

Kristina R. Llewellyn

Democracy's Angels: The Work of Women Teachers

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012. 207 pp.

Alyson E. King

University of Ontario Institute of Technology

When women became teachers in the post-war period of the 1940s to 1960s, they had to find a balance between projecting the “soft” feminine characteristics of being nurturing and motherly while at the same time being a “tough” professional with clear intellectual and administrative abilities. While the challenge of negotiating these two dimensions of being a female teacher may not be new, Kristina Llewellyn’s account of the interplay between those characteristics and the democratic discourse of the period, based on her collection of twenty interviews, introduces a new perspective into both the nature of teaching and the role of the education system in creating a democratic Canadian nation. In four succinct chapters, Llewellyn establishes the gendered nature of educational democracy, democratic knowledge and professionalism, morality and citizenship, and issues of responsibility and power in a participatory democracy. Each chapter includes analysis of the personal experiences of individual teachers in Toronto and Vancouver, interwoven with previous research on both teachers and public education for democracy and good citizenship.

Llewellyn’s first chapter sets out “the ideological terrain” (p. 21) of Canada’s schools and education systems. Her historiographical overview includes the major debates about the influence of the progressive and traditional theories of education on the nature of education systems. In addition, however, Llewellyn integrates an analysis of the democratic rhetoric that circulated around education and schools, shaping the workplace experience of the women teachers she examines. The period was one during which this rhetoric of participatory democracy was translated into (1) more vocational opportunities and a diversified curriculum in secondary schools, (2) a shift towards viewing schools as a social service with formal guidance departments and the teaching of what was called universal values and responsible citizenship, and (3) a turn towards more local autonomy in decision-making and supervision (p. 25). Llewellyn notes in particular the contradictions in the expression and

implementation of a participatory democracy when women teachers were involved.

In the secondary schools, the most valued curriculum was that of the academic stream which purportedly required teachers (and students) to have a capacity for “academic/rational knowledge” rather than the “feminine” qualities of nurturing connections with children and “appreciation of learning theories” (p. 52). Women teachers, therefore, were faced with a system that accepted male teachers as “natural scholars” while they were both encouraged to become teachers and seen as less committed, less capable, and less qualified (p. 52). Llewellyn’s oral histories, however, illustrate that women teachers did not accept this categorization; indeed, they worked hard to establish their identities as teachers who were “rational knowledge-bearing professionals” (p. 52). In her interviews, Llewellyn digs into the ways in which women interpreted and defined qualities such as being “a good teacher” and what it meant in their day-to-day performance as teachers and professionals. These stories highlight the contradictions in their professional lives: on the one hand, being treated as less serious than their male colleagues if they demonstrated traditional feminine and heterosexual qualities (i.e., getting married and having children), while on the other hand, being treated with suspicion if they focussed on their career or did not marry and have children. The post-war education systems relied on the labour of women teachers, but they were more often seen as a flexible reserve source of workers who did not need praise, appropriate compensation, or promotions. The interviews illustrate the struggles of the women who sought to establish their professional identity within this context.

The balancing act continued for women teachers as they were “situated as the moral gatekeeper[s] for democratic citizenship” (p. 78). Llewellyn’s interviews illustrate the tension between women teachers’ simultaneous performances of femininity, respectability, and professionalism within the parameters of their jobs, as well as the performative nature of their work. Consider, for example, the physical education teacher who must conduct classes in attire appropriate for sports and athletics, but must transform herself into an acceptably feminine appearance when outside of the gymnasium. Indeed, several of the interviewees spoke of the importance of being role models within the classroom, something that they saw as more effective than simply lecturing about morality. The women all maintained an appearance that fit the norms of the period, even when they were themselves outsiders due to their ethnicity or sexuality: one second generation Chinese teacher established and modelled an identity that reproduced the values of the period even though her body did not.

Given the contradictions between the masculine image of the professional teacher and the gendered norms of the period, Llewellyn asks how school officials were able to define women teachers as “appropriate agents for participatory democracy” (p. 102). She argues that women teachers were expected to take on additional responsibilities as leaders in the patriarchal school system which was being molded into “a microcosm of participatory democracy” while being denied the authority and power to control their own work environments (pp. 103-104). As Llewellyn puts it, “[u]ltimately women were democracy’s workers and men were its managers” (p. 111). As workers in a participatory democratic institution, women teachers were given

increasing “freedom to teach”—a catch-22 of having more control over what was taught in the classroom but with a corresponding increase in responsibilities for designing curriculum. Women teachers, therefore, experienced increasing responsibilities without the opportunity to achieve the political authority that would allow them to move up in the hierarchical power structures of the education system.

Llewellyn’s case study of women teachers in Vancouver and Toronto provides an insightful look at individual experiences and stories that are often overlooked in histories of education based solely on documentary evidence. At the same time, these individual experiences are well-contextualized within the broader debates and previous research on women teachers in the post-World War II era and introduce a new perspective on the contradictory place of women teachers as angels of democracy.