



# Panta Rei

Revista digital de Historia  
y Didáctica de la Historia

2025



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# The Future of Civic Education. Interview with Keith C. Barton

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## Resumen

En esta entrevista al investigador estadounidense Keith Barton se ofrece una reflexión crítica sobre la enseñanza de las ciencias sociales y la educación cívica en las últimas décadas. Barton, autor de *Teaching History for the Common Good* y *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony*, entre otros libros de gran calado, aboga por una educación centrada en la acción, la justicia y la esperanza, defendiendo un modelo que prepare a los estudiantes para transformar el mundo.

## Abstract

In this interview with researcher Keith Barton, a critical reflection is offered on the teaching of social studies and civic education in recent decades. Barton, author of *Teaching History for the Common Good* and *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony*, among other influential books, advocates for an education centered on action, justice, and hope, defending a model that prepares students to transform the world.

## Palabras clave

Educación ciudadana, ciencias sociales, justicia social.

## Keywords

Civic education, social studies, social justice.

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## 1. Introduction



Keith C. Barton was born in 1961 in Kentucky, USA. He is a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Indiana University. His work focuses on preparing students for democratic civic participation, with a particular emphasis on history and other content areas within social studies. He has collaborated with faculty, teachers, and students from across the world, including in the United

States, Northern Ireland, Singapore, New Zealand, Chile, South Sudan, North Macedonia, and Sweden.

At Indiana University, Barton prepares future educators to teach history and social studies, and he also mentors doctoral students in curriculum studies, social studies education, and history education.

With an extensive body of publications, Barton has become a nationally and internationally recognized authority in history and civic education. Among his most influential works are those co-authored with Linda Levstik. Their collaborative research has made significant contributions to the field, and several of their publications are considered essential reading for educators devoted to teaching social studies.

One of their most widely known books is *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Levstik & Barton, 1997). This book has gained international acclaim and offers guidance for introducing historical inquiry in elementary and middle school classrooms. It includes case studies from real classrooms, providing practical insights for both teachers and researchers.

Equally noteworthy is their book *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This work explores the relationship between history education (and social studies more broadly) and civic education. The authors argue that the primary goal of teaching history should be civic in nature—preparing students to engage in a pluralistic democracy, to think critically, to evaluate sources thoughtfully, and to become informed and active citizens.

More recently, Barton co-authored *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony: Deliberation, Knowledge, and Action in Social and Civic Education* (2022) with Li-Ching Ho. This book aims to fundamentally reimagine social and civic education in pursuit of a more just and harmonious future. Emerging in a time of shifting perspectives on social studies education, the work advocates for a transformative approach grounded in deliberation, informed understanding, and meaningful action.

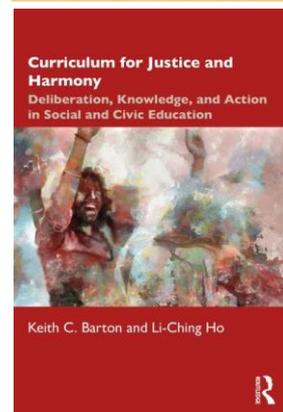
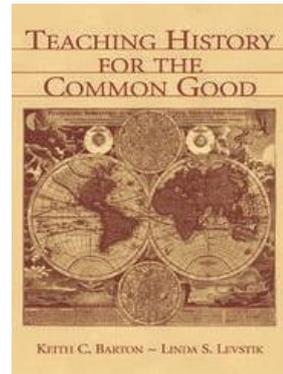
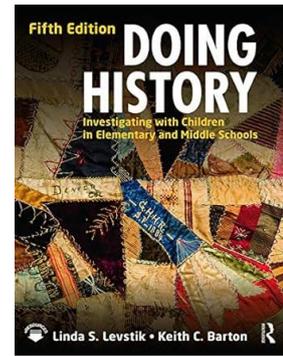
This interview was conducted via Zoom in May 2025, soon after Dr. Barton published his co-edited book *The Future of Civic Education: Rebuilding a Democracy in Ruins* (2025). The aim was to get to know him more deeply—his career, professional path, intellectual influences, and his vision of history teaching and civic education—and to briefly synthesize his perspective on key issues related to the teaching of social studies.

## 2. Interview

**Verónica Pardo (VP):** First, for all of those who doesn't know you, who is Keith Barton?

**Keith Barton (KB):** I was a primary school teacher in California for about five years, and before that, I had been in a doctoral program in anthropology, but I decided that I did not want to be a professor and did not want to travel around the world. So, I became a primary teacher instead.

Now, of course, where am I now? Well, I'm a professor after all, and I travel a lot for my work after all, but at the time, I decided to teach little children instead. And then, after



five years, my wife got a job as a professor in Kentucky, and there were no teaching jobs for me at the time. So, I went back to graduate school, and I was very lucky to be assigned to Linda Levstik<sup>1</sup> as my advisor, and she was certainly the leading expert on history education for primary students at the time. And so, that really set the first part of my career. For many years, I focused primarily on how elementary children learn history, and then, to some extent, older students as well. And, of course, we wrote *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Levstik & Barton, 1997), which is a book for teachers about how to teach history. Then, we wrote *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004), which is more of a curriculum book, as well as publishing several research articles. After that, I went to Northern Ireland to do research there on how students understand history. There, I began working with Alan McCully<sup>2</sup>, and he and I also did several studies together.

So, for a large portion of my career, I was focused on history education, but also the civic purposes of history education, and looking at it in a comparative and international context. In about the last 15 years, I've continued to be interested in history, but my research has focused more on, first, human rights education, and now, Li-Ching Ho<sup>3</sup> and I are focused on teaching for social action and teaching about social issues. During this time, I've been very fortunate to have been able to work in a number of countries around the world, from South Sudan to Northern Macedonia to Northern Ireland. I've spent time in Chile, Colombia. So, you know, I really see myself very much part of the international context of teaching and learning in this area. Singapore is another place where I've spent a lot of time.

**VP: Who would you say have been the most influential figures in your research path and why?**

**KB:** Well, certainly Linda Levstik (Levstik & Barton, 2008; Levstik, & Barton, 2023; Barton & Levstik, 2024), for a number of reasons. The focus of her research on how children make sense of the social world has really been an important guiding factor in my career. I would say also her pragmatic or common-sense approach to research, not overtly narrow or ideological, but using research to flexibly understand how students think as a way to improve instruction. That has really been a big part of my career. She's had a big impact.

Indirectly, I would say that James V. Wertsch<sup>4</sup> has had a big impact on the kind of theoretical perspectives that I look at, the sociocultural context of learning and specifically how cultural tools and sometimes schematic narrative templates affect learning. And then more recently for the work I've done together with Dr. Ho, we've started looking at a new set of authors going all the way back, for example, to the Confucian philosopher, Mencius.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda S. Levstik, Professor Emerita at the University of Kentucky. She was awarded the Jean Dresden Grambs Distinguished Career Research Award in 2007 for her scholarship in history education. Retrieved from: <https://gws.as.uky.edu/users/llevs01> / Interview with Linda S. Levstik in *Panta Rei* <https://revistas.um.es/pantarei/article/view/469671>

<sup>2</sup> Alan McCully was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Education in the School of Education in Ulster University. Retrieved from: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/unesco/staff/alan-mccully>

<sup>3</sup> Li-Ching Ho is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her research, conducted primarily in East and Southeast Asia, focuses on global issues of diversity in civic education. Retrieved from: <https://justiceandharmony.com/about-us>

<sup>4</sup> James Wertsch is Director Emeritus of the McDonnell International Scholars Academy and Professor Emeritus of Sociocultural Anthropology and of Global Studies. Retrieve from: <https://anthropology.wustl.edu/people/james-wertsch>

But also people like Chenyang Li<sup>5</sup>, who's written about harmony in the modern world. Also Sung-Moon Kim<sup>6</sup>, a Korean political theorist based in Hong Kong, who has explored the relevance of Confucianism in the context of modern liberal democracies and how the two can be meaningfully integrated. So lately I've been looking at more East Asian scholars as a basis for my work.

**VP: Is there a specific article or a book that was special for you during your career?**

**KB:** That's a good question. Certainly, the book *Mind as Action* (Wertsch, 1997) has been very influential for me. Early on, *Children's Minds* (Donaldson, 1978) was also really important. It was written in the 70s, based on empirical research, and it was a move away from Piagetian stage theory. When I first started in the profession in the early 90s, there were still a lot of people who seemed to believe that young students could not intellectually understand history. Sources like Donaldson's helped me understand that this sort of stage theory is not a productive way of looking at children's understandings. So those are two of the sources that certainly had a big impact on me. I would also say *Apprenticeship in Thinking* (Rogoff, 1990). I guess that had an impact on me both as a researcher, but also as a teacher, thinking about the different ways that we help students learn information.

**VP: Looking back at your dissertation, focused on historical thinking among elementary children, would you change anything that you wrote?**

**KB:** Well, not if I went back in time to 1994, because at the time there was so little research on elementary children's understanding of history. And so it was very general. I mean, I came up with some really nice, specific conclusions, but my approach was very open-ended, because it had to be at the time. But I tell my doctoral students today, I hope you never see the proposal I wrote for that, because it would not meet the standards I have for a dissertation proposal today. The field has moved on so far, and we've learned so much more, both in the United States and internationally, that any new scholar is going to start at a much higher level than I did 30 years ago. It's not that I would change anything, and particularly the way that I did the research. I was very lucky to find two fabulous teachers who were really interested in improving their instruction, and I worked together with them. We talked about what we can do with students, and that was a perfect setting to do this kind of research. So it was a great context for doing this research, but if somebody were going to do the same thing again today, I would say, "I need you to review a lot more literature and have a lot more sophisticated theoretical framework than I did back then". I was a child then.

**VP: What were the first works that you published and what were they about?**

**KB:** There were several that were published in very close succession in 1996 and 1997. Two of them were based on research that Linda Levstik and I had done together on children's understanding of time. One of those was in *American Educational Research Journal* (Barton & Levstik, 1996), and the other was in *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (Levstik and Barton, 1996). About the same time, I published the first article that came out of my dissertation, in *Theory and Research in Social Education* (Barton, 1997a), and that one was

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<sup>5</sup> Chenyang Li is Professor Emeritus of philosophy at Nanyang Technological University. Retrieved from: <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/cris/rp/rp00886>

<sup>6</sup> Sungmoon Kim is Chair Professor of Political Philosophy and Director of the Center for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy at the City University of Hong Kong. Retrieved from: [https://scholars.cityu.edu.hk/en/persons/sungmoon-kim\(10a18ccf-ef32-4a53-a8dc-f4d7a8b0b684\).html](https://scholars.cityu.edu.hk/en/persons/sungmoon-kim(10a18ccf-ef32-4a53-a8dc-f4d7a8b0b684).html)



on students' use of historical evidence. It's still interesting work, because students were great at analyzing evidence and seeing what factors may have influenced a particular source, but then when it came time to draw conclusions from it, they just forgot all that and started making stuff up. I think that's really an interesting, interesting piece of research.

At the same time, I also published a piece that was not history education, but just history (Barton, 1997b). It was on the practice of hiring out enslaved people in the early 1800s in the United States. And that was an area people hadn't done much research on. And so that was a really nice article. It started as part of a history seminar that I took in grad school, and I continued with the research and published it. And it was really very useful for me because it helped me really understand what historians do, instead of what we sometimes pretend they do. In the 1990s, there were a lot of people in education saying, historians do this, or historians do that. And they didn't really know what they were talking about because they weren't historians. And so having actually done the historical research, I had a much better understanding of what it is we should be focusing on.

**VP: Moving on to the book *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School* (Barton & Levstik, 2004). How did this book come to life?**

A lot of luck, because Linda Levstik had already published a previous book, and her publisher wanted her to do one on history teaching. And there was really almost nothing on history teaching for elementary students at the time. She wanted to do it with me, but I hadn't finished my dissertation yet, so she was hesitant. But once I promised her, "I'm going to finish by this date", then we started working on the book together. Some of the chapters are based on the two teachers I did my dissertation with. Some of Linda's chapters are based on other teachers she knew. And then we also got extremely lucky in that we were at the *National Council for the Social Studies*<sup>7</sup> in the United States, and we went to a session that was about history teaching, but we didn't know the teachers who were presenting. And the teachers were wonderful, Rhoda Coleman and Rebecca Valbuena. And during a break in the presentation, I went up to them and said, "Do you want to be in a book?". They looked at me like I was crazy, like, "Who is this guy?". But as I got a chance to talk to them more, I was convinced they should be in the book. And I went to visit their classrooms, and that really wound up being an important part of what the book came to be. But it was certainly luck.

**VP: How does it feel that your books, specifically *Doing History, Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School* (1997) and *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004), are core readings for so many researchers around the world?**

**KB:** It's a little bit strange. With *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004), it's a US focused book, and most of the people who read it were in the United States. It's extended more now, but in the first few years, it was mainly American. But after the book came out, there were two experiences I had that amazed me. I was in the Netherlands, and Carla van Boxtel<sup>8</sup> had had gotten together a group of people from Dutch universities to do a seminar with me, in about 2005. I went there and three or four of the people in this had

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<sup>7</sup> The National Congress for the Social Studies is the largest professional association in the U.S. devoted solely to social studies education. Retrieve from: <https://www.socialstudies.org/about>

<sup>8</sup> Carla Van Boxtel is a professor at University of Amsterdam teaching Methodology, with a focus on historical education.

Retrieved from: <https://www.uva.nl/en/profile/b/o/c.a.m.vanboxtel/c.a.m.vanboxtel.html>



copies of my book! And here I am in the Netherlands. That was really the first time I realized that people in other countries are taking this work seriously.

And then a couple of years after that, I was at a conference in Taiwan. There were two professors from mainland China, and one of them had a copy of the book and wanted me to sign it. And then that was even more amazing. People in mainland China are reading *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004)? So that's obviously very rewarding, very gratifying. Linda and I are both very proud of the fact that we've written something that so many people seem to be interested in. These days, sometimes I wonder, though, if people know they're just supposed to cite these books, but don't actually read them. This book has been translated into Greek and Korean and Japanese. So that has also spread the reach internationally quite a bit.

**VP: Now you published another your book, *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony* (2022). How does this new work differ from *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004)?**

**KB:** For one thing, we hardly mentioned history in it at all. That book came about because Li-Ching Ho and I were both dissatisfied with a lot of what the social education community tend to focus on. For one thing, Dr. Ho is very concerned that most of what people focus on is very Western centered or even just U.S. centered. And so, she finds that a lot of the scholarship we produce, particularly in North America, has limited relevance for Asia.



And particularly, if we ignore the idea of harmony, it falls flat in Asia. People there don't accept that you can have societal norms that don't involve harmony in one way or another. And at first, that was difficult for me to accept because as a Westerner, I had this very negative image of the word and concept of harmony. But as I read more contemporary Asian philosophers, I developed more of an appreciation for it and saw how relevant it could be, not just in Asia, but in the West as well. And so that was really the genesis of the book. And then we started talking about what this would mean in terms of actual curriculum. How would you get students towards this point? So hopefully we produced something that has some new ideas in it.

**VP: Would you say that those two books complement each other?**

**KB:** I think so. Every once in a while, I'll be writing or talking about something that's part of the new book, but then I'll go back to *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004) and realize, oh, I wrote very similar things with Linda Levstik, just with a slightly different focus back then. So I do think they go together particularly well. I would say there are two main differences. One is obviously that we're not focused on history in the second book. But the other big difference is that with *Teaching History for the Common Good* (2004), I think I still had the belief that if we just teach history well, it will become relevant for the present. And I no longer think you can do that. I think you have to start with present-day social issues. You can then explore the historical roots, but we can't think that if students learn

history or any other subject well enough, that one day they will be able to use that information.

**VP: Regarding your last book *The Future of Civic Education: Rebuilding a Democracy in Ruins* (2025), how would you describe civic education?**

**KB:** The most recent book is really meant in a very U.S.-focused way. It may be relevant for people in other places, but in the United States, civic education generally means learning about how the government works and how to take part in public affairs. And in the United States, civic education is a part of the curriculum from the first years through the last years, and students will typically have a whole course called either civics or U.S. government in high school. But even before then, it will be part of the curriculum, often in fairly simple ways. So in the U.S., civic education is not a very ambiguous term. But in other places, I think it absolutely is. In most parts of the world, you don't have a course titled civic education, so, it's a more amorphous concept.

**VP: But for you, how should civic education be?**

**KB:** In line with Li Ching Ho's and my book *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony* (2022), I think civic education should be how students can enter the public sphere and take action for a better world. Now, of course, to do that, you have to know some things about how governments work as well. And that's certainly a big part of our emphasis is the importance of knowledge. You have to know things in order to take action effectively. But I would put action at the center of civic education, how to make the world a better place

**VP: When you think about this kind of civic education, would you say that it's something that could be global or it depends on each country?**

**KB:** I think it should be global, because many educational systems at least tacitly believe that students should learn how to make the world a better place. But in some countries, that is not a very prominent part of education. In some countries, there's such an emphasis on supposedly academic knowledge, traditional subject areas, and particularly being tested on those, that there's not much time spent on how students can improve the world. Yet I think it's something that there should be more of an emphasis on nearly everywhere, because obviously every country has significant social problems, and we're all connected to each other these days anyway. I wish that it were more widespread.

**VP: Which social issues or problems do you think are most urgent for students in today's classroom?**

**KB:** I would say the two big ones are. First, climate change, because literally the world is burning down. And it's probably too late to stop climate change but thinking about how we can address the changes that are coming fast is important. I think that's one that just cannot be ignored. And the other would be the whole range of issues related to social inequality. Gender inequality is a problem throughout the world. In some places, it may be racial inequality. Economic inequality is important almost everywhere. So all the different forms of inequality, because those are things that limit people's life chances so much.

**VP: Regarding your last articles about Education for Hope (Barton, 2024; Ho & Barton 2024), what role would you say hope play in civic education?**

**KB:** Li-Ching Ho and I started thinking about hope about a few years ago when we went to a national conference, during Trump's first term, and everybody was so depressed

about everything. We understood that, but we thought, “This doesn't lead us anywhere.” And there's certainly research with children showing that when they study climate change, sometimes the result is despair. Like, “This is such a big problem, nothing can be done about it”. And so if we really want schools to play a role in helping students think about how to improve the world instead of giving up, we have to think about how to develop a sense of hope. And we have to think about it very systematically. To us, it's not just a vague feeling, but it's something where specific knowledge can develop a sense of hope.

**VP: Some people argue that encouraging civic action in classrooms can be some kind of indoctrination. How would you respond to that?**

**KB:** All education is indoctrination. If we say students need to learn mathematics, that's indoctrination. If we say students should not get into fights, that's indoctrination. All of education is indoctrination. But what typically happens is that when somebody has a goal that you don't agree with, you claim that those other people are indoctrinating students, but “we” are not. But if you don't address civic action in schools, that's also indoctrination: You're saying that's not important, students don't need to learn that. Anything we do or don't do sends messages about what we think is important. To me, the whole idea of indoctrination is just a buzzword that's used to avoid discussion over what are the appropriate ends of education by just saying, “That's indoctrination”. Or in the United States, “That's critical race theory”. And therefore, we don't have to talk about it anymore. The issue is, what goals should we be promoting, not just attaching labels to them like “indoctrination”.

**VP: We already talked about action, but what role should it play in education for social sciences?**

**KB:** A lot of people still have this idea, that if you just teach students enough information and teach it well, then someday they can use that for action. But that's not how people learn. We know, for example, from sociocultural theory, and particularly theories of legitimate peripheral participation, that people don't just amass a bunch of knowledge and then use it. They learn knowledge in the course of using it. So students have to be engaged in some form of action, even though it's not going to be fully mature or developed. But it's only in engaging in some kind of action that they actually learn how to take action. I think it's got to be there, even though we're always going to have to think about what's the age of our students, what's the context of the school; just like with any subject, we're going to take those things into account. But if students never have a chance to act, they won't learn how to act.

**VP: Moving on to teachers and his role, how should teachers be trained to facilitate this kind of civic and justice-orientated education?**

**KB:** Teaching is such an impossible job. There's so much you have to know in order to be a teacher. I struggle with this in my own teaching of teachers every semester. There's just so much to know. And when I think back to my own teaching career, I didn't know enough at age 23 to really teach very well. So there's no magic solution to this. But I think that maybe two related things are, first, really thinking about the purpose of what we're doing. If teachers only believe that their purpose is to cover the materials in a textbook or in a curriculum, then that's always going to be a limiting factor.

It depends on the system, because in highly centralized locations, if the Ministry of Education says you're going to teach about civic action, then you will teach about civic



action or you'll be fired. In the United States, we are completely decentralized, so teachers really have to buy into this purpose because they don't have to do anything they don't want to do. So I think getting teachers to think about purpose is one thing. Part of that is just developing their own sense of professionalism, seeing themselves as professional decision makers rather than implementers of somebody else's curriculum. And then second, the lifelong or career-long quest to figure out what knowledge will best help students do this. That just means teachers must be very reflective. They have to always be thinking about how they can better help students learn what they need to learn. But none of this is easy. And like I say, there's no magic solution to any of it.

One of the things that Dr. Ho and I are doing is trying to develop hopeful portraits of teaching for social action. I think it's important that teachers be able to see realistic portraits of other people teaching for social action or whatever the topic is, teaching in more sophisticated ways. We all have this tendency to say, "Oh, I can't do that" or "My students can't do that" or "It wouldn't work here." And if we only read things that are so idealistic that they don't seem realistic, then that's not going to help. So I think helping teachers see, "this teacher in this setting did this", that can help them think, "Maybe I could do some similar things".

**VP: What is the situation now in the U.S in relation to civic education?**

**KB:** It's changed a lot in the last few years, because for many years, there would be public debates over what teachers should or should not be teaching about, particularly race or other related issues. But for many years, those debates didn't really matter, because the U.S. is so decentralized. Teachers could pretty much do whatever they wanted. And so that's why I've always said in the United States, education never gets much better, but it also never gets much worse, because it's so decentralized. So things just go on the way they've always been. That's started to change now, because in a number of states, the state legislators have imposed very extreme sanctions.

So now teachers can lose their license and lose their job if they teach certain things. So that's much more of a threat than it used to be. And at the federal level now, Trump has started to withhold funding for schools or school districts or states that don't do things in line with his administration. So that's also a big threat. If a school district is facing the possibility that they're going to lose millions of dollars if they include certain topics in the curriculum, that's a big threat. So now, things are really starting to change. And I would say that not all teachers, but a large portion of teachers are very demoralized right now, because there has never been so much control over what they can say. At the same time, I would say many teachers, if they're committed to things like justice or equity or diversity, they're going to continue teaching what they've always done. Some of them are finding ways to keep it quiet, but doing it anyway. And some are being much more vocal about how they won't stop teaching the things that they think students need to know.

**VP: Are you still optimistic? And do you still have hope?**

**KB:** It's very hard to have hope in the United States right now, probably because it's so unpredictable. I have no idea what's going to happen. Some of what gives me hope is looking at other countries. For example, Li-Ching Ho and I have been working in Ireland, and one of the interesting things about Ireland is teachers have a great deal of professional freedom. They have to teach the content of the curriculum, but if you say, "What topics would you be afraid to teach about?", there are none. They have

professional autonomy, and they also have very strong job safeguards. You can't just fire a teacher there for doing something that people disapprove of. That shows that it's possible, but the United States right now is very far from that point. So I guess what a lot of people, including myself, are searching for is, "What does give us hope?"

I don't know yet, but I don't think that people are not going to routinely say, "Okay, I'll never teach about difficult topics again". I don't think that's going to happen, but I don't know how we will solve this.

**VP: Going back to your last book, *The Future of Civic Education: Rebuilding a Democracy in Ruins* (2025), what do you think the future of civic education should look like?**

One of the main premises of that book is that it cannot just focus on how the government works, because how the government works in the United States is bad. It is what has gotten us into this mess. We don't have any one solution to that, and the purpose of the book was to get other people thinking about it. It might involve focusing more on empathy or compassion or foregrounding students' own ideas about the future. So I don't think there's any one way, and I don't yet know what the future of civic education should be. I really just know what it shouldn't be, which is a little bit depressing, but it cannot just be more of what we've always done. This is something that varies a lot of country to country, but in the United States, we have a uniquely bad governmental system. And for 250 years, it crept along without things getting too bad, except for minorities, but now it's bad for everyone. I don't know, we're probably going to have to have another revolution. We had one in 1776, and now 250 years later, it might be time for another one.

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## Annex: publications of Keith C. Barton

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