

Stephanie Fox and Lukas Boser, eds.

National Literacies in Education: Historical Reflections on the Nexus of Nations, National Identities, and Education

Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 248pp.

National Literacies in Education represents an international collaboration of scholars with shared historical interests in how and why mass public schooling has been implicated in the making of national citizens and modern nation states. The two editors and fifteen contributors are primarily European scholars, with academic appointments in the history of education, comparative education, educational foundations, and educational policy. Daniel Tröhler has been a pivotal figure within this scholarly community, and this edited collection serves in part to honor his career and commemorate his recent retirement from the University of Vienna.

By design, Tröhler is neither an editor nor chapter author in this book. However, his work features prominently in the book's framing and the ways the chapters play off each other. The title adopts Tröhler's concept of "national literacies," loosely defined as "the ability to make sense of national symbols, acts, and signs, and thus to live a meaningful life in a particular national context" (11). This concept serves as the book's centre of gravity—with each chapter discussing, criticizing, or elaborating upon national literacies as an orienting concept that helps historians (1) study how nationalist impulses and national-building campaigns have been entangled with practices of mass education through history and (2) recognize how different national(ist) orientations enable and constrain practices educational research.

National Literacies comprises seventeen chapters that explore the nexus of nations, nationalism, and education in different contexts, including Canada, Denmark, Sweden, France, Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Israel, Finland, the United States, the Ottoman Empire, and Argentina. The editors loosely organized these chapters into four thematic sections identified as Tröhler's chief interests as an educational historian:

- 1) National Literacies in Education Research
- 2) From People to National Citizens
- 3) The Nation in School and Curriculum
- 4) The Nation in a Globalized World

The book's overarching focus works well. The chapters span a range of contexts and wide-ranging concerns. However, every chapter touches enough on Tröhler's work to craft a shared conceptual orientation. The explicit focus on "national literacies" makes it easier for readers to compare and contrast (trans-)national educational movements and to consider how different national styles of thought have enabled and constrained the work of educators and researchers in education. The references to Tröhler's scholarship does not come off as forced or hagiographic, and these frames

seemed to open up conceptual space more than they constrained the histories represented in this edited volume.

The range of chapters was relatively broad for an edited volume but not comprehensive. Anglo-American perspectives often dominate “international” volumes in education. In contrast, *National Literacies* drew contributors from a range of European countries and extended the book’s gaze with chapters situated in North America, South America, and the Middle East—a conceptual and geographical universe similar to the journal *Paedagogica Historica* and the International Standing Conference for the History of Education. The chapters also span both conventional and novel historical concerns. Many chapters explore the nexus of nations, nationalism, and education through major curriculum and reform documents or the establishment of national schools and universities. Other chapters examine this nexus historically through studies of an informal Israeli greeting, the boundaries of educational fields, and the use of a children’s book and digital media as national literacies.

The volume explicitly focuses on *national* literacies, but I also found the transnational nature of the book generative. Many of the contributors have lived, studied, and worked in multiple countries, and many chapters pursue transnational and comparative histories. These historical comparisons illustrate how educational perspectives, practices, and policies have traveled historically and how they were taken up, re-interpreted, and transformed as they touched down in different nations. The contributors primarily pursue transnational movements in Europe; however, those studies open up ways for North American readers to consider how and why certain European ideas and practices spread across the Atlantic and how they mutated upon landing in Canada and the United States. The section, *The Nation in a Globalized World* considers the relationships between “national” and “global” more explicitly, and the chapter on the establishment of a US university in Istanbul points to imperial dimensions of transnational educational initiatives.

Even though the words “religion,” “Christianity,” and “Protestantism” do not appear in the book’s title, *National Literacies* also explores the nexus of religion, nation, and education. Many chapters draw more broadly from Tröhler’s work, particularly *Languages of Education*, which argued that Protestant Christianity played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern school and the citizen-making function it came to assume. For example, some chapters consider links between religious and national identities in several countries while others contrast nation-building movements in European countries with different Protestant histories. Historians interested in the role that Christianity (especially Protestantism) has played in making up the modern citizen and national identities will find several chapters in this book insightful.

While the overarching focus on national literacies was generative, I was struck that *National Literacies* thoroughly develops the “national” without conceptualizing “literacies” in any serious or specialized way. As a curriculum historian who is also well-versed in the New Literacy Studies, I recognize that Tröhler, the editors, and contributors largely assume definitions of “literacy” that language and literacy scholars have critiqued for decades as masking the social, political, and ideological dimensions of language and literacy. The analyses of national literacies might

have been more robust had the book adopted the “ideological model”⁶ of literacy as social practice, for example—especially since several chapters explicitly sought to understand nationalism as ideological languages. More intentionally defining and theorizing literacy might have opened new avenues to consider how language and texts function in social practices that make up certain kinds of subjectivity, citizenship, and national identities.

Overall, I highly recommend Fox and Boser’s (2023) *National Literacies in Education: Historical Reflections on the Nexus of Nations, National Identities, and Education*. I found this book an insightful and engaging read, and I plan on drawing upon its chapters and reading more work from its contributors as I pursue historical interests related to white Christian nationalism in the US.

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Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M. F. Andersen

Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education

The University of Chicago Press, 2022. 232 pp.

Why are folks so hot and bothered about the provision of sex education in schools? Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M.F. Andersen’s book *Touchy Subject* opens with a series of controversies. Parents in Nebraska, clutching pearls, and shrieking, “I have five daughters! Five daughters! Who’s going to keep them pure?” (1). But, it’s not just America, as the authors highlight; it’s happening in Germany too. And Ontario.

And at this moment, alarming conservative incursions on sexuality education are unfolding broadly. In Canada, the conservative provincial governments of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and New Brunswick are anxiously trying to censor sex education curricula, and far-right groups are organizing national anti-queer and anti-sex ed protests across the country.⁷ And then, perhaps fortuitously, as I was reading this book in May 2024, New Brunswick premier Blaine Higgs railed against the provision of sex education by sharing a screenshot of a sex education workshop in a New Brunswick high school. The screenshot showed an image of a slide from the sex ed workshop, that includes four questions presumably asked by young people such as “do girls masturbate” and “is it good or bad to do anal?” Blaine Higgs responded with handwringing, tweeting:

6 B. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); J. P. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (Taylor & Francis, 1990).

7 Kendall Latimer and Laura Sciarpetti, “Critics alarmed as Sask. government scales back sexual health education,” *CBC News*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/sex-education-saskatchewan-1.6944443>; Jacques Poitras, “Higgs greets marchers opposing LGBTQ policies,” *CBC News New Brunswick*, September 20, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/higgs-marchers-lgbtq-1.6972813>