

Review of Transforming Conversations: Feminism and Education in Canada Since 1970 by Dawn Wallin and Janice Wallace (Eds.)

Mairi McDermott

Volume 6, numéro 2, automne 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076790ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v6i2.70730>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (imprimé)

2368-416X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McDermott, M. (2020). Compte rendu de [Review of Transforming Conversations: Feminism and Education in Canada Since 1970 by Dawn Wallin and Janice Wallace (Eds.)]. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 6(2), 154–157.
<https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v6i2.70730>

© Mairi McDermott, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Transforming Conversations: Feminism and Education in Canada Since 1970 by Dawn Wallin and Janice Wallace (Eds.). Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.

The chapters in this book map the influence of feminism in K-12, adult, and postsecondary education in Canada. In a narrative journey, the reader is moved through four waves of feminism, starting with the 1970s Royal Commission on the Status of Women, with each author addressing different planes of feminist influence and struggle. As the introduction notes, the process has been slow and the shifts seemingly minor; yet, taken as a whole, the chapters capture that change has indeed occurred. Just as importantly, in the conclusion chapter, Wallace and Wallin urgently remind us that the work of feminism is incomplete. Because of the ever-shifting contexts of contemporary education, they say, feminist educators must continue to push the boundaries of feminism and continue addressing social inequities. Too often, the work of changing inequities feels overwhelming, and this book is a necessary intervention, a reminder to take note of and amplify the little changes. Thus, feminist educators may stay in the work and avoid fatigue.

In the introduction, Wallace and Wallin set the question guiding the collection of essays: “What effect, if any, has feminism had on education in Canada since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), and to what end” (p. 6)? They then provide the broader historical-political context of the RCSW, how it emerged, and what potentialities for equality the report provided. Critically, underpinning the edited collection is the realization that Commissions, reports, and policies themselves cannot stand in for the actions required to undo historical inequities. In other words, while documents like the RCSW (Government of Canada, 1970) are necessary in providing legibility to the ongoing inequities for groups who make up the tapestry of Canada, they are not sufficient in bringing about the change they name. Furthermore, they form a solid ground upon which communities, scholars, educators, and activists can stand in their efforts towards social justice and equity in schools and society. By positioning the book in direct relation to the RCSW, the editors and contributors animate various ways in which people and groups have tirelessly worked towards materializing the goals in the report.

As the reader moves through the subsequent chapters, they will find a balance between personal stories of researchers, leaders, and educators, as well as empirical research involving archival and interview data. This approach to mapping the terrain and allowing each chapter to offer its own orientation device encourages readers to notice shifts in the landscape. As an organizing schema, the chapters offer a chronological topography of feminism in Canadian education, yet could include more conversation on broader socio-political landscapes through a sociological approach.

Part one, *Discourses of Teaching: Speaking Up*, consists of three chapters discussing second-wave feminist movements (1960s-1990s) in education. In Chapter one, Cook traces how feminism was integrated into the fields of history and education in Canadian universities, noting how history embraced feminism more quickly than education. She explicates the

tenuous position faculties of education have had, where, since their emergence in Canadian universities, they have been seeking recognition as an academic field. Secondly, she unpacks the ongoing pressures to teach, promote, support, and challenge the ever-shifting policy terrain guiding teaching and learning practices coming from provincial governments' initiatives.

Fine-Meyer, in the next chapter, draws on oral history interviews of teachers alongside archival documents. She shows how feminism was brought into schools during the 1970s and 1980s through teacher-driven curriculum development and the use of networks (usually informal) in sharing resources as counternarratives to the masculinist curriculum that ignored women's historical experiences. She suggests that the work of individual teachers, while tethered to communities, did more to change history education than government policies and curricula.

Chapter three takes the reader into Hewitt's personal experiences as a teacher, school principal, senior administrator, and activist from 1960-1985 to name and mark material changes in undoing discriminatory practices within school boards. Hewitt maps the overt as well as tacit job interview scoring sheets infused with bias towards male candidates. Through specific examples of change, Hewitt suggests that feminism did, indeed, have substantial influence on policies and practices in Ontario education.

Part two, *Discourses of Leadership: Speaking Out*, turns the focus from access and representation to consider the influence of feminist thought amplified in second-wave feminism. As Wallin notes in the introduction to part two, "[t]he movement of more women into positions of authority in educational systems," which is marked in different ways in part one of the book, "does not necessarily equate with a feminist ideology being introduced" (p. 93). The three chapters in part two each consider the field of educational administration within the university to unwind masculinist epistemological assumptions framing the field. Using a variety of approaches—feminist autoethnography and institutional ethnography in Wallace, interviews with feminist leaders in Wallin, and interviews oriented by actor network theory (ANT) in Viczko—these chapters animate how feminist educators and activists can be pulled back into dominant articulations of power and privilege even while actively resisting such performatives.

This section as a whole models critical reflexivity and vulnerability to continually notice and change complicities within work seeking feminist encounters. Wallace, for example, tells of a final assignment submitted by a student in her course that challenged her to recognize the way her course outline supported masculinist approaches to educational administration. Wallin, on the other hand, brings attention to the sense of exhaustion felt by feminist educators living and working in liminal spaces between commitment to the institution in which one is employed and challenging the very structures of that institution. Finally, Viczko positions feminism as an agentic force recursively shaping and being shaped by the leadership practices of female administrators. Through the engagement with ANT, Viczko allows the reader to notice how the field is continually being formed, thus creating space for expanding or shifting the boundaries that hold the field of educational administration together.

If the reader moves through the book in the order presented, Viczko's chapter flows into part three, where the field of feminism is challenged to better attend to contemporary lifeworlds. Part

three, *Disrupting Discourses: Speaking Back to Feminism*, does just what the title of the section suggests. The three chapters surface how the story of mainstream feminism (Hemmings, 2011) is told through Euro-white registers, tending to ignore politics of difference within feminism itself. Hamdon reflects on her experiences as an adult educator committed to both feminism and anti-racism. Through intersectionality, her reflections address racism in feminism and sexism in anti-racism. While Hamdon points to colonial propensities in Western feminism seeking to save Eastern women from patriarchal oppression, McKay engages a poststructural orientation to understand how experiences of oppression for Aboriginal women are produced and silenced through colonial relations of power. When an entire culture is dehumanized—continued through ongoing colonial relations—there are dangers in naming problematics within the culture. In other words, McKay addresses how women are silenced and positioned as “going against cultural norms and practices” (p. 200) from within the community, and thus doubly marginalized as Aboriginal women.

Wrapping this section up, Pillay, too, engages poststructural feminism to consider the possibilities presented when the teaching force better represents the diversity of ways of knowing, being, and relating in the world. Starting with her experience having a teacher who was South-Asian and who looked like her, she suggests that while representation matters, she also considers ways for White teachers to draw on and seek multicentric classroom environments. Ultimately, however, Pillay believes more must be done to diversify the teaching force, to help create alternative epistemological and ontological approaches in the ways we do schooling and education.

Finally, positioned as a Coda in the book, Harris’s chapter pulls back to focus on implications of the unquestioned underpinnings of schools, specifically the mind/body dualism. By linking arts-based education with feminist pedagogy, she discusses a particular community-based research project to animate how arts-based education can and should shift the ground towards critical and engaged teaching and learning.

Unabashedly committed to feminism as a broad field, the book as a whole assembles a critical stance to feminism itself. Even with the sense of hope provided by the reminders that feminism has influenced Canadian education, more thorough engagement with the socio-political contexts underpinning why change has been so slow would have better-grounded ways forward in feminist efforts. Particularly in intensified times such as we find ourselves today—COVID-19, financial cuts to education (austerity budgets—asking for us to do more with less), and broader social policies, such as refusal to renew affordable childcare in Alberta—we need to be reminded of the influences feminism has had and tools to recognize the current political implications for social justice and equity in schools and society. The reminders play a critical role, however, for without them, feminist educators may be inclined to give up; how much effort can be put in when we are continually hitting brick walls (Ahmed, 2012)?

References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Government of Canada. (1970). *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*. Queen's Printer.
- Hemmings, C. (2011). *Why stories matter: The political grammar of feminist theory*. Duke University Press.

Mairi McDermott
Assistant Professor, University of Calgary
Email: mairi.mcdermott@ucalgary.ca