

Volume 29 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rcééa

CJSAE Book Review

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editor-in-Chief: *Donovan Plumb*
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

29,2 June/juin 2017
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

ADULT EDUCATION IN CHANGING TIMES: POLICIES, PHILOSOPHIES AND PROFESSIONALISM

Marion Bowl. NIACE, Leicester, 2014, 190 pages.

In *Adult Education in Changing Times*, Marion Bowl presents a comparative case study of adult education in England and New Zealand, focusing on adult educators' perspectives of their work and the impact that policy changes have on adult education in each country. Bowl identifies the conflict between neo-liberal ideologies that inform government policy and the community-based practice and attitudes of adult educators. As well, Bowl explores how educators manage and make meaning of this conflict through accommodation and resistance.

The first three chapters provide a theoretical and historical overview of adult education specific to England and New Zealand, demonstrating how the evolution of the field is informed by changes in dominant ideologies, such as industrialization, community development, and neo-liberalism. Bowl focuses on community education in the last 30 to 40 years, the marketization of adult learning, shifts to the knowledge-based economy, globalization, consumerism, and instrumentalism—evidence of the virulent nature of neo-liberalism. Retracted government financial support has left many community-based adult education programs struggling or defunct. Emphasis on the knowledge-based-economy has narrowed funding for adult learning to target the development of knowledge and skills beneficial for national economies.

While there are similarities between the two countries, there are also differences, particularly in regards to culture. The influences of Maori and Pasifika peoples on adult education in New Zealand have enabled adult education to maintain, to some degree, its focus on social, cultural, and community development. The first section of the book sets a comprehensive stage for delving into Bowl's research.

It's in the second section where Bowl explores her data on the everyday realities of being an adult educator in England or New Zealand in the face of policy changes. Participants ranged in age and years in the field, with most participants working as adult educators for at least a decade. Bowl's use of educator profiles enriches the analysis by providing a nuanced human element to the discussion. Recounting how adult educators entered the occupation, Bowl notes that many fell into adult education by chance. Most adult educators, many of whom are women, work contract (full-time or part-time), casual, hourly paid or volunteer jobs, sometimes holding multiple positions simultaneously. The over-representation of women in the field, and this study in particular, suggests that this book is about "women's working lives" (p. 74). However, Bowl does not explore the gendered impacts of neo-liberalism more explicitly or critically within this book.

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
29,2 June/juin 2017

ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

Even though most educators profiled in the book describe their work through their experience rather than theories, their descriptions connect with humanist/liberal philosophies of adult education. Bowl argues that a lack of theoretical consideration can leave educators “vulnerable to shifts in ideology and policies” (p. 95), and she emphasizes the importance of dialogue between theorists/academics and the practice. Bowl identifies a lack of greater critical analysis of the broader socio-political and economic systems and ideologies that oppress learners and educators. While educators in Bowl’s study discussed Paulo Freire in both contexts, a focus on his teaching methods overshadowed application of his critical theory—informed radical pedagogy in current circumstances. The discussion highlights a conflict between practitioners’ philosophical and social values (e.g., inclusion, de-marginalization, equity, social justice, and community social development) and the reality of adult education practice within a neo-liberal context.

Bowl also identifies how adult educators manage shifts in government adult education policy (e.g., deep budget cuts) through accommodation and resistance. Educators may accommodate or adapt as a means of waiting out the political powers enacting policy changes in hopes that the next government will be different and will reinstate an adult education mandate that supports their vision of a broad and inclusive, state-funded adult learning system. The growth of third-wave opportunities in adult education, especially social entrepreneurialism, is another accommodation/adaptation strategy discussed. While Bowl appreciates the potential of these initiatives, she challenges the accolades of social entrepreneurialism by pointing out that its economic nature within adult education reinforces cuts to public adult education funding, destabilizes opportunities for educators and learners, favours learners with resources to participate (financial, time, social, and cultural resources, including trust), and marginalizes those who may be most in need. Through accommodation, Bowl illustrates that adult educators placate their concerns about inclusion, values, and social justice, which risks a naïve optimism that a change in government equates to policy changes in adult education. This strategy ignores the global trends of neo-liberalism that continue to inform government policies. Bowl warns that failing to consider these broader global trends causes disconnection between the social justice and humanitarian values informing the work of many adult educators and dominant political and economic ideologies pushing for marketization of adult education.

Simultaneously, educators seek immediate spaces for agency in classrooms and communities. In both countries, Bowl identifies three advocacy strategies that challenge government policies: strategic alliances, national organizations, and grassroots campaigns. After exploring the strengths and limitations of all three, she recommends that a collaborative, multi-track approach must be taken to challenge neo-liberalism, which continues to inform policy no matter the government. Succumbing to “policy fatalism” (p. 151) undermines educators’ agency and the values of social justice and equality that inform much of adult education history, theory, and practice. Rather, educators, analysts, theorists, and advocates must adopt approaches that reflect the current language of policy while at the same time advocate for social justice, equality, and equity, collaborating within the profession and across professions/sectors impacted by neo-liberalism to effectively address the conflict between policy and practice.

Although England and New Zealand are geographically distant, they share a history of colonization and migration. This shared history serves as a basis for Bowl’s comparative analysis of the working lives of adult educators in the two countries, particularly with

respect to the professional and policy changes influenced by neo-liberalism. In doing so, she reveals a disjuncture between the social justice roots of community education and the neo-liberal marketization of adult education for the knowledge economy.

Readers will come at this book from their own experiences and through their own lenses. I approached it from the crossroads of my interdisciplinary position straddling adult education and peace and conflict studies, both fields significantly impacted by neo-liberalism. Bowl's warning against policy fatalism—a likely response to perceived monoliths such as neo-liberal policies—and her call for concerted multi-track actions from the micro to the macro scale could catalyze practitioners and analysts/theorists alike to take action. However, such advocacy is challenged by the disconnect between theory/analysis and what is happening on the ground in communities.

Robin Neustaeter,
University of Manitoba