

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Paul Bocking, Public Education, Neoliberalism, and Teachers: New York, Mexico City, Toronto (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)

Rodrigo M. Santos

Volume 89, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090052ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0031>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Santos, R. (2022). Review of [Paul Bocking, Public Education, Neoliberalism, and Teachers: New York, Mexico City, Toronto (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 325–326.
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0031>

Paul Bocking, *Public Education, Neoliberalism, and Teachers: New York, Mexico City, Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)

PUBLIC-SCHOOL teacher, union activist, and scholar Paul Bocking presents an analysis of three case studies situated in Mexico City, New York, and Toronto to explore why teachers' professional autonomy is under assault by neoliberal education reform and how this assault has impacted the work of teachers in Mexico, the United States, and Canada. In this comparative study, Bocking draws mainly from different teachers' accounts to emphasize the importance of local contexts to understanding neoliberal governance and teachers' resistance. The book's structure is developed around the case studies.

In the first two chapters, the author explores the importance, differences, and commonalities of teachers' professional autonomy within teacher unionism contexts and the challenges the neoliberalization of education has posed to teachers' professional autonomy in the three cities studied. Bocking starts by positioning teachers and teachers' professional autonomy as the main targets of educational reform in North America since the 1970s. The author approaches key historical developments in the geography of neoliberal policies in North America, describing why Mexico City, New York City, and Toronto are important centres of education policy and how international organizations have produced teachers' policy mobility. Despite stressing the importance of local spaces of policy deliberation, Bocking understands neoliberal education policy as a dominant trend that transcends the context of local districts, municipalities, states/provinces, or national governments. While the book focuses specifically on the issues surrounding teachers'

professional autonomy within neoliberal contexts in North America, readers could benefit from a discussion about the definition of neoliberalism and its uneven pattern of development around the world.

Bocking draws from a combination of interviews, an ethnographic study conducted with teachers' organizations and educators, and his own experiences as a public-school teacher and union activist, to provide the reader with rich accounts that evidence the neoliberal offensive on teachers' professional autonomy in these three contexts. By positioning teachers as subjects rather than objects of the research, Bocking also addresses an important issue in qualitative education policy research, which is the absence of classroom teachers' voices in investigations that have the work of teachers as the focus of the research. The book includes accounts from teachers but also from administrators, principals, union leaders, and policymakers. The diversity of voices from actors involved in different levels of policy deliberation provides the reader with a detailed picture of the complex struggles to resist the deskilling and deprofessionalization of teaching.

Bocking supports a collective notion of professionalism in which teachers as a group, especially through unions, have the autonomy and the responsibility to self-regulate the profession. By teachers' professional autonomy, Bocking means the "capacity and freedom of teachers to exercise their judgement in interpreting broad curriculum guidelines established by the state into their day-to-day classroom activities." (4) While Bocking's description of professional autonomy acknowledges the capacity and responsibility of teachers to self-regulate the profession and to make broad changes to external curriculum demands, it seems to keep teachers out of the realm of curriculum production, as interpreters of the official curriculum guidelines.

Bocking assesses the three case studies through five dimensions of comparison on governmental policy and teacher responses: the centralization of authority away from local school district levels to higher policy levels (state/province); how contemporary policies have shifted workplace power relations between principals and teachers from a collegial model to a manager-employee hierarchy; the effect of standardized testing on teachers' capacity to exercise professional judgement in the classroom; the promotion of school choice through competition between public schools within districts; and the trajectory of teachers' unions towards accommodation and resistance to neoliberal education reform. The author considers these five dimensions "common dynamics" of the neoliberalization and de-professionalization of teachers' work in Mexico City, New York, and Toronto.

Chapters 3 through 5 consist of a very detailed account of each case study. While the focus of Bocking's research was on union organization at the city level, the author describes with impressive coherence and detail among the three case studies how the multi-scalar aspects of neoliberal policies operate to regulate and limit the types of resistance and response teachers and teachers' unions can organize against neoliberal education reforms and its impetus to strip teachers' professional judgement away from the educational processes of teaching and learning. Despite sharing commonalities in the development of neoliberal policies in education, Bocking thoroughly demonstrates how the previous political structures and policies regarding education, teaching, and teacher unionism upon which the neoliberal policies are built play a significant role in the local development of policies and, consequently, organized resistance.

The book's conclusion summarizes the evidence of neoliberal education reforms' attack on teachers' professional autonomy across the three case studies. Bocking defends the importance of teachers' struggle for professional autonomy, emphasizing the crucial role played by unions in building a counter-hegemonic position against neoliberal governments and experts. Bocking also argues that to significantly impact the work lives of teachers, a multi-scale, geographically informed strategy to resist the neoliberal assault on the teaching profession and teachers' professional autonomy must be rooted in classroom experiences. Sharing strategies for confronting neoliberal policies that are developed similarly in different places, like high-stakes, standardised exams, and school choice, can be a useful resource to teachers and teacher unions.

Paul Bocking's book is an important contribution to qualitative education policy research and to any teacher, education worker, student, or scholar who is interested in understanding resistance, the struggles of teachers against de-professionalization, and how neoliberal education policies operate through different scales of policy deliberation. Bocking presents the reader with a detailed account of how neoliberal education reforms impact the daily lives of teachers and how collective resistance is influenced by the different circumstances imposed by neoliberalism and can be deployed (or not) to resist the neoliberal attacks upon the teaching profession. By sharing international experiences of teachers and teacher unions resisting neoliberal reforms, Bocking turns the book itself into a useful resource to inform the multi-scale strategy of resistance he argues for.

RODRIGO M. SANTOS
University of British Columbia