Guiding Students in the Process of Becoming Historical Detectives
Review by Elaine Lawrence

Educators (P-12 teacher, pre-service teacher, teacher educator, or student teaching supervisor) in any content area interested in developing student research skills will find the practices and suggestions laid out in this book extremely useful. These ideas stem from the premise that students need to learn there is more to research than locating information (usually from a list of topics generated by the teacher) and using it to prepare an assignment that is created with a teacher-as-audience focus. As explained by Selwyn, a more real-world approach would be to guide students in the process of figuring out what they want or need to explore to learn more about a topic, which would engage them more in the process. Once this inquisitiveness has students engaged, teachers can help them develop their research skills. The material presented in the book falls within three categories: setting the stage, process development, and examples from K-16 practitioners.

Finding the hook to engage learners is essential to the research process. Students who want to delve beyond who, when, and what to find out why and how will build on their knowledge base. Selwyn offers a variety of approaches for engaging students in historical inquiry. One example is to develop what I call a Mission Impossible scenario – use a topic from local history and give just enough clues to what happened in such a way that students will become curious and want to find out more about the topic. Their mission is to find out more, why they did not already know more about it, and the impact on the present day community. Using the example in the text, teachers would need to be aware of the community reaction so they can adjust the research mission accordingly.

Chapter Six offers insight into getting students hooked on hidden history (not seeing/understanding evidence that is in plain sight). In the chapter, the reader learns how to help personalize history so that students will want to take ownership of learning. Examples of good real-world probing questions model ways to initiate student interest.

Part of the research process involves identifying points of view – personal and in the source material. As Selwyn notes, three principles are at the core of research in social studies: (1) There is more to the world than what an individual sees at one time; (2) Individuals see the world based on their own experiences, which makes it neither right nor wrong, just different from other viewpoints; and (3) Individuals tend not to consider the framework that developed the lens through which they are viewing the world. There is a great example of how to introduce this to middle school students. They can create personal telescopes out of cardboard tubes and vary the shape of the lens on the end of the tube. Teachers ask students to look at a specific object and draw exactly what they saw. A discussion about the differences can serve as an introduction to differing points of view.

Selwyn offers examples of how to guide students through the process stages. Suggestions include formulating a research question that is neither too broad nor too narrow and involves interest for the researcher; identifying the reason for the research; gathering information; evaluating the material gathered; reflecting and adjusting draft work; deciding on the format of disseminating the results; and presenting the final product. The steps are broken down so that a teacher can set up tasks and benchmarks to guide and assess student progress. There are practical tips and hints for a teacher to help guide the beginning, intermediate, and veteran researcher through the process. In Chapter Four, a bulleted list provides a guide for a classroom posting students can refer to as they work on projects.

Real scenarios interspersed throughout make it easy for pre-service and in-service teachers to grasp the ideas presented. After reading one or two examples, the reader begins to develop connections for use with other topics/concepts. Included is an array of grade level and content examples: a K-1st grade model of introductory use of questioning and learning, a 4th–5th grade model for a social studies topic, middle school models for social studies and math/science topics, and a high school model for a social studies topic.

From introductory exercises to extended tasks, educators from all content, grade, and experience levels can benefit from the ideas laid out in this book. Teachers in the early, middle, and later stages of their careers can find suggestions for short-term or long-term tasks/projects. If you are looking for helpful, practical ways to guide your students to dig deeper when conducting research, just open this book and dive right in. I found myself halfway through the material in no time and the only delay in the page-turning process was that I kept stopping to take notes on ideas that I wanted to, and actually did, put into practice in my classroom.