

*Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*  
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Grant Frost

*The Attack on Nova Scotia Schools: The Story Behind 25 Years of Tumultuous Change*

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Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 2020. 176 pp.

Grant Frost's account of the past twenty-five years of policy development and discourse in Nova Scotia is compelling for its grounded review of education privatization policies, illustrating global trends implemented in a local context chronologically and with a clear understanding of the impact these policies have on teachers and those underrepresented in the discourse. As an educator, author, and Halifax Local Nova Scotia Teachers Union President until 2020, Frost highlights the fundamental difference between those who see public schools as a vehicle for public good and those who see schools as an economic tool for competition and individual financial gain. His analysis of the manifestations of privatization in Nova Scotia and his exploration of the relationship amongst international actors, the media, and the government provide real-world accounts to supplement observations made by other researchers from across the globe.

Frost outlines what he sees as a neoliberal reformist perspective on public education. In this view, reformists consider increased accountability, a focus on core subjects, and increased competition as critical components of effective education reform. While these concepts might sound good in theory, Frost contends that increasing accountability through standardized testing and data collection, prioritizing certain types of knowledge, and connecting test results to teachers' livelihoods or school funding do little to improve student performance. Instead, he argues that these measures limit teachers' creativity and autonomy to teach based on local context, centering the test as a core reason for education and making it harder for teachers to adapt content to their students' specific needs. This structure, Frost warns, takes power from the collective by discouraging collaboration and goes against the social message that public education is supposed to advocate for. This view builds on work by researchers, such as Stephen J. Ball and Deborah Youdell's report, *Hidden Privatization in Public Education*, who warn that privatization policies can present a great ethical danger as they redefine relationships in the education system from collective and collaborative to individualistic and competitive interactions. The shift in ethical perceptions was demonstrated in one of Frost's examples in the book, where teachers who used to volunteer their time for additional tasks, such as supervising students during recess, refused to do those

tasks once the government attempted to impose a contract on teachers. Ball and Youdell agree that the environment created by privatization practices reduces collaboration among teachers, impacts their incentive structures, and eventually leads to negative impacts on the students.

In his analysis, Frost claims that the system suffers from what he calls an “Unsupported Deficiency Syndrome” (13), as a powerful neoliberal advocacy campaign has shifted the language about the state of public education to a deficit perspective. He points out how think tanks, the media, and the government use language about global competition and the economy to frame public education as failing Nova Scotians. Once these fear-based narratives have been established, private interests and the government step in to offer solutions such as charter schools, parent choice vouchers, and other offerings emphasizing competitiveness. These are solutions that result in increased inequity and weakening of collective power. Frost’s narration of how the framing shifted in Nova Scotia supports other scholars such as Antoni Verger, Clara Fontdevila, and Adrián Zancajo who conclude that private interests use language to create new meanings that frame privatization as progress toward a solution.<sup>1</sup> Both Frost and Verger et al. also demonstrate that this new framing impacts decision-makers perspectives regardless of their ideological background. Frost highlights this impact as Conservative, Liberal, and NDP governments made decisions that advanced privatization in Nova Scotia.

To counteract the fear-based narrative, Frost offers counterarguments tackling common concerns about public education. He cites the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program report to showcase that Nova Scotia’s public education is far from being a failing system as portrayed in the media and by advocates for privatization. He concludes that people believe public education is failing because it has no advocates. With the media prioritizing fear-based narratives and private interests, the government finds an easy political win by offering simple solutions that do not address core issues of inequity. Similar to Sue Winton<sup>2</sup> who advocates for a focus on what we are fighting for instead of what we are fighting against, Frost advocates for more public engagement, more representation of success stories from public education, and more investment in what works in the system instead of opting for privatization strategies. He puts the responsibility on the government and the leaders in the public education system to better showcase the achievements of public education.

Grant Frost’s *The Attack on Nova Scotia Schools* offers a compelling narrative for researchers looking to read a first-hand account of educators experiencing privatization in Canada and the tactics employed by different actors to scale privatization. The book leaves me wanting to know more about how a positive narrative can be advanced on the policy level. It would add value if educators, such as Frost, can

1 Antoni Verger, Clara Fontdevila, and Adrián Zancajo, “Multiple Paths Towards Education Privatization in a Globalizing World: A Cultural Political Economy Review, *Journal of Education Policy* 32, no. 6 (2017): 757–787

2 Sue Winton, *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 115–130

provide concrete recommendations to improve public education in ways that serve the public good. Nonetheless, Frost's book provides a view from the ground on issues often discussed in abstract terms.

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Richard Hornsey

*Imperial Engineers: The Royal Indian Engineering College, Coopers Hill*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 432 pp.

Educational institutions, like most institutions, are so big and complex that normally their chroniclers are forced to make a series of focusing decisions. What time period to write about? Should the focus be on students, faculty, culture, or something else? The Royal Indian Engineering College, located at Coopers Hill, just west of London (and hereafter Coopers Hill) had a short enough life (35 years) and was a small enough school (1623 total graduates), that Richard Hornsey didn't have to make those choices: in *Imperial Engineers*, he is able to attempt a total history of the school.

Coopers Hill was established in 1871 at the behest of the Secretary of State for India, as a college to train engineers in England for service in India. As the colonial government increased its public works programs (railroads and irrigation systems), several schemes to increase the number of engineers for the colonial service had not proven satisfactory. More broadly, the British system of producing engineers, based on apprenticeship, was proving inadequate. While Coopers Hill was designed to train engineers for India, Hornsey sees the school as the leading edge of formal classroom engineering education for Britain. But Coopers Hill was a transitional institution. By 1906, British engineering institutions had grown sufficiently in their numbers and specializations so that a 1903 Committee of Inquiry argued that Coopers Hill was no longer necessary, and it closed its doors in 1906.

Hornsey, who is himself a professor of electrical engineering, does not provide a strong theoretical framing. (For example, one could imagine using the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the creation of elites.) He acknowledges his "generally sympathetic" (6) account is an internalist one centred on the experiences of Coopers Hill students and graduates. Hornsey does, though, briefly mention historiographic controversies over whether British engineering works in India really benefitted the Indian people. To the extent that the book has aspirations beyond a names and dates history of Coopers Hill, it attempts to provide an engineer-centric examination of the British in India, their production, their technical works, and their social lives. He frequently makes comparisons to modern day engineering education practices

A major theme of the book is that the Coopers Hill was as much a place for inculcating culture and esprit de corps as it was for providing formal technical education, and advocates of Coopers Hill believed these processes could be best carried out in