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A Grander Grand Narrative

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These essays by our thoughtful colleagues open a wide range of ideas to consider. I offer some comments on several categories that emerged from reading their essays, each of which leads us to a more complex and interconnected grand narrative for our field: access to evidence, transnational studies, local studies, biography, and autobiography.

Evidence: Kinds and Limits

Barbara Finkelstein's characterization of a world in motion speaks volumes to not only the expanding state of our field but of a new and evolving environment for research. New technologies for research, the ability to manipulate large quantities of data quickly, internet research, digitization of resources, and fluid communication systems have revolutionized how we do research. These methods have also revolutionized the questions we ask. As historians, we know that the availability of resources shapes the interplay between the evidence and the research question. Consequently, many of the gaps in the history of education have been due to limited access to primary materials, their physical distance from us, their scarcity or absence as we go back in time, and our language limitations, as pointed out by Jim Albisetti. New forms of access and newly available materials have allowed us to reformulate our questions. Each of the authors' suggestions for new directions in research is in large part driven by new forms of access to primary evidence.

Increased ability to compile data and gather previously inaccessible sources has changed our view of what is possible. All of the authors here recognize the research potential embedded in access to information through new media: Wayne Urban wanting deeper and broader quantitative analyses now that it is possible; John Thelin seeking longitudinal studies of colleges and universities over time; Barbara Finkelstein pursuing individual biographies that stretch across borders; and Jim Albisetti recognizing previously invisible gaps in the historiography through his access to international research and networks of scholars and sources. Access, however, does not ensure quality, and quantity does not ensure utility. John Thelin points out the problem of having

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easy access to abundant recent data, and only sparse historical data for comparisons. Exasperatingly, our new methods, while mesmerizing on one hand, also make the comparability gap broader and exaggerate the problem of research based largely on contemporary (readily available) records. Each is applying tested methods of local, biographical, organizational, or institutional histories to broader national and international sources, identifying new forms of incomparability, and consequently pointing us to new areas where research is needed.

The one old-fashioned method for which there is no easy solution is the acquisition of language at the level required for research, or deciding in which language to publish. As Albisetti points out, scholars writing in languages other than English are compelled to make choices about the language in which they write and publish, weighing local audience interest against wider distribution. For English language speakers, as both Finkelstein and Albisetti point out, there is still no substitute for having the ability to conduct comparative research in a multilingual world. Two solutions emerge from their discussions: Albisetti urges us to learn the languages of our research fields where Finkelstein urges us to partner with colleagues elsewhere whose questions we share if not our research languages. Both methods have the potential to expand access to primary sources and comparative studies. Even as our expectations for language acquisition rise for ourselves and our students, a different but nonetheless fruitful avenue may lie with Finkelstein's call for more collaboration with partners in other parts of the world who are doing research in their native languages and sharing their research with us in English.

While we do have greater access to evidence in some ways, each of our authors cautions that we are still bound by limitations of language, comparability, and the cultural dimensions of research.

Interconnectedness: Transnational Studies Abroad and at Home

It used to be assumed that "international" research meant research across national borders and histories. Today, "international" research can mean observing our own classrooms. While both Barbara Finkelstein and Jim Albisetti appear to be the more international in their subject matter and perspective, their observations apply to the work of John Thelin in analyzing student retention, graduation and admission, and to wish-he-were cliometrician Wayne Urban's interest in teacher experiences across three contiguous southern states. Classrooms today for both teachers and students throughout our country are multicultural, multilingual, and in Finkelstein's example, filled with border crossers. Interestingly, while Finkelstein is heartfelt in encouraging us to "unbind education history from its moorings in single nation-states and localities," her examples are two brilliantly multicultural

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American teachers, making the point that "thinking across boundaries" has become a way of thinking within boundaries, not only across national borders. On my campus at University of Massachusetts Boston, some sixty languages are spoken with the common language being any one of the World Englishes, the languages of learning and, often, instruction. We have bilingual, bicultural border crossers on both sides of the lectern. Not only are we not unique in the composition of our collegiate student body, we are much closer to the norm.

The internationalization of our classrooms puts before us the embodiment of previously abstract ideas. Educators have exchanged ideas internationally for centuries through immigrants and traders, through written texts, international associations, allegiances, and explorers. Historians of childhood and education have examined each other's objects of art, music, clothing, and religious traditions, mining them for the subtexts of meaning about children, imagining worlds of children different from our own. Now these children from imagined communities sit before us. Indeed, the distance between us and them may be as narrow as the space from where we stand and the first row of our classrooms. For this reason, "international" studies may be increasingly more important not only for the researcher's contributions to comparative research, but for the practical utility of helping the rest of us understand the people we teach. Our classrooms close the distance between local and international research.

While exchange is not new, our burgeoning access to information about those historical exchanges complicates the long-standing Eurocentric narrative, and our understanding of each other is increasingly less hierarchical. While the fact of exchange is not new, how we interpret the meaning has evolved at warp speed over the past two decades. The formerly conventional explanation of educational exchange, the "west to the rest," has evolved into a new convention of including the voices of the "rest" in examining the production and reception of educational practices globally. The language of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies has infused discourse on international studies of education, and studies of international educational practices include local examples in addition to national education policies.

As a consequence of this change, today doing research "elsewhere" is not always as simple as parachuting into an archive or discovering previously understudied texts, even for bilingual researchers. As we seek expanded bilingual collaboration, doing research in other places reveals differences in the very cultures of research: "other" scholars not having asked or examined "our" questions or not sharing an interest in preserving or examining the data that we find useful. Albisetti speaks to a frustration that derives from these cultural differences in how research is conducted, frequently resulting in secondary literatures

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that may not lend themselves to comparison or correlation. My own experience in putting together a collection of essays by scholars from a range of countries pointed out the challenge of integrating dissimilar research traditions and cultures of writing. To comply with the writing and publishing norms expected by western publishers, for a predominantly western research audience, much was left out.[1] These unanticipated incompatibilities, born of becoming closer as researchers, posed challenges for us as collaborators to overcome.

The Place of Locality/Regional Studies

The movement toward more global understanding nevertheless reinforces the need for a foundation in local history, without which we have no basis for comparative studies. The importance of local histories is made clear by Albisetti, Finkelstein, Thelin, and Urban. Their local, biographical, oral, and institutional histories make the transnational/translingual encounter meaningful.

Wayne Urban has been in the forefront of local and regional history, particularly regarding the southern experience. While he claims that "stylistically and methodologically" his emphasis is "traditional," his narrative and biographical approach continues to deepen our understanding of the region and inform the foundation of the field. Similarly, Thelin's statistical analyses of issues in higher education illuminate our understanding of both federal policy and outcomes for college students, particularly in terms of retention and graduation rates. His studies make possible comparisons with educational policies in other nations, and facilitate comparisons with college student outcomes both nationally and abroad. Finkelstein directly applies her local biographical work to larger comparative themes, based in individual experience. Finally, Jim Albisetti applies his formidable language skills to local school and institutional histories in Germany, Italy, and France, filling in and pointing out lacunae in the scholarship for other comparative researchers. The work of these four researchers demonstrates that fundamental research in local, regional, biographical, and institutional studies is indispensable to collaborative and comparative work.

Biography as a Starting Point

The work of these scholars intersects on many levels. Each is thinking forward and rethinking how to use existing sources and creating new

[1] Roberta Wollons, ed., *Kindergartens and Cultures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

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categories of sources. Each offers new forms of comparative studies: between contiguous states, over time, across boundaries, among international scholars. Each has offered a roadmap that grows from their own experience based both in the new technologies that allow us to use large databases along with the old methodologies of oral history, local histories, language acquisition, statistical surveys, and comparisons. Central to each, though, is biography used in differing ways. Clearly, each believes that stories of the individual have not diminished in importance in the face of increased access to data, and comparative studies are enriched with the voices in each local place of comparison.

Barbara Finkelstein applies her skills to oral histories and biography as a means to explore her concept of border crossers, those people who embody multiple cultures and negotiate those identities as their life's work. Wayne Urban uses biography to give to us the lives of people who changed (Bond) or produced (Conant) the world in which we live. He also returns to community studies and local histories from which emerge the larger human story. John Thelin takes statistics to a new level of comparison and analysis with access to large datasets, inevitably based in individual experience; and Jim Albisetti points us to the lives of individual teachers and students and the abiding and irreplaceable necessity for multilingual researchers who can read the work firsthand, ask their own questions, do their own research, make their own comparisons, and bring these lives into a multinational, grander narrative. For historians of education, the individual life story is still at the heart of the enterprise whether as teachers or students, administrators or philosophers. Moreover, as teaching and learning are profoundly individual experiences, the study of education is never far from the individuals who make up the world of the classroom. If biography is about voice, each of these researchers is bringing the voices to us, whether as a single or a collective story.

Thoughts on Autobiography

The autobiographer is that two-headed Janus, god of beginnings and transitions, looking forward to the future and backward to the past. Autobiography allows us to pass experience and expertise to a new generation, at the same time as reflecting on our own past. Recently, a wonderful volume of scholarly autobiographies by our own colleagues has attempted to integrate the researcher's life into his/her own research choices.[2] What brought them to the subject, and how did their own experiences influence their points of view? Wayne Urban ponders these

[2]Wayne Urban, ed., *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011).

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questions in "A View from the Provinces,"[3] and in this special issue of *HEQ* he links his experiences in Catholic schools with his questions about the consequences of anti-Catholicism in the NEA and in the public schools. In "Life at the Margins of Possibility" Barbara Finkelstein has also written reflectively about how her background growing up in New York, significant experiences in school, and her own international experience shaped her scholarship.[4] Here in this volume, the evolution of that experience presents itself in her examination of the lives of border crossers, of which she is one. John Thelin unabashedly connects his love for numbers with the research methods that have led to significant contributions to the history of higher education policy; and Jim Albisetti brings together his encyclopedic knowledge of European history of education and talent for languages with his lifelong commitment to comparative studies. Each of their autobiographical stories inspires and leads the way for upcoming scholars. What does it mean to be an historian of education, how does one feel both satisfied and unfinished, what new vistas did past research open up? They are good questions: "what would I like to have done, and what would I like to do." Our colleagues reply by sharing the inevitable frustrations of being an historian, as we are often unable to control access to information or have enough research time. All four of our colleagues exemplify the importance of lived experience in their pursuit of research questions. And they are, lest we forget, among the trailblazers who changed the academy. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of scholars transformed such fields as women's history, African-American history, American-Indian history, postcolonial history, and of course the history of education. Deeply personal experiences changed the research questions and, dramatically, our perceptions of the world. That generation and those that followed gave up the pretense of unbiased or disinterested research. They actively sought social justice, correctives, and ameliorations to the narrow but grand and powerful narrative that prevailed at the time. Recognizing that one's own experience can and does inform intellectual pursuit opened the door to a world of new voices and new interpretations of our history.

It is both important and inevitable that all of us allow ourselves to be motivated and energized by our own questions about the world and our experiences in it, and encourage the upcoming generations of historians with their own experiences to do the same.

[3]Wayne Urban, "A View from the Provinces," in *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, ed. Wayne Urban (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), 275–86.

[4]Barbara Finkelstein, "Life at the Margins of Possibility: Learning Along the Way," in *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, 81–94.

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Conclusion

With all its complexities, Finkelstein's call for a new master narrative is both daunting and invigorating. It encapsulates the inexorable movement from a history dominated by national studies to the challenge of recognizing centuries of international/cross-cultural exchanges carried in all directions by individual travelers, networks of practitioners, international organizations, and mass media from broadsides to the Web. Moreover, it imagines applying new technologies in service to established research categories: comparative, local, biographical. In this sense, all of our authors are participants in changing the narrative of the field. Our colleagues leave us with many directions to pursue and research problems to resolve: the best gift one generation can give the next.

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