate in the public life of a democracy is to think, judge and act – and all these depend on a concept of oneself and others as individuals who make choices about desired social ends, who decide how to pursue those goals, and who are both enabled and constrained in doing so by the wider world. Simply teaching students that people in the past were caught up in these complexities, though, may not be enough to develop their own sense of agency in the present. Both children and adults, after all, are adept at learning *about* history without learning anything *from* history; they may extol the ‘lessons of history’ without thinking about what those lessons are or how they implicate people in the present. Two pedagogical practices might enhance the likelihood that students’ understanding of historical agency will influence their participation in society today.

First, teachers need to develop students’ metacognitive understanding of historical agency: they need to explicitly call students’ attention to the concept of agency and its application to the topics they study. In addition to expanding the range of actors involved in a historical lesson or unit, for example, they need to help students understand why they have chosen particular people and groups, and how the topic might look different from other perspectives. Moreover, teachers should encourage students always to ask, whenever they encounter a historical topic in any context, ‘Who are we learning about? Why? Who’s left out?’. Similarly, not only should teachers call attention to the decisions made by people in the past, they should also alert students to how this compares to other ways of approaching history. This might involve leading students in a critical examination of present-day representations of history, such as textbooks or popular films, so that students can better see how agency is either highlighted or eclipsed. In order for agency to become a useful tool in students’ historical understanding, they must recognize that it *is* a tool – one they can and should employ whenever they think about the past.

Second, teachers need to make connections between historical agency and agency in the present. Students need opportunities to directly consider

contemporary social issues and how understanding of those issues is informed by the concept of agency. What can people do to address social, economic, political or environmental issues? What are the consequences of their action or inaction? How do people differ in their opinions about what can or should be done? What factors enable or constrain their actions? These are critical issues for democratic decision making, and they deserve extended attention – the kind of attention that is not always available in history classrooms with crowded curricula. Teachers typically do have time, however, to ask, ‘Can you think of any parallel situations in the world today?’. Every day’s news is full of examples of agency, yet students are unlikely to think of current events in this way unless they are asked to do so. If teachers consistently remind students, even in small measure, that the purpose of studying the past is to better understand our lives in the present, then agency may become a useful and productive lens of analysis for young people. History, as the record of thoughts, judgements and actions of people in the past, provides a model for how to think about agency in the present, and students deserve a form of history education that directly informs their own actions, in complex and meaningful ways.

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### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Keith C. Barton is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Adjunct Professor of History at Indiana University. His research investigates students’ historical understanding, classroom contexts of teaching and learning and the history of the social studies curriculum. He has conducted several studies in the United States, Northern Ireland and New Zealand, and he has served as a visiting professor at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, and the UNESCO Centre for Education in Pluralism, Human Rights, and Democracy at the University of Ulster. He is the author, with Linda S. Levstik, of *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Routledge, 2011), *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Routledge, 2004) and *Researching History Education: Theory, Method, and Context* (Routledge, 2004), and editor of *Research Methods in Social Studies Education: Contemporary Issues and Perspectives* (Information Age Publishing, 2006). He teaches courses on secondary social studies methods, educational research and curriculum history.

Contact: Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47405, USA.

E-mail: [kcbarton@indiana.edu](mailto:kcbarton@indiana.edu)

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