
BCTF Research Report

RR2014-07

**Why do we educate? Are the proposed BC
K-12 education directions appropriate
for future economies, and for the needs
of a diverse and democratic society?**

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October 2014

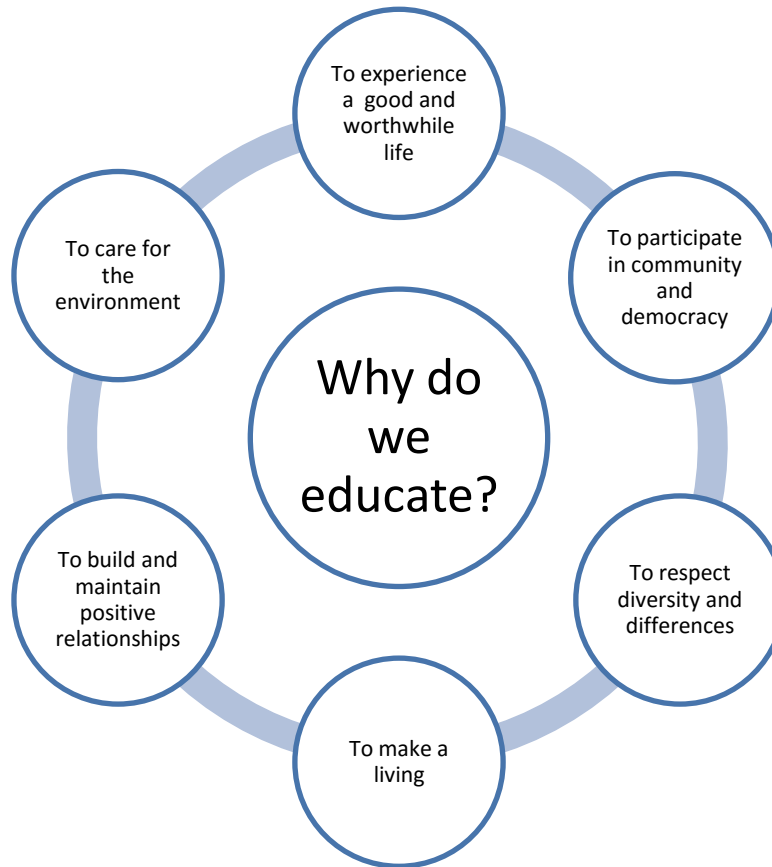
Christy Clark, Premier of BC, interviewed on CKNW's *The Mike Eckford Show*, September 26, 2014:

Eckford: What is your plan in the future for education in British Columbia....Is that the role of education as we move forward—to prepare people for industry?

Clark: Education has a whole bunch of roles. Ultimately education's role is to make sure that any citizen has the chance to lead the kind of fulfilling life that they want to lead, to be able to think for themselves, make good decisions, be good citizens and also go out and get a job.

Is it to make a living or to build a better world? To serve the needs of industry or to build a democratic society? Should the 'educated citizen' be a critical thinker? A person who lives in a sustainable way and cares for the environment? An entrepreneur? Some of these? All of these? Something else altogether?

Below is a graphic showing some of the reasons we educate.



Are these reflected in the BC Education Plan¹ or in the plans to ‘re-engineer’ BC’s public schools? Should they be? As the provincial government announces major philosophical and practical shifts in the BC education system, now is the time to reconsider the purpose of public education, in part because the discussion is essentially absent from the government’s more-recent documents, specifically the *BC skills for jobs blueprint: Re-engineering education and training report*², and in part because by revisiting the discussion on the purposes and asking ‘Why do we educate?’, it’s possible to frame and consider whether educational proposals are in fact suitable for our lives and for the needs of our current and future societies. The major shifts in direction currently being proposed require some discussion rather than being announced and implemented in the absence of public debate.

The question of the purposes of education has been addressed for millennia. The UBC Action-Centred Teaching group³ discussed the influence of the philosophers of ancient Greece as impacting modern thinking on the purposes of education with their consideration of *poiesis* and *praxis*:

Poiesis is a means-end activity where the desired ends determine the required means. Aristotle uses shipbuilding as an example of *poiesis*: the image of the finished vessel helps shipbuilders select the appropriate means. Teaching understood as *poiesis* includes, for example, deciding what children should learn,

¹ <http://www.bcedplan.ca/>

² http://www.bcjobsplan.ca/getskills/wp-content/uploads/BCs_Skills_for_jobs_blueprint.pdf

³ <http://einsights.ogpr.educ.ubc.ca/v11n03/articles/coulter/coulter.html>

organizing so that they might learn what are deemed desirable knowledge, skills, or dispositions, setting up a classroom, writing report cards. Clearly much of teaching is *poiesis*.

Teaching understood as *praxis*, however, begins from different assumptions. *Praxis* is concerned with ethical action and the ultimate end of *praxis* is to act well, to lead a good and worthwhile life, an activity that inevitably involves relationships with other people and the intertwining of ends and means. Parenting, for example, is largely a *praxis* activity: good parents help their children discover their own worthwhile lives by helping them acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions or virtues to succeed in the various aspects of life. Parents discover the means and ends in context, in relationship. Indeed, the means are constitutive of the ends, that is, how we act as parents is enmeshed with our purposes as parents.

Kemmis and Smith (2008) defined *praxis*:

Praxis is a particular kind of action. It is an action that is morally committed and oriented and informed by traditions in a field. It is the kind of action people are engaged in when they think about what their actions will mean in the world. Praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what is best to do, they act. (p. 4)

Thus, in *praxis*, teaching is a moral act. ‘Means’ and ‘ends’ are distinguished but the ends are crucial because the means impact the ends, including what kind of world we occupy. ‘Means’ are essentially the things done in schools, with a curriculum and assessment, while ‘ends’ require a consideration of what kind of life, relationships, and society the education system is intending to prepare students for.

Peters (1973), close to 2,000 years later, re-iterated the notion of a good and worthwhile life:

At its core, education aims to initiate people into a worth-while form of life.

Many authors have differentiated between ‘education’ and ‘socialization’, differences which can become clear when looking at the history of education.

Egan (1983) stated:

A society in which a distinction could readily be drawn between educating and socializing is a society in which an elite will be educated and the rest socialized. (p. 30)

Such a distinction was reflected most notably with the development of public schools in industrial societies, where students were essentially provided with the forms of schooling appropriate to their place in society. As an example, the English elite were educated in private enclaves such as Eton, Harrow, and Rugby, while the working-class populations in industrial towns were herded into a range of far-less-pleasant school buildings for a very different kind of education. In an earlier (Elizabethan) era in England, during the period of mercantilism (under which Canada’s initial colonization was in the sole control of the Hudson’s Bay Company), the sons of merchants were to be educated in Grammar Schools so that they might engage in commerce, while the sons of lesser men received no education.

To provide a brief sense of the variation in considering the purposes of education, three major figures writing about the philosophy of education in very different eras over the last 2,000 years are Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey.

Plato argued:

[A] proper cultural education would enable a person, ... even when young ... and still incapable of rationally understanding why, ... rightly [to] condemn and loathe contemptible things. And then the rational mind would be greeted like an old friend when it did arrive.⁴

Rousseau followed Confucius' belief⁵ in experiential learning:

Rousseau took a consistently naturalistic approach to education in the *Émile*, maintaining that the child is naturally good and made wicked only by its environment. He held that knowledge comes from the senses, and that children should engage actively with a well-ordered environment, and learn by interacting with it. Since movement is crucial to this learning process, it should be encouraged from birth. Thus Rousseau was hostile to swaddling infants and to controlling toddlers with leading reins. The growing boy was to be introduced to the natural sciences by practical lessons, 'learning by doing', preferably in the open air, far from the dry pedantry of textbooks and laboratories. (O'Hagan, 2001)

Dewey wrote:

[We must] make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and throughout permeated with the spirit of art, history, and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantor of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.

Themes such as education to develop rational understanding and critical thinking, or learning by doing, while also contributing to or building a wider society, are some of the themes espoused in considerations of the purposes of education over time. Most writers considering the purposes of education, whether philosophers or not, have combined some factors which enable the student to learn what s/he needs within some consideration of the needs of society. It is the balance between learner needs and societal needs that's at the crux of the issue. Socialization—the ways that students are taught explicitly or implicitly to become socialized into the norms of society—is broadly accepted as necessary. But what are the norms and who sets them? Governments? Corporations? Religious groups? Are some broadly-understood and agreed (human rights, non-violence, etc.) while others may be competing for dominance (the need for a skilled workforce, or the need for educating citizens in a democratic society)? Competing perspectives need not imply that norms should be seen as dichotomies—that we either develop students only as 'ready for work' or as participants in democratic processes—but that some balance or combination of norms may be required.

⁴ The Republic, pp. 401–402.

⁵ "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."—quote attributed to Confucius.

Recent contributions to the debate on the purposes of schooling

In addition to what might be considered the classic voice of philosophy briefly discussed above, many authors in more-recent times have pondered the purposes of education.

Within the debate and focus on 21st century learning, John Abbot's *Overschooled but undereducated*⁶ (2010) addresses the issue of the purposes of education. Abbot critiques cultures of materialism and acquisition, and promotes life quality over standards of living, arguing that schools are forced into stressing the latter, with curriculum articulating values of status rather than life quality or issues that affect all, such as the environment. Yet, as interesting and valuable as his argument is, Abbot has a limited perspective on an issue pervading educational thinking for centuries—why do we educate? He gets close to what might have been an exploration of this question in the fifth of fifteen principles that he articulates as providing a “rationale for a new form of learning” (p. 198). The fifth principle states:

Children's search for meaning starts young. It is the children who are already anxious to make sense of issues that matter to them in their own private lives, who come to formal schooling anxious to use whatever it can offer them to help meet their personal objectives. Not the other way round. That is why a caring, thoughtful, challenging, stimulating life—a life of childlike proportions—in the greater community is so vitally important. That is why streets that are unsafe for children to play around are as much a condemnation of failed policy as are burned-out teachers. (p. 201)

Abbot is clearly linking the purposes of education to community and society, and to building both a quality of life for the individual while also creating environments which are safe and caring.

UBC Education faculty Stack, Coulter, Grosjean, Mazawi, and Smith (2006) address their exploration of the purposes of education by considering “educational ends”. They reference Burbules (2004), who, they suggest, updates the conversation initiated with the philosophers of Ancient Greece:

Burbules assumes that education is a particular kind of end, one that involves helping people to improve the quality of their lives. In other words, the end of an education is a good and worthwhile life. The fundamental challenge, then, becomes ‘identifying and specifying the specific ideals to which education should aspire; what is it about being educated that makes us better people?’ (Burbules, p. 4; Stack et al, p. 15)

The UBC authors separate the concept of ‘ends’ from ‘means’, arguing that much of the debate in education focuses extensively and in some cases exclusively on educational ‘means’—what is taught and how—rather than ‘ends’, which reflect the wider purposes of education. Yet for many, including Abbot, the ‘ends’ stated by recent governments are also linked to countries’ economies and individual prosperity rather than to any significant focus on developing an individual’s ‘good and worthwhile life’, which in turn they argue enables citizens’ contributing to civic and civil society.

Cuban (2003) identified and listed five values that he believes are widely shared and which good schools should develop. These can be considered possible ‘ends’ of an education system, and are

⁶ <http://www.21learn.org/publications/books/overschooled-but-undereducated-how-the-crisis-in-education-is-jeopardizing-our-adolescents/>

included here to illustrate his view of education systems being the foundation of civic participation in a democratic society. By stating these ‘ends’ publicly, Cuban and other authors also encourage discussion of them, and place them firmly within a moral framework, with morality focusing on both the individual and the collective. Cuban’s five values are:

- participation in and willingness to serve in local and national communities
- open-mindedness to different opinions and a willingness to listen to such opinions
- respect for values that differ from one’s own
- treating individuals decently and fairly, regardless of background
- a commitment to reason through problems and struggle toward openly-arrived-at compromise. (pp. 46–47)

In considering how to judge whether a school is ‘good’, Cuban (2003) posed three questions:

- Are parents, staff, and students satisfied with what occurs in the school?
 - Is the school achieving the explicit goals it set for itself?
 - Are democratic behaviours, values, and attitudes evident in the students?
- (p. 48)

Such criteria appear to be of low priority in many education systems which currently stress managerial efficiency, and where success is measured in standardized tests which dominate system-accountability processes and structures. If such tests dominate educational approaches and drive teaching, then the focus on values must necessarily diminish. Criteria such as those developed by Cuban are highly unlikely to occur in jurisdictions with standards-based centralization and uniformity, yet Cuban offers a clear alternative to standardized accountability linked to narrowly-defined school effectiveness. He stresses ‘good’ over ‘effective’ as the key concept of schooling, and links the definition of goodness to a decent individual life and the need for a sustainable and sustaining democracy.

Yinger (2005) proposed a vision for the future of teaching which consisted of three components, all including some notions of morality:

- education rechartered as public good, with broad citizen participation in deciding goals and outcomes
- teaching re-framed as a professional covenant, stressing moral purpose and imagination, social responsibility and personal caring
- learning re-cast in its moral, cultural, and human significance, in which healthy communities, good societies, and sustainable ecosystems will be determined as much by moral choices as by scientific knowledge. (pp. 308-309).

Noddings has also articulated a view that the goals of education might be focused on caring and relationship:

She has been able to demonstrate the significance of caring and relationship both as an educational goal, and as a fundamental aspect of education. As a result Nel Noddings’ work has become a key reference point for those wanting to reaffirm the ethical and moral foundations of teaching, schooling, and education more broadly.⁷

⁷ <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/noddings.htm>

Kincheloe (2008) argues for a ‘fundamental rethinking and deep reconceptualization’ of the purposes of schooling to include consideration of:

- what human beings are capable of achieving
- the role of the social, cultural, and political in shaping human identity
- the relationship between community and schooling
- the ways that power operates to create purposes for schooling that are not necessarily in the best interests of the children that attend them
- how students and teachers might relate to knowledge
- the ways schooling affects the lives of students from marginalized groups
- the organization of schooling and the relationship between teachers and learners. (p. 6)

The above authors explore the purposes of education in ways that are absent from much of the current BC educational policy proposals. Their focus is on the needs of the individual and the needs of society, which they view as fundamentally linked to a quality of life which is primarily moral and ethical. Yet this is not a narrow view of imposed morality or ethics, but one based on building a ‘good’ life in an inclusive, sustainable, just, and caring society. The views expressed by the advocates of 21st century learning (including the BC Education Plan), and those the authors considered here, are quite different, but not necessarily dichotomous. They are different because one (21st century learning) focuses primarily on ‘means’ while the authors discussed above largely addresses ‘ends’. The first suggests radical change of teaching and learning approaches to fit within new economies and new technologies, while the latter suggests we consider what kind of world we want and then build approaches within education systems to create such a world.

However, the more-recent BC government emergent focus on trades and trades-related skills changes and narrows this debate. It changes the debate by its position of certainty—that the government knows what the situation is and what needs to be done. In contrast, most proponents of new educational approaches argue that in an uncertain world we need to develop students’ creativity and adaptability, because the nature of future work and the nature of society are unknown. The BC-government certainty is specific in that it focuses on employment, and much of that narrowly focusing on trades. Contrast the BC-government thinking with Morgan (2014), who articulated five trends shaping the future of work:

New behaviours, such as living a more public life, building communities, and increased sharing and collaborating.

Technology, such as big data, the Internet of things, and robots and automation.

The millennial workforce, which is expected to comprise 50% of the workforce by 2020 and growing to 75% of the workforce by 2025. This is a generation of digital natives with new values, ideas, and expectations about work.

Mobility, which allows us to stay connected anytime, anywhere, and on any device.

Globalization is giving organizations around the world the opportunity to operate in markets where boundaries of any kind are diminishing.

Some will prefer the BC-government view that there’s a labour shortage and we need to fix it. Perspectives like Morgan’s are more complicated, showing potential trends that we need to

consider, but Morgan also appears more-narrowly-focused on commerce than a more holistic view of societal and environmental needs.

One of the major initial efforts to rethink the purposes of education in the last 25 years is the Multiliteracies concept argued by the New London Group (1996):

The New London Group's initial definition of Multiliteracies breaks down the concept into three contexts. The first explores the multiplicity of communication channels in today's technological society, with diverse modes of representation and expression such as visual and spatial expressions in multi-media forms, often transmitted through mass media.

The second context focuses on the changing nature of the State and the nature of economies within such States. They outline the decline of welfare states and the growth of economic rationalism, privatization, de-regulation and the growing prevalence of 'market economy' thinking applied to schools and education systems. The world of work is described as changing from the mass-production of 'old capitalism' (Senge, 1991) to post-Fordist (Piore & Sable, 1984), and fast capitalism (Gee, 1994).

The third context is social and cultural, focusing on issues of local diversity in a world of global connectedness. Local diversities include multicultural urban environments, with a range of languages, accents and dialects. The perspective of the authors is that such contexts contain considerable social, cultural and economic assets that should be viewed positively, rather than as deficits. They stress terms such as 'democratic pluralism' and 'productive diversity', not only as terms of respect but also as ideals and as necessities for the promotion of both social equity and economic development. Using this as a foundation, they argue that teachers and others can build on the individual cultural assets of students and community. But such assets can also be economically useful, with, as an example, multilingualism being useful for the sale of goods or services to societies using the same languages. (Naylor, 2003)⁸

Many others since the Multiliteracies argument was put forward have made the case for reconsidering the nature of education systems in a changing world, although dominant views embraced by many governments rarely encompass the focus on diversity as an asset and the nature of building community espoused by the New London Group. The case made in this paper is that the focus on the purpose of the education system should be extended from a narrow focus on employment to consider much wider criteria, including the goal of creating worthwhile lives and positive relationships in diverse communities and a sustainable world.

⁸ <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/21CL/MultiliteraciesNaylor.pdf>

Recent BC-government approaches to shifting the focus of the BC education system

Four documents are considered here:

- *The BC Education Plan*⁹
- *BC Labour Market Outlook 2010–2020*¹⁰
- *Canada Starts Here: The BC Jobs Plan*¹¹
- *BC's Skills for Jobs Blueprint: Re-engineering Education and Training*¹²

The BC Education Plan has five components:

- Personalized learning
- Quality teaching
- Flexibility and choice
- High standards
- Learning enhanced by technology

The *Plan* is one of many initiatives springing up internationally that seeks to come to terms with a rapidly-changing, globalized world in which technology is pervasive. Its goal to effect 'transformation' of the education system is proclaimed in a series of documents and videos, with the *Education Plan* website stating: 'The world has changed. The way we educate our children should too.' While new curriculum is in the process of development, with a focus on 'competencies'¹³ rather than content knowledge, there are considerable uncertainties in terms of assessment, reporting, and graduation requirements. The minimal level of implementation suggests that transformation is easier to announce than to deliver. And while the move to transform initially appeared common across a number of Canadian provinces, and internationally in recent years, the steam may be going out of the movement. A conservative backlash has already occurred in Alberta, where:

Ken Porteous, former associate dean of engineering at the University of Alberta, attacked the Alberta government for adopting 'New Age' approaches to math, then called on Johnson to make significant changes to Alberta's math curriculum.

'The problem is much larger than that. Your department, including your deputy minister, is full of individuals who are committed to this wrong-headed method of teaching mathematics... If you refuse to correct these deficiencies I would suggest that the Premier needs to appoint a new Minister of Education, who is prepared to listen, and/or we need a new government.'¹⁴

The *Education Plan* faces hurdles of implementation in the absence of any funding support, and possibly a potential backlash from those who espouse 'back to the basics'. But it also has the potential to confuse with the language and terminology of the five components. Such language can be confusing because each of the five areas could mean very different things depending on individuals with different ideological perspectives. Or contextually they may appear quite

⁹ <http://www.bcedplan.ca>

¹⁰ <http://www.workbc.ca/WorkBC/files/5f/5fc26f16-3c0f-4884-ab99-b475ca7448b7.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.bcjobsplan.ca/bcjobsplan/page1/>

¹² http://www.bcjobsplan.ca/getskills/wp-content/uploads/BCs_Skills_for_jobs_blueprint.pdf

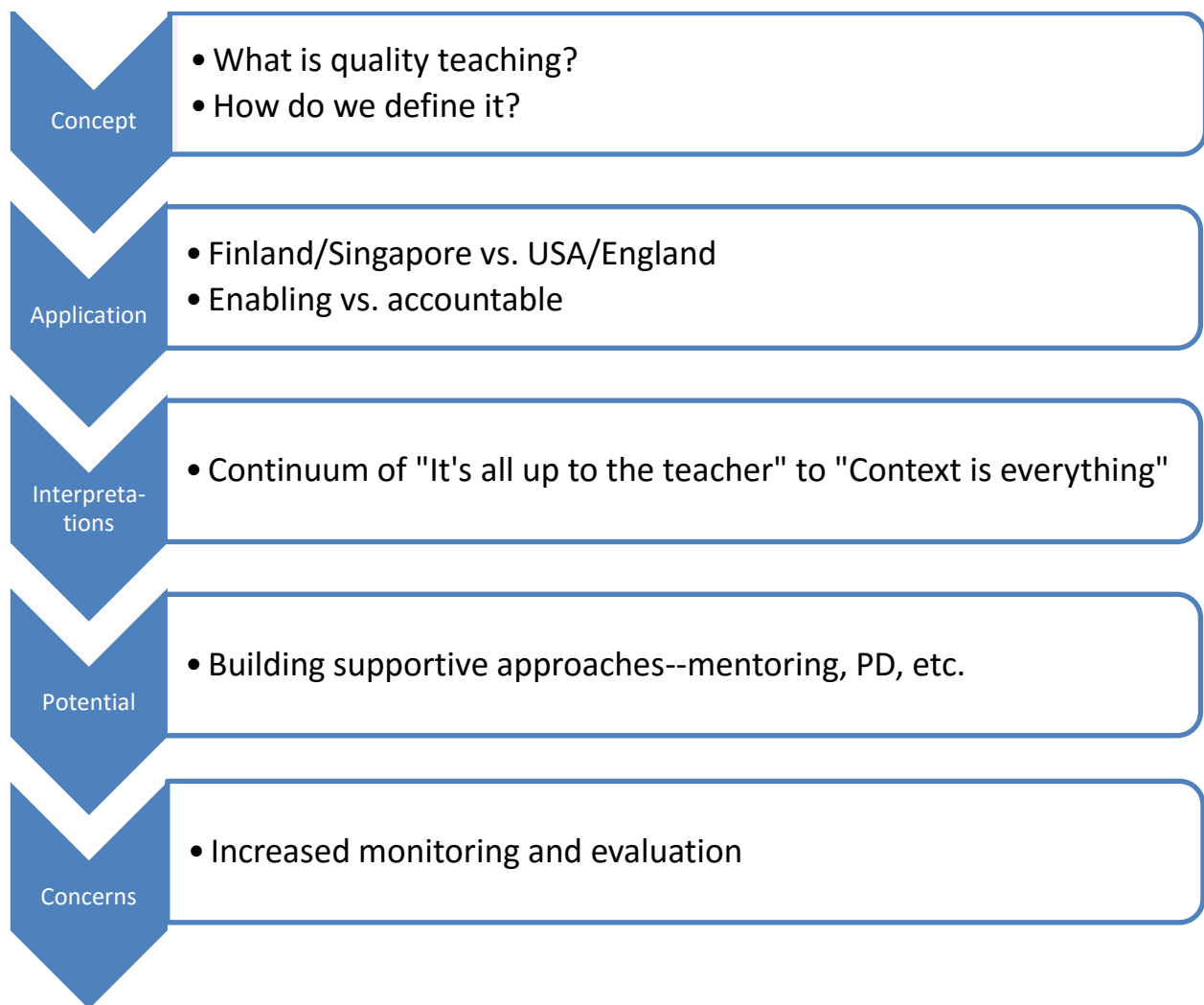
¹³ https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/docs/def_xcurr_comps.pdf

¹⁴ <http://blogs.edmontonjournal.com/2014/04/16/if-education-minister-jeff-johnson-doesnt-fix-math-curriculum-its-time-for-him-to-resign-say-math-advocates/>

different in a range of jurisdictions—the notion of ‘quality teaching’, for instance, does not look the same in Dallas, Texas as it does in Helsinki, Finland. In some movies, the superhero teacher conquers adversity and poverty, reflecting a view of quality teaching that the individual teacher, if good enough, can overcome all obstacles of poverty and under-resourced schools. Other views argue that quality teaching occurs when the skills and competency of the teacher are matched with supports for teaching and learning needs in adequately-resourced schools.

BCTF Research has offered some analysis of the terms ‘Quality teaching’ and ‘Personalized learning’, with five areas explored for each as illustrated in the graphic below.

Quality teaching: 5 ways to explore the concept



The intent of the BCTF Research analysis is not to offer a simplistic support or opposition to the concept of quality teaching, but to explore some of the complexities inherent in the term and its application in different countries, and to identify potential differences in interpretation. As examples, we accessed areas of the academic literature to explore:

- **Is quality teaching good teaching?** Not all instances of good teaching are successful, nor are all instances of successful teaching good teaching. Indeed, considerations of successful teaching took us into the domain of learning,

where it became apparent that successful learning (in the context of schooling) requires more than teaching of a certain kind. Learning also requires willingness and effort on the part of the learner, a supportive social surround, and opportunity to learn through the provision of time, facilities, and resources. These features of learning add greatly to the probability that teaching will be successful. When teaching is both successful and good, we speak of quality teaching, in the sense of placing a high value or regard upon such teaching.

Fenstermacher, G.D., & Richardson, V. (2005). On making determinations of quality in teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 107(1), pp. 186–213.

- **Is quality teaching linked to students’ test scores**, as in some parts of the USA, where teachers whose students have low test scores are considered to have deficits, or is it linked to building capacity in the teaching profession (Finland, Singapore)?

Often underlying accountability initiatives is what might be called a ‘teacher deficit’ viewpoint. The assumption underlying this view is that the primary source of low-quality teaching in schools lies in various deficits in teachers themselves—their ability, commitment, engagement or effort. Hence the attendant assumption is that the best way to fix schools is to fix these deficits in individual teachers through increased rules and regulations, incentives, and sanctions, ‘sticks and carrots’.

Ingersoll, R. (2012). Power, accountability, and the teacher quality problem. In *Assessing Teacher Quality: Understanding teacher effects on instruction and achievement*. Kelly, S., Ed. New York: Teachers’ College Press.

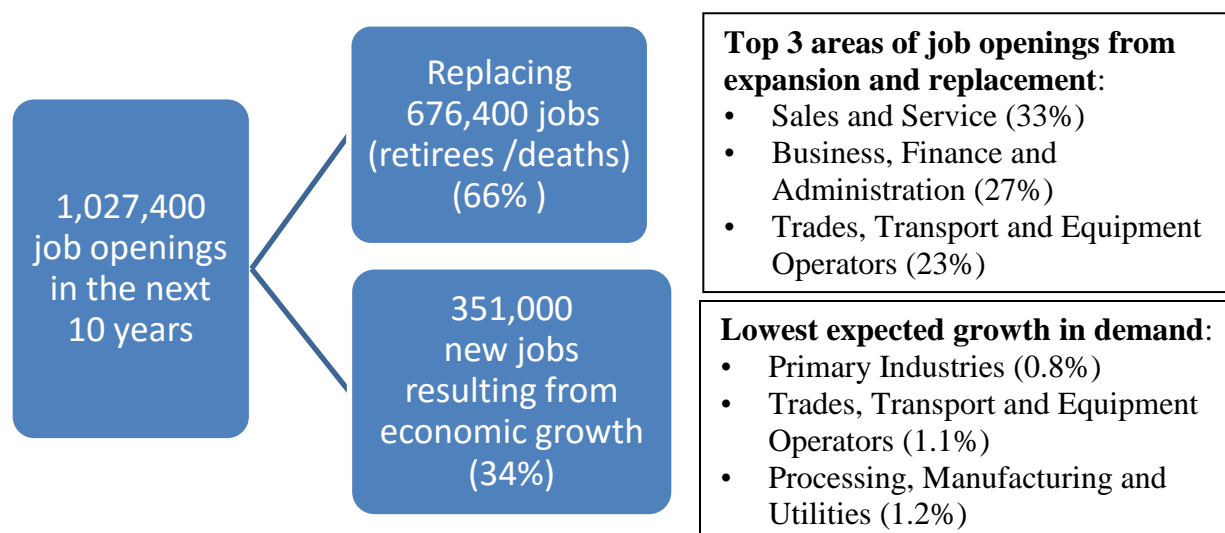
In BC, at the time of writing, the *BC Education Plan* appears to be in a precarious position. With no apparent funds for implementation support, the optimistic view of imminent system transformation perhaps epitomized in a video released September 11, 2014¹⁵ may suggest two quite distinct factions in the government and ministry levels—one, which assumes the move towards transformation and the *Education Plan* is still viable and in progress, and the other, which appears to be rapidly gaining dominance, appears to have a much more prosaic view of what the public education system should deliver: graduates with skills required by industry and commerce. That view is reflected in the following documents:

- *BC Labour Market Outlook 2010–2020*
- *Canada Starts Here: The BC Jobs Plan*
- *BC’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint: Re-engineering Education and Training*

The *BC Labour Market Outlook* report predicts ‘over one million job openings are expected in BC from 2010 to 2020.’ A closer examination of this report identifies 66% of these as replacements for those who retire or die. The report also identifies areas of job growth in terms of occupations, as shown in the graphic below:

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVOOZRyX4y8>

Job openings and job growth in the *BC Labour Market Outlook* report



The *BC Labour Market Outlook* report is an analysis of labour-market projections, and outlines its projections with clarity and objectivity. Its regional projections illustrate how variations in job openings may impact different regions of the province, and its projections that new migrants are expected to fill one-third of job openings in 2020 suggests some significant demographic shifts.

While the report appears objective, government directions based on the report appear flawed. As can be seen from the above graphic, across the province of BC the area with the predicted second-lowest growth in demand is Trades, Transport and Equipment Operators. The top two occupations with job openings are predicted to be: Sales and Service, and Business, Finance and Administration. Job openings in Trades, Transport and Equipment Operators are expected to make up less than a quarter of all job openings, well behind the first two. In addition, the three occupations with the strongest expected growth in demand across BC are:

- Health (2.4%)
- Natural and Applied Sciences (1.6%)
- Art, Culture, Recreation and Sport (1.6%)

Corroborating evidence of the limited demand for trades skills can also be found in Jessica McDonald's (2014) report, which reviewed the Industrial Training Authority and Trades Training¹⁶:

Positions in the trades are anticipated to account for just over 10% of new labour market demand between 2010 and 2020 (104,640 out of an estimated one million positions).

The short-term projections of job openings in the *Labour Market Outlook* and the emphasis on trades training in the government's policies simply do not match, but appear more linked to the likely optimistic view of LNG-related employment central to the BC Liberals' election platform rather than what the labour-market report identifies.

¹⁶ http://www.jtst.gov.bc.ca/ITA_Review/docs/ITA_Review_Final_Report.pdf

Canada Starts Here: The BC Jobs Plan, in contrast to the *Labour Market Outlook*, is an articulation of BC government ideology and policy. Its frequent references to fiscal discipline, balanced budgets, low taxes, and ‘smart’ regulation (later in the report restated as ‘smart de-regulation’) reflect key government priorities and ideology. It states three pillars to the plan:

- Working with employers and communities to enable job creation in BC
- Strengthening our infrastructure to get goods to market
- Expanding markets for BC products and services, particularly in Asia

The report’s focus on education is minimal, save for some general platitudes:

Two of our greatest strengths as a province are infrastructure sectors—the transportation networks that move goods and people, and the education system, essential to so many aspects of our quality of life.

However, the report does focus on Aboriginal access and outcomes with the stated intent of:

Improving First Nations access and outcomes in B.C.’s education system with consistent and rigorous analysis to identify what is helping Aboriginal students improve their education outcomes in successful districts and what barriers remain.

But its major educational focus is the intent to ‘increase the number of international students in British Columbia by 50 per cent over the next four years’, and the report explicitly includes the marketing of K-12 public education:

BC’s education system is among the world’s best and, while we’ve always counted on it to prepare our children and youth for the future, we’ve barely begun to tap its potential to support our economic growth. With rapid economic expansion in Asia Pacific countries, more parents than ever before want their children to receive an English-language education—and we have growing opportunities to attract and retain a much higher number of international students.

Thus, the major focus on education in this report is on its value as a commodity to be marketed internationally like lumber or coal.

The *Jobs Plan* appears to have less of the objectivity of the *Labour Market Outlook* report, contains significant amounts of optimistic rhetoric, and articulates a clear, business-oriented focus. But its lack of detail or detailed analysis reflects a trend of the current Liberal government—to state their case with some certainty, creating the impression that the government is clear in its directions and able to move effectively and efficiently towards implementing them. The problem with that approach is twofold, the first being that the world is a somewhat less certain place. The second is that while clarity in policy and directions may gain support, the capacity to deliver is far from certain. The Premier illustrated this certainty in the throne speech of 2013:

Premier Christy Clark on Tuesday staked her political future on her approach to liquefied natural gas, promising her government’s strategy could transform the province’s massive resource stores into a more-than-\$100-billion fund, enough to erase the province’s debt by the end of the 2020s.

‘This will be a transformational change for our province and we cannot afford to be short-sighted,’ said Clark’s throne speech.¹⁷

However, Shamsul Abbas, Petronas chief executive, made comments to the *UK Financial Times* on September 25, 2014, which cast some uncertainty over the project. While his comments may well be a strategy to pressure the province to apply more-beneficial conditions to Petronas, the realization of the LNG potential for BC may be in jeopardy if LNG is offered at better terms from other producers in the USA and Australia than can be offered in BC:

‘Canada has to buck up real fast to be a credible global LNG player if it wants to be taken seriously by potential investors. Until investors cross the final investment line with an economically viable project, they remain just potential investors on paper,’ he said.

The *BC’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint: Re-engineering Education and Training* leaves the reader in little doubt as to its directions once one has considered the title. ‘Re-engineering’, while a term likely to appeal to some in those industries wanting greater supplies of trades-oriented labour, is not an appropriate term for a vision of education in this millennium. It also fundamentally contradicts the *Education Plan*, which articulates adapting education to make students creative, collaborative, and adaptable to a changing world of technology, complexity, and uncertain economic and social futures. Perhaps some evidence of the dominance of the ‘Re-engineers’ over the ‘Education Planners’ is the smiling faces of the Premier and three senior ministers in the ‘Re-engineering’ document, while the *Education Plan* lacks both the images and the endorsement of the Premier and ministers.

There is no uncertainty in the vision of this *Blueprint*. In the Premier’s message, Christy Clark states:

It sets out the fundamental changes and shifts we must undertake to make the most effective use of our existing resources and future investments in education and training. It calls for a more targeted focus on training for high-demand jobs, providing all partners with more up-to-date and useful labour market information, encouraging innovation in how we provide education and training to better meet the needs of British Columbians and giving employers and industry a stronger role and voice in shaping and evaluating our skills and training funding and program delivery.

Thus, the alignment of education with jobs and the needs of industry are explicit, even if the focus is on the wrong jobs. In addition, employers and industry are to be given a ‘stronger role’ in education funding and delivery decisions, implying but not definitively stating that such a role includes K-12 public education. To reinforce this message, three government ministers (Shirley Bond, Minister of Jobs, Tourism and Training, Peter Fassbender, Minister of Education, and Amrik Virk, Minister of Advanced Education) add their view that:

Government is working with our partners in education and industry to make sure education and training programs are aligned with the demands of the labour market.

¹⁷ <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Christy+Clark+projects+billion+windfall+throne+speech/7953712/story.html#ixzz3Dau35Jrw>

Unsurprisingly, while the vision is bold, the funding is not:

Government currently funds education and training in excess of \$7.5 billion per year. This is a lot of money from taxpayers. Re-engineering training and education doesn't mean spending more, it means targeting more of the substantial resources already available to meet labour market priorities.

Three objectives are stated for the *Blueprint* proposals:

- A head-start to hands-on learning in our schools.
- A shift in education and training to better match with jobs in demand.
- A stronger partnership with industry and labour to deliver training and apprenticeships.

In terms of what these objectives mean for the K-12, public-school system, the report states:

Students in elementary, middle or high school will get a better, earlier head-start to hands-on learning so they'll be ready for the workforce or more advanced training when they graduate.

In addition, the following changes are among those proposed:

- Doubling the number of Accelerated Credit Enrolment in Industry Training (ACE-IT) spaces to 5,000 over the next two years (allowing high school students to take pre-Apprenticeship training in schools)
- Expanding dual credits in schools to get students trained more quickly
- Encouraging school districts to partner with industry, municipalities, post-secondary and aboriginal communities to get more students into jobs, including high-demand jobs in specific sectors
- Reforming graduation requirements to allow more technical and trades studies as pathways to graduation
- More information about jobs in Trades areas in K-9 Applied Skills curriculum
- More teachers with qualifications to teach pre-Apprenticeship course
- Making it faster and easier for qualified trades people to earn teaching certificates
- Partnerships with Principals' (BCPVPA) and Trustees' (BCSTA) associations to design a 'skills outreach and promotion strategy'.

The emphasis on trades in proposals considered in the *BC's Skills for Jobs Blueprint: Re-engineering Education and Training* appears at best misplaced, and potentially a serious misdirection for BC's K-12 public education system, in part because the labour projections fail to support the directions, and in part because education is about more than creating an appropriate supply of labour as and when needed by industry. Nor does it include any consideration of the philosophical debate about the purposes of a public education system, and any suggestion that it should might well invite ridicule. Yet if some of the world's great thinkers have grappled with the issue of education's purposes for two millennia, perhaps that indicates it's worthy of some consideration, even by government pragmatists. Indeed, the question 'Why do we educate?', and some understanding of educational philosophy which addresses this question, could contribute to developing a better understanding of what might be appropriate directions for K-12 education.

One other possible explanation could be considered for the focus on trades. The ideology of the current BC government strongly favours the private sector. The government's infrastructure

projects are essentially roads, bridges, and buildings, all largely built by private-sector companies, many of which support the BC Liberal party. Investments in the human infrastructure of the province through appropriate investments in public education appear less attractive to the Liberals and are often targeted for cuts or constraints in spending. Those who work in the BC public sector are generally represented by unions who have at best a cautious and in some cases a hostile relationship with the current government, and who implicitly or explicitly support the NDP. Thus, investment in ‘hard’ infrastructure of roads provides not only a visible reminder of infrastructure investment but also reflects an ideology which supports private enterprise and physical infrastructure, while public education expenditures are capped or ‘targeted to meet priorities.’ ‘Targeting to meet priorities’ could entail the shifting of existing K-12 funding towards ‘re-engineering’ projects.

While billions in spending for roads, bridges, convention centres and football stadium roofs are manageable within budgets, modest increases in education spending would, according to some ministers, require tax increases:

‘To simply accede to the demands to the union leadership, would, if we were funding it from a particular source, would see the average property tax increase by \$200 a year or the gas tax increased by 5 cents a litre,’ de Jong said.¹⁸

Thus the public is warned against supporting increased education spending while being assured that other and much greater levels of expenditures incur no additional taxes.

The Liberal government’s actions focus on skills for trades since 2001

Another issue to be considered when assessing current policies to promote trades skills is the current government’s approach to training, apprenticeships, and skills since the provincial Liberals came to power in 2001. The Industry Training Authority (ITA) was established in 2004 by the BC Liberal government. The ITA replaced the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) established by the NDP in 1997–98.

The initial changes and subsequent effects of this legislation and other government actions were reviewed by Gilbert (2013):

Under the first five years of the Liberal government, Stats Canada said the number of apprenticeship completions declined to 2,424 in 2005 and made a significant drop to 2,151 in 2006.

The B.C. Liberals eliminated requirements for apprenticeship ratios and compulsory certification on construction jobsites in 2002.

Next, the Liberals enacted legislation in 2003 that dissolved the ITAC and established the Industry Training Authority (ITA).

The new approach to apprenticeship training began by closing regional offices¹⁹, eliminating trades counselors and cutting funding to programs.

¹⁸ <http://globalnews.ca/news/1554746/b-c-teachers-strike-possible-cost-to-taxpayers/>

¹⁹ The following ITAC offices were closed: Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Surrey, Abbotsford, Victoria, Nanaimo, Courtenay, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson, Cranbrook, Prince George, Terrace, Dawson Creek and Williams Lake, as stated in *Hansard*, May 13, 2013: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/hansard/37th4th/h30513p.htm>

In addition, the labour representatives were removed from the Industry Training Authority board. (*Journal of Commerce*, April 24)²⁰

In 2009, the National Union of Public Employees reported that the provincial government accepted federal funds to support apprenticeships and training and then cut its own funding:

On September 16, the B.C. government issued a press release broadcasting a \$15 million federal funding increase for apprenticeship support—including extra funds for tuition, EI recipients and living expenses for students enrolled in apprenticeship programs.

However, the government quietly posted a revised service plan on the agency's website a week earlier, showing a \$5.898 million cut in provincial funding to the Industrial Training Authority (ITA) over the next three years. The new service plan also removes the authority's obligation to provide a 'sufficient and timely supply of skilled labour,' as well as 'efficient and effective program development and delivery.'²¹

In 2013, the ITA CEO Kevin Evans was removed and a new Board established after disappointing results. Gilbert (2013)²² reported:

As the CEO of the ITA, Evans was expected to increase the number of apprentices that complete trades training programs and implement flexible training initiatives that reduce the amount of time apprentices must spend away from the workplace.

However, the ITA reported that apprenticeship completion rates in B.C. fell to 37 per cent in 2011/12 from 43 per cent in 2009/2010.

The BC government expected the ITA to increase completion rates and take these specific actions, while funding to the organization remained stagnant or declined.

For example, the ITA's annual service plan report 2012/13 said core funding from the provincial government was set at \$94.44 million between 2010 and 2013, and is forecast to stay at this level until 2016.

The provincial government provided funding of \$96.9 and \$100.5 million in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

The ITA plans to spend \$15 million in 2013/14 on Labour Supply Initiatives compared to \$18 million in 2012/13.

This initiative, which includes youth programs, will be cut by 300 per cent to \$5 million in both 2014/15 and 2015/16. (*Journal of Commerce*, August 26)

²⁰ <http://www.journalofcommerce.com/Labour/News/2013/4/BC-NDP-unveil-apprenticeship-training-platform-JOC055023W/?cmpid=RSS|profdevelopments>

²¹ <http://nupge.ca/content/2576/bc-government-accepts-federal-apprenticeship-funding-then-cuts-funding-agency>

²² <http://www.journalofcommerce.com/Labour/News/2013/8/ITA-looks-for-new-leadership-while-mandate-reviewed-JOC056683W/>

Hunter (2014)²³ reported the findings of a government-commissioned report on the ITA authored by Jessica McDonald:

For a government that professes to be focused on creating jobs in the trades, Jessica McDonald's review of the provincial agency responsible for apprenticeship training reads like a bad report card.

The Industry Training Authority, a creation of the B.C. Liberal government, has been buffeted by one-off decisions, created bad blood between key partners and has suffered whiplash from abrupt policy changes without consultation, she found. There are no overarching targets and, as a result, funds are being spent in the wrong places. What Ms. McDonald found however is that the agency responsible for funding trades training and setting standards for credentials has contributed to the problem the government is trying to address. (*Globe and Mail*, May 5)

It appears that the ITA was held responsible for poor falling apprenticeship completion rates. Yet when examining the ITA Service Plan 2014/15–2016/17²⁴, the forecast funding to be provided by the provincial government in each of the three years of 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17 is less than the amount budgeted in 2012/13. In addition to reduced funding, 16 ITAC centres²⁵ around the province were closed in 2003. So while the blame is pinned on the ITA, two major causes of its failure are reduced, and likely inadequate, provincial funding, and the removal of regional centres to support the ITA program. Another cause of failure was the 2002 regulation which removed the requirement for apprenticeship ratios and compulsory certification on construction jobsites.

There are some straightforward connections and consequences in these actions. If, prior to 2002, compulsory certification was required, but not after, what is likely to happen? Fewer certified trades people on sites. If government removes apprenticeship ratios, the likely result is fewer apprentices. Government, therefore, set the rules and reduced funding and regulatory control, then blamed the authority it had established, when the inevitable failures occurred. So, while the government on the one hand touts its intent to change education systems to create more people with the skills required in trades, its record shows reduced apprenticeship completion rates, cuts in funding for skills programs, and an approach which responded to narrowly-defined industry demands while excluding labour from participation in the ITA—hardly the most-promising record for building skilled labour capacity in BC.

²³ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/job-1-might-be-an-overhaul-of-liberals-jobs-program/article18457065/>

²⁴ http://issuu.com/itabc/docs/ita_serviceplan_2014-2017

²⁵ The following ITAC offices were closed: Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Surrey, Abbotsford, Victoria, Nanaimo, Courtenay, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson, Cranbrook, Prince George, Terrace, Dawson Creek and Williams Lake, as stated in Hansard, May 13, 2013: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/hansard/37th4th/h30513p.htm>

Conclusion

This paper started with a question: ‘Why do we educate?’ To some this will seem prosaic, even irrelevant. What’s the use of philosophy, one might ask. The question may be answered in part by the University of Florida’s Philosophy Department²⁶:

To ask what the use of philosophy is, is like asking what the use of understanding is. One answer is that understanding is something that we very often seek for its own sake. As Aristotle said long ago: ‘All human beings by nature desire to understand.’ We are curious if nothing else, and it is one of the more admirable traits of human beings. We like to know what is going on and why.

If philosophy is all about wanting to know what is going on and why, then we can use its ideas and teachings to assess educational policies and programs (the ‘what is going on’) and seek to better understand the rationale for such policies and programs (the ‘why’). Such an assessment is not likely to emanate from the current proponents of change, with their utter certainty that the one way to go is the way they prescribe, while making it clear that they also have the power to impose the preferred direction. The smiling faces of premiers and ministers, and their optimistic and forward-looking messages, are telling us that the BC-public-school system needs to make a fundamental shift in our education system because industry needs that shift. While the need for an appropriately-educated workforce reflects one consideration for changes in public education, it’s not the only one. By asking the question ‘Why do we educate?’, it is possible to consider policy development within a broader frame of economic and social needs and to discuss preferred future directions. Preparing students for work is one function of an education system, but not the only one. And even when preparing for work, one might consider where future work will be created, in terms of occupations, geography, and the very changing nature of work itself.

By reverting to some fundamental philosophical thinking we can better judge educational proposals. Does the distinction between ‘education’ (for an elite) and ‘socialization’ for the rest imply that we are reverting to the industrial schooling model of the 19th century, where schools were to ‘sift and sort’ students into their place in the class system and into their vocational occupations? Is the vocational orientation limited to public schools while independent (private) schools tread a different path—might it be argued that students in independent schools will be educated and those in public schools socialized? If independent schools receive substantial public funds, will they be required to ‘re-engineer’ also, in order to continue receiving funding?

Should the goals of living a ‘good and worthwhile life’, or having positive and caring relationships, influence how we educate? Should we build caring and compassion as qualities in students as part of their education? Should we develop the skills needed for an educated citizenry to participate in a democracy? To enable the creation of a sustainable environment? These are all questions raised in one form or another by philosophy and by a range of educational academic writing, yet these questions are absent from many governments’ thinking about the purposes of public education, including the provincial government of British Columbia.

As a provincial government, BC appears in-step with, but less cunning than, Alberta, where the government document entitled *Framework for Student Learning: Competencies for Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit*²⁷ (2011) tries to cover all the bases of competencies, critical thinking, and ethics while still creating budding entrepreneurs who will

²⁶ <http://www.phil.ufl.edu/ugrad/whatis/useof.html>

²⁷ <http://education.alberta.ca/media/6581166/framework.pdf>

emerge from the province's schools. And if ever a quote was worthy of further debate and analysis, consider Alberta's definition of the entrepreneurial spirit:

Entrepreneurial Spirit: who creates opportunities and achieves goals through hard work, perseverance and discipline; who strives for excellence and earns success; who explores ideas and challenges the status quo; who is competitive, adaptable and resilient; and who has the confidence to take risks and make bold decisions in the face of adversity. (p. 6)

Another way to consider issues such as the purposes of education is to move away from the direct focus on education and instead to focus on the nature of the democratic process. The actions taken by the BC government (and by governments of other stripes before them), suggest they have acted within their perception of representative democracy. This view of democracy often includes the perspective that once elected, the government does as it wishes, broadly in line with its ideology, promises, and policies, and with minimal consultation. If a population also accepts this view of democracy, a government's actions are rarely challenged, and likely only when there is sufficient anger within the population over an unexpected policy shift. The Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) is a classic example of a BC-government action, in this case without any related prior promise or policy, to implement a deeply-unpopular proposal, and one which generated huge and negative reactions.

An alternative view of democracy is participatory democracy, where there is greater input to government decisions by the citizens, perhaps characterized by Schugurensky (2004):

Democracy should involve more than going to the ballot box every four years. It should also involve ordinary citizens on a regular basis.

While the purest form of participatory democracy might be unwieldy and unworkable, the idea is that more debate and discussion among citizens will help shape and mould policies. In some cases the BC government encourages public input in situations where they control the parameters (usually cost) but may have some difficult decisions to make concerning priorities within such parameters—such as the Health Care Conversation of 2006–07:

The Conversation on Health was a year-long, unprecedented public engagement initiative that used a variety of facilitation techniques and communication channels to reach as many British Columbians as possible and understand their issues, ferret out the good ideas, and prepare for the future.²⁸

However, some view such examples of participatory democracy as something of a sham—the appearance of consultation is provided through structured input while policy directions are not impacted by the results of consultation:

We (BC Health Coalition) don't really trust this process because it appears that the premier has already decided we can't afford our public healthcare system and he intends to shape the debate around that view.²⁹

The proposed changes in the BC public education system (*Education Plan* versus *Re-engineering*) are very different and arguably dichotomous. One attempts to consider a changing world and how an education system might be appropriately developed within such changes. The other states what a somewhat smaller world (the province of BC) is and will be, focuses on one

²⁸ http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2007/conversation_on_health/Introduction.pdf

²⁹ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2645156/>

narrow occupational area, and argues for an education system that meets the needs of industry within that area.

While the *Education Plan* is vague and flawed, it is a possible beginning to a new conversation about what kind of education system we want, and why we should educate in particular ways. Some analysis of this was developed in an earlier BCTF Research paper.³⁰ But there has been little discussion in recent years about the fundamental purposes of public education in the province of British Columbia. The focus has been predominantly on the ‘means’, as in what we do, not the ‘ends’, as in what we want as results of our actions in providing education, whether they be economic or social. Or perhaps the ‘means/ends’ debate has been shut down by the BC government’s apparent assertion that the ‘ends’ have now been stated by the BC government: that K-12 public education should serve the needs of one sector of industry as defined by the government of the day.

This paper makes the case that we need a wider public debate on the purposes of British Columbia’s public education system. Such a debate might better inform how much of a system’s focus should be preparation for employment, and what the nature of employment might be in the years to come. But it also makes the case that education is about so much more than preparation for work. It’s also about the nature of our connections and relationships with each other and with the planet on which we live. It’s about how we create and sustain the capacity to recognize and build on our population’s diversity as an asset to create a harmonious multi-cultural and democratic society. The purposes of education include grander and more important concepts than the narrow frame which is currently being developed. This paper makes the case that the question ‘Why do we educate?’ should be discussed, and the ensuing discussions should inform policy.

³⁰ <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/21CL/21CL-DiscussionPaper.pdf>

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