

‘Re-culturing’ students and selling futures: school-to-work policy in Ontario

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This paper situates recent school-to-work transition policy in Ontario, Canada, within the historical context of secondary school reform in the past 50 years. This understanding informs our analysis of interviews with representatives from government, business, organised labour, education and partnership brokers. Data suggest tensions between the rhetoric of corporatism and the reality of a market model, the rhetoric of enhancing opportunities for all students and the reality of lower graduation rates associated with new curriculum. We argue that these tensions reflect historical and continuing struggles around education and training and the adoption of neo-liberal policy approaches that decrease rather than enhance opportunities for non-college-bound students.

Introduction

In Canada, as in other industrialised countries, policy-makers are interested in increasing competitive advantage by raising the quality and productivity of human capital. However, the duration of youth transitions from the end of high school to work increased by nearly two years across 15 OECD countries between 1990 and 1996 (OECD, 2000). Although there is a lack of national political debate over public schooling in Canada because education falls under provincial jurisdiction, a common response from ministries of education across the country has been the introduction of school–work transition (SWT) policies directed at high school students (OECD, 2000; Taylor & Lehmann, 2002; Lackey, 2004).

Trends in Canada as well as in other industrialised countries include attempts to make career pathways more transparent and to provide work experience, cooperative education and apprenticeship opportunities for high school students (Marquardt, 1999; OECD, 2000). A federal task force also recommended that the government

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encourage a more integrated approach to youth employment through partnerships between the key players (Government of Canada, 1996). However, countries like Canada and the USA lack the tradition of social partnerships of Germany, or the more formalised links between schools and the workplace of Japan (Krahn, 1996; Marquardt, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2001).

In this paper, we argue that tensions within Ontario SWT policy are rooted in contradictions within capitalism and neo-liberal governance. One contradiction is the rhetoric of corporatism versus the reality of market approaches that reinforce competition and the academic–vocational hierarchy. A second is the rhetoric of enhancing opportunities for all students versus the reality of lower graduation rates and attempts to lower the expectations of non-college-bound youth.¹ The sections that follow help to situate our study of current SWT policy in Ontario by highlighting influential theoretical ideas and providing an historical overview of secondary school reforms.

Theoretical influences

Contemporary discussions about the relationship between education and the economy reflect earlier debates between functionalist, neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist theories. For example, *technological functionalism* assumes that changes in educational requirements are linked directly to changes in skill requirements, and that formal education provides the training necessary for highly skilled jobs (Collins, 1979). Formal educational requirements are seen as a means of disseminating important knowledge and skills and a mechanism to ensure the social placement of individuals based on merit (Wotherspoon, 1998).

These ideas were reflected in 1960s policies based on *human capital* ideas, which assumed that as technology and the demand for workplace skills grew, the need to invest in education and training also increased. Gaskell and Rubenson (2004, p. 7) write that, during this period in Canada, an ‘ambitious program of establishing new post-secondary institutions was designed to maximise the accumulation of human capital while at the same time creating avenues for social mobility’. Since the late 1980s, a ‘second wave’ of human capital ideas has influenced government policy (Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004). While continuing to endorse the idea that education is a generator of economic growth, the emphasis has shifted from the *quantity* of education to the *quality* and *vocational relevance* of education. And rather than policy to increase provision, reforms aim to link current forms of education more closely with work and promote individual responsibility for education and training throughout life. The focus is therefore on making educational institutions more responsive to economic demands.

The shift from the first to the second wave of human capital ideas can be related to a structural economic crisis characterised by the flight of capital and jobs to developing countries; trade liberalisation; rationalisation of production systems; high unemployment rates; and increases in service industries, non-standard work forms and female labour force participation (Ashton & Lowe, 1991; Pannu *et al.*, 1994). Most governments in OECD countries since the early 1970s have shifted from Fordist rules

of engagement between government, employers and workers associated with the Keynesian welfare state towards more market-driven models rooted in neo-liberal ideas (Brodie, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 2004). They have adopted principles of smaller government, balanced budgets and new management practices that emphasise consultation with policy experts, partnerships with the private sector and new hybrid forms of service delivery (Pal, 1997).

Critics have questioned the assumptions of human capital theory and neo-liberal policy approaches. Drawing on the ideas of Weber, Collins (1979) states that historically the educational level of the labour force has increased beyond what is needed for jobs and the result has been the general over-qualification of workers. Murphy (1988, p. 296) adds: ‘educational requirements for employment and advancement reflect the interests of groups that have the power to impose them more than they reflect the technical needs of positions.’ Skills and credentials act to structure positions within society leading to conflict for *positional advantage* between different status groups (Brown, 2000).

Neo-Marxists suggest alternatively that conflict is rooted in the contradictory relationships associated with the capitalist mode of production (Livingstone, 1994). For example, capitalist enterprises need to encourage the learning capacities of workers to enhance productivity at the same time as they seek to appropriate and routinise workers’ knowledge in order to remain profitable. Calls for schools to improve their preparation of workers therefore divert attention from employers’ inability or unwillingness to adequately train workers, utilise their skills, compensate them fairly and involve them in decision-making (Livingstone, 1999). In sum, conflict perspectives challenge the assumption that a *unity of interests* across groups exists with respect to education and training, and the reification of *skill* that is inherent in discussions around the need to better equip workers to meet the needs of the knowledge economy (cf. Dehli, 1993).

Writers have also critiqued state responses to economic changes in different sites. Brown and Lauder (2004) distinguish between *neo-Fordist* and *post-Fordist* policy approaches in the USA and UK. While neo-Fordism is depicted as a harsher version of neo-liberalism, post-Fordist approaches are said to involve simplistic assumptions around the relationships between skills, income and employment. In both approaches, governments are seen as having an important role in the distribution of opportunities and income. Robertson and Dale (2002) suggest that state-led restructuring in New Zealand, which included new management practices, devolution, markets, auditing and new forms of private–public partnerships, has created social polarisation.

Critical sociologists of education agree that the development of strategies for education and economic development is subject to contestation and political struggle related to class, race and other social divisions. They make the important point that the capitalist state is an arena, product and determinant of social conflict, and that education policy is social policy (cf. Torres, 2004). Reforms to public education can be viewed therefore as a mode of reformulating class relations by the state (Curtis, 1984). The case study that follows suggests also that policy formation expresses conflict, contradiction and struggle.

Method

Analysis of educational policy-making needs to consider the main actors of policy formation, key features of the system, and the institutional and ideological atmosphere in which decisions are made (Torres, 2004). To gain a sense of the perspectives of the main actors associated with SWT policy in Ontario in the 1990s, we draw on data from interviews and focus groups with 22 representatives from government, business, organised labour, education and 'brokers' in Ontario conducted in May and June 2002². Table I summarises details of interviews. Some of our participants (e.g. business, partnership brokers) reflect the expanded policy community that was influential in discussions about reform, while others (e.g. organised labour) represent voices that ought to be part of debates, given the discourse of corporatist partnership. Interviews were held in Toronto and in three smaller cities in southern Ontario and included participants working for provincial and community organisations. Participants were asked to discuss changes over time in policies related to SWT, key players and influences on current policy, issues in translating policy into practice, and outcomes for students.

Reforms to secondary education in Ontario since 1960

To understand current struggles over education, it is useful to examine shifts in thinking about the purpose and organisation of secondary schools historically in Ontario and other sites. For example, writers in England refer to recurring debates in the twentieth century over whether secondary schools should be common or differentiated (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1981). Similarly, in a publicised exchange in 1914, John Dewey advocated for a progressive approach to vocational education in the USA that would develop in young people an 'industrial intelligence

Table 1. Interviews and Focus Groups

Interview no.	Descriptions of participants
1	5 staff reporting to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities involved in different aspects of SWT policy and programming
2	Consultant working for Ministry
3	2 staff: one from the Ontario Learning Partnership Group and one from an Industry Education Council
4	5 participants in total: 4 representing different unions and the provincial labour organisation, and 1 apprenticeship coordinator employed by a school district
5	4 participants representing cooperative education, guidance counsellors, the secondary teachers' union and a resource teacher
6	1 participant from group representing small- and medium-sized businesses across Ontario
7	1 participant from group representing youth employment centres across Ontario
8	2 participants from an IEC in southern Ontario
9	Administrator from school district

based on knowledge of social problems and conditions' as opposed to what he saw as the narrow (functionalist) vocational education proposed by David Snedden (Drost, 1977, pp. 38–9). In Canada, policy questions around the aims of schooling, whether there should be common or differentiated high school programming and what knowledge should be core have also arisen periodically. Concerns about the preparation of young people, and particularly non-college-bound youth, have been most evident during periods of economic downturn and instability (Taylor, 1997). A look at key policy debates, documents and players in Ontario in the past 50 years provides a sense of recurring themes and shifting views of the relationship between education and the economy.

The 1960s was a time of expansion in the number of students in the education system because of the postwar baby boom and relative economic prosperity. The structure of the school system in Ontario was established in the 1950 Hope Report, which recommended compulsory education from age 6 until 16, including four years of high school. This high school programme was said to be rigorously academic and highly selective and concerns began to be voiced that the system was not producing the quantity or quality of professional technical skills needed by the country to be competitive internationally. The human capital belief in education for economic prosperity and concerns about the class bias of schools came together with the willingness to invest in education and accept an expanding government role in education (Gidney, 1999). Discussions in Ontario began to reflect this first wave of human capital theory. The federal government was also a key player in this period with the introduction of the Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act (TVTA), which allowed local boards of education to access federal money in order to build vocational schools or add vocational wings on to existing schools³.

Partly in response to the demand for schools to provide vocational education, the 1962 Robarts Plan in Ontario reorganised the programme of studies such that students could enrol in a two-year practical programme, a four-year programme to prepare them for the labour market or for entry to college, or a five-year programme to prepare them for university. Although the goal was to make secondary schools more inclusive, the plan was criticised for introducing rigid streaming. Students were required to take all their courses within their chosen programme, the decision to pass or fail a student depended on his or her performance across all courses, and there was little mobility across streams (Gidney, 1999).

In the mid-1960s a provincial committee was established to rethink the aims of education. Renewed interest in progressive ideas around child-centred education was reflected in the Hall-Dennis Report released in 1968. Key recommendations adopted by the government included the introduction of individual timetables and a credit system providing more flexibility for students, an increase in options (which challenged the privileged place of core academic subjects) and the abolition of streams (although courses continued to be offered at different levels of difficulty). The idea of a comprehensive public education system that did not differentiate students by programme fitted well with *ethical liberal* ideas around progressive person-centred education, which were current across Canada at the time (Manzer, 1994).

However, conditions changed in a way that 'called into question the policy of continued expansion of schooling and the humanistic ideological overlay that was supporting it' (Quarter & Matthews, 1987, p. 111). By the early 1970s, the economy of the province was being affected by worldwide economic recession, the school system faced declining enrolments and there were concerns about government's ability to pay for educational expansion. Gidney (1999) suggests that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, businesspeople and universities were unhappy about students' lack of basic knowledge, parents were concerned about a lack of discipline and teachers' federations were calling for a return to compulsory courses in reading and writing. Questions about the adequacy of programme for non-college-bound students were again voiced.

In Ontario, as in other provinces, governments began to revert back to models of the 1950s and 1960s by increasing requirements for high school graduation, reinstating a system of provincial exam and streaming students more clearly (Gaskell, 1991). A document from the early 1980s called *Ontario schools. intermediate and senior* (OSIS) expanded the number of core subjects required by high school students, increased the number of credits required for graduation and introduced provincial standards for different course streams. Despite concerns about the general stream of courses, most attention was focused on the implementation of new Ontario Academic Courses (OACs), which would replace the old grade-13 courses. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation expressed concern that restructuring would reduce enrolments in options and increase dropout rates, and as it turned out, vocational subjects were, in fact, hit hard (Gidney, 1999). Taking a look over a longer period, Smaller (2003) reports that the number of technology courses taken by Ontario secondary school students in 1996 was only 257,000 compared to 481,000 in 1973, despite an increase in the student population.

An improved economic climate after recession in the early 1980s and increased enrolments resulted in some expansion in the education system. At the same time, economic globalisation was seen as a threat to the province, and problems with graduates' illiteracy and high dropout rates again became a focus. There was particular concern that general-level courses had little relevance to students' lives or the world of work and denied equal opportunity to poor children. The 1988 Radwanski Report, entitled the *Ontario study of the relevance of education and the issue of dropouts*, promoted the principles of excellence, equity and accountability. Although the author critiqued the child-centred approach of the Hall-Dennis Report, he believed that educational goals would best be achieved through a common unstreamed curriculum in grades 1 through 12. The 1989 throne speech announced both the development of new provincial benchmarks in grades 3 and 6 and a plan to abolish streaming in grade 9.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) under Premier Bob Rae was elected in 1990 and implemented the de-streaming of grade 9 soon afterwards. A Premier's Council was set up to examine how the province should respond to the needs of the new economy. The resulting reports (Ontario Premier's Council, 1988, 1990) reflected second-wave human capital theory ideas, which emphasise the need to link education

more closely to the world of work through stronger partnerships between government, business and labour (Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004). The need for external evaluation of system outcomes through provincial testing was also an important theme (Manzer, 1994). Drawing on Brown and Lauder's (2004) typology, the NDP strategy could be characterised as *post-Fordist*, in contrast to the later *neo-Fordist* approach of the Conservative government led by Mike Harris.

At the same time, commentators agree that many of the educational reform ideas developed by the Conservatives had their origins in the Royal Commission on Learning (RCL) report released by the NDP in 1995. The RCL mandate was to review and make recommendations about the programme of studies, accountability and governance of the school system. Recommendations related to the high school programme included the abolition of grade 13, an increase in the number of required courses and the provision of two sets of courses—one designed for university preparation and the other, of equally high quality, to emphasise applications and connections outside the classroom (Gidney, 1999). Commissioners rejected Radwanski's idea of a common curriculum from kindergarten to grade 12. In keeping with increased concern about accountability, the report recommended that all high school students be required to pass a province-wide 'literacy guarantee' test in order to graduate.

The preceding overview of key educational policies in Ontario between 1960 and 1995 provides relevant insights for our analysis. First, concerns about the role of education in developing human capital have been particularly intense during periods of economic instability. Second, streaming has long been a feature of the school system despite periodic concerns about its effects on already disadvantaged students, and is arguably related to intensified 'positional competition' during periods of labour market uncertainty (cf Curtis *et al.*, 1992; Brown *et al.*, 2003). Third, despite ongoing concerns about the preparation of non-college-bound students, it appears that little has been done to create programmes that ensure greater opportunities for success for these students. As Gidney (1999, p. 283) notes, 'a succession of reforms have not abolished the effects of social class ... on student achievement or life chances'. While it is doubtful that schools will ever 'abolish' such effects, it is clear that the state has a role in the regulation and distribution of opportunities and that policy struggles over what is useful knowledge and how it is to be distributed continue.

Educational restructuring, 1995–2003

Leithwood *et al.* (2003) describe the period at the end of the 1990s in Ontario as 'the most tumultuous' in the province's history. Elected in June 1995, the Conservative government under Premier Mike Harris moved quickly to restructure government. In education, a series of legislative Acts and Cabinet decisions beginning in 1996 resulted in changes to curriculum, funding and the governance of schools. Programme changes included the re-streaming of grade 9, a new four-year high school programme and the requirement that students pass a grade-10 literacy test in order to graduate. Funding changes included the centralisation of funding and introduction

of a provincial funding formula. Governance changes included a reduction in the number of school boards by about two-thirds, the mandating of school councils, increased school board reporting requirements, removal of principals and vice-principals from bargaining units, changes in what could be included in collective bargaining, expanded provincial testing and the establishment of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to monitor system performance (Griffith, 2001; Leithwood *et al.*, 2003a, b). Education reforms in Ontario were very similar to those in Alberta in the early 1990s (cf Taylor, 2001). And like Alberta, the 'radical centralization of decision-making' in Ontario led to ongoing conflicts with local school boards, parent groups and teachers' federations (Livingstone *et al.*, 2003, p. 2).

The re-streaming of grade 9 in 1997/98 and introduction of flexible streaming with differentiated course content in later grades arguably represented a 'reassertion of more traditional views' (Gidney, 1999, p. 240). Students in grades 9 and 10 were offered academic or applied courses, while grades 11 and 12 students could take workplace⁴, college, university/college (U/C) or university 'destination' courses. The number of compulsory credits was increased with more focus on maths, language and science. Technology courses continued to be optional. The new high school curriculum was 'developed in consultation with universities, colleges and business to ensure that courses actually prepare students for post-secondary education and the world of work' (Kitigawa, 1998, p. 3). The aim was to increase graduation rates and promote success for all young people by better preparing them for future destinations and encouraging them to make realistic career choices.

However, a report sponsored by the Ministry of Education (King, 2002) suggested that the restructured curriculum was not yielding desired results. Failure rates were high in applied courses and there was a significant increase in the number of students taking locally developed courses⁵ because of this. A follow-up report by the same researchers suggests that the graduation rate of the first cohort of the new secondary school programme after four years was significantly lower than the five-year graduation rate of the previous system (King, 2004). Almost one-quarter of students in the first cohort of the new programme was unlikely to graduate because of high failure rates in grades 9 and 10 applied courses (p. i).

The workplace stream was described as not meeting the needs and abilities of students. Students registered in grades 9 and 10 applied and academic courses in roughly the same proportions as in the old advanced and general streams. However, in a study of 46 schools, less than 5% of grade 11 students took workplace English or Science, while 6% took workplace Mathematics (King, 2002, p. 55). Because of low enrolments, workplace courses were frequently combined with other courses (King, 2004). In addition, less than half of Ontario schools had the facilities to offer a full range of technology programmes. On the other hand, the path to university appeared more achievable than before, based on lower failure rates in grades 11 and 12 university preparation courses and high levels of achievement in university/college courses. In effect, there seemed to be increased polarisation of student outcomes.

The requirement that students pass a grade-10 literacy test as part of the requirements for a high school diploma also caused problems. In response to concerns that

significant numbers of students were failing this test (e.g. only 72% of students passed both reading and writing components of the test in October 2002), the province introduced a literacy course in March 2003, which would allow ‘unsuccessful students to build and demonstrate their reading and writing skills in alternative ways to achieve the literacy requirements for graduation’ (EQAO, 2003).

Because of the perceived ‘mismatch’ between the aspirations of students and their ultimate destinations, developing different career pathways for students also became a policy focus. Authors of a report promoting the idea of programme pathways for ‘at risk’ students wrote: If students aim for destinations and select courses that are not compatible with the knowledge, skills and interests they bring to their efforts, they are not positioning themselves for success’ (Government of Ontario, 2003, p. 15). In a society that promotes social and occupational mobility through education, it is ironic that a goal of the pathways document appears to be to reduce the expectations of ‘at risk’ youth regarding high-status jobs (cf. Carnoy & Levin, 1985). The unrealistic expectations of workplace-destined students are to be addressed by encouraging them to stream themselves more appropriately and offering SWT programmes that encourage them to develop a better understanding of skill requirements and make decisions earlier, and obtain a credential that has external validity.

The pathways report was intended to provide direction to school districts, which was needed because of the Ministry of Education requirement that they provide SWT programmes for students intending to enter the workforce after high school (Government of Ontario, 2003). The province also provided limited funds to districts in 2002 to support the promotion of the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Programme (OYAP). The OYAP allowed students to work as apprentices in different trades while in high school. But there is debate over which students should be targeted for SWT programmes. For example, the pathways report suggested targeting ‘at risk’ students, defined as those having difficulty meeting diploma requirements, who are disengaged and who are probably destined to go directly to work after secondary school (p. 32). Programmes were to be developmental, providing opportunities for exploration in grades 7–10 and encouraging commitment in grades 11 and 12 (p. 10).

On the other hand, interview data reveal divergent opinions about the appropriate target group for SWT programmes. For example, a youth apprenticeship coordinator agreed that they should be aimed at students who were likely to go directly to the workplace and who therefore needed most support (Focus group 4). In contrast, a guidance counsellor suggested that SWT should be for all students because when they are targeted at lower achieving students, programmes tend to become marginalised and under-resourced (Focus group 5). Finally, a broker who was working with schools and business to promote apprenticeship suggested targeting students who could go to college or university:

it’s not the kind of dumping-ground for the kids who aren’t going to pass the literacy test.
(Interview 8)

Thus, historical struggles over what is best for different groups of students have continued.

In sum, the Conservative government in Ontario introduced a variety of educational reforms in a short time and ‘unhappiness with one reform’ tended to spill over to ‘general opposition to all’ (cf. Levin, 2001, p. 144). Teachers were particularly upset by changes perceived to undermine their autonomy and working conditions. Interview data suggest that policies related to SWT were seen as working at cross-purposes. For example, the grade-10 literacy test and new course streams appeared to work against an improvement in graduation rates and opportunities for ‘at risk’ students. Early results suggest that instead of raising the bar for everyone, a polarisation of outcomes was occurring, not unlike the polarisation in the labour market. Despite the Pathways report’s rhetoric of ‘re-culturing the school’ to value all pathways (Government of Ontario, 2003), barriers to SWT programmes in schools included timetable challenges, inadequate resources to develop partnerships, a lack of incentives for schools, a decline in technology facilities and a lack of qualified technology teachers. As interview data presented in the next section indicate, SWT programmes have continued to be seen as a ‘tough sell’.

Tensions in SWT policy and practice

Instead of the tradition of social partnership characteristic of vocational education and training (VET) in many European countries, a ‘market-based model’ developed in Canada over time (Krahn, 1996, Heinz, 2003). The presumed advantage of this model is its flexibility and responsiveness to labour market changes. However, interview participants from industry–education councils (IECs), government, education and organised labour in Ontario agreed that the lack of coordination and structure were problematic. For example, an IEC representative discussed youth apprenticeship as follows:

We thought that the secret to building a skilled trades workforce [was] to get more kids. And then as you start to dig deeper, you realise you can get as many kids lined up as possible, but if the system isn’t there and the employers aren’t on side and the training isn’t there and we’re not organised, it just ends up with a huge frustration. (Interview 8)

In other words, the concern with creating employable students is bound to fail unless employers are willing to provide positions.

Citing the RCL report, a government representative suggested that in the development of SWT policy, the ‘early model was roughly referenced to the German dual system model.’ The German dual system consists of company-based on-the-job training and school-based vocational education (Heinz & Taylor, 2005). A legislative framework sets universal standards for training companies and apprentices by defining the rights and duties of the firms, the content of curricula taught at vocational schools, their duration, the salary levels of apprenticeships and the form of VET contracts. Social partners include employers, unions, schools, government and a federal VET agency.

In contrast to such a system and more in keeping with neo-liberal approaches, policy-makers in Ontario and Canada have emphasised voluntary partnerships

coordinated by brokers. For example, the Ministry of Education hired a consulting firm in the late 1990s to develop the Provincial Partnership Council (PPC)—a group of leaders from business, education and the voluntary sector that would promote private-sector involvement in work experience, cooperative education, SWT and youth apprenticeship programmes (Kitigawa, 1998). The ‘initial intention was that [the PPC] would provide advice on curriculum and would be very hands-on in terms of providing advice’ (consultant, Interview 2). For example, the new ‘four year, more rigorous’ secondary school programme was to be ‘up to a standard that was validated by third parties—employers, apprenticeship stakeholders, and so on’ (Ministry participant, Focus group 1).

Initiatives also built on earlier government efforts. For example, the Ministry of Education encouraged the formation of the Ontario Learning Partnership Group (OLPG), which was then used to coordinate a campaign to mobilise employers called ‘Passport to Prosperity’. OLPG members included business – education councils and industry–education councils, and in areas without these organisations, local training boards. Training boards were established in the mid-1990s as a joint federal/provincial initiative to address local labour force development. Industry – education councils, on the other hand, were established with provincial funding support in the mid-1980s to strengthen linkages among business, organised labour and educators (Taylor, 1997). Although organised labour was nominally involved, the surviving councils were effectively bipartite, with staff describing their role as brokering relationships between school districts and local employers in their communities. What might be described as a *truncated corporatist* or *limited partnership* model therefore developed.

While neo-liberal approaches have advantages for governments, writers have expressed concerns. For example, policies that emphasise freedom from bureaucratic and regulatory constraints and the pursuit of self-interest are antithetical to the objective of transforming individual into collective interests through corporatist approaches (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985; Cawson, 1986). Multi-stakeholder forums and private–public partnerships potentially lead to a blurring of state authority and public interest (Hoberg, 1993; Armstrong & Lenihan, 1999; Taylor, 2002). The underlying assumptions, that the public interest can emerge as an amalgamation of private interests, and that interest group participants are representative of the balance of interests in society, are seen as flawed. Ranson (2003, p. 471) adds that a regime of neo-liberal corporate accountability ‘atomizes the public and empowers sectional interests’.

Some interview participants shared concerns about emerging forms of partnership because of the perceived lack of commitment from key partners, fragmentation and inequity associated with market approaches, and concerns over responsibility and accountability. Involving employers as representatives was difficult because of their divergent interests. For example, a teacher involved in SWT programmes suggested that employers in her district were divided about whether generic or specialised skills were more important for students to develop (Focus group 5). In his study of recruitment processes for apprentices in the UK, Rikowski found that ‘employers were

confused or contradictory regarding what they said they were looking for in young people' (1996, p. 1). Despite the discourse of skills, employers tended to look for work attitudes rather than particular skills or competencies.

Canadian employers have under-invested in long-term employee training programmes and are less active in education programmes compared to those in most other OECD countries (Marquardt, 1999). Economic restructuring has exacerbated the tendency for them to take a short-term view and to expect the formal education system to provide job-ready, flexible entrants. Although there is variation, employers tend not to invest in either school- or company-based programmes unless they are experiencing labour shortages (Livingstone, 1999). Using the example of the Provincial Partnership Council, a consultant reported that business employers wanted to be kept 'in the loop' and would do a finite task but generally were not interested in making an extensive commitment (Interview 2). Therefore although employers have become key players in defining the skill requirements of future workers, their willingness to invest in training through SWT programmes is less certain (cf. Brown & Lauder, 2004; Lackey, 2004).

Participants from IECs also emphasised the importance and challenge of engaging businesses in SWT. One suggested,

employers don't really get it yet that this is a real crunch. They're thinking six months to a year out ... And you've got to have return of significant value in order to get employers to put their money on the table. (Interview 8)

He went on to say that employers were more interested in the 'performance piece' than the 'philanthropy piece':

[Our IEC] used to be very student focused ... But I remember employers used to come and say, 'You know, we'd really like to support you and you're a good guy but I've got a real value problem here ... I can throw you a couple of bucks but I don't want to be in a charity game. Give me something here—longer-term employees; give me them pre-trained, do some screening for me ... I need them to be at this level and to be producing pretty dang quick.

A participant representing small business confirmed that employers are concerned that there is no 'tangible right up-front' with SWT initiatives (Interview 6).

This raises educational concerns about the extent to which SWT programmes are likely to be able to enhance transitions for 'at risk' students without government incentives, and echoes an OECD report which suggested that governments in Canada were finding it difficult to reconcile their 'public mission of equality of access to education and training for all citizens with increased responsiveness to rapidly changing demands for new skills and knowledge and higher standards for all' (OECD, 1999, p. 30). Clearly, the *limited partnership* model that has developed makes this even more difficult.

Education participants also expressed concerns about the external validation of new secondary school curriculum by employers and post-secondary institutions. Employers appeared to be particularly influential given that the most radical curriculum changes involved increasing the rigour of workplace stream courses. But an

educator argued that it was highly problematic to assume that employer and post-secondary representatives ‘represented’ their constituencies in this process. Even more problematic, in his view, was that these institutions subsequently inflated their requirements:

Many colleges in Ontario will give preference to students who have university [stream] courses rather than college courses ... And we’ve got people asking for more than they need. And this goes back to the hierarchy. If I want to be a tool and die maker ... and there’s a maths called apprenticeship maths, I’d think that’s the one that would make sense. If I was going to college, I’d think a college course would make sense. [But] we now have people asking for a whole lot more than they need ... Because everybody is still tempted to say, ‘We all want the best kids.’ You hear that in every field. (Focus group 5)

In contrast to the influence of employers, organised labour seemed far less involved in the policy community. At the time of interviews, relations between the Conservative government and labour organisations were poor (Focus group 4). Different labour market experiences across unions also presented a challenge to developing a collective position around SWT policy. For example, a representative from an industrial union commented that ‘there’s a big hierarchy of work and we have people who are being laid off by co-op students coming in’ (Focus group 4). In comparison, a craft union recognised the need to bring in several apprentices each year to maintain the workforce.

Despite differences, union participants agreed on the need to provide transition programmes that:

don’t abandon the existing workforce but at the same time shift the focus to the school system and guarantee jobs. (Focus group 4)

One participant described his vision as follows⁶:

We want success to be that you actually give the opportunity of a job, where industry vacancies and slots go right to the school system ... We want to shift it to things like sector councils where the students could actually move from employer to employer. Don’t lock them into a single employer. Get them the best training possible, and at the end of that, the sector council has created, let’s say 40 tradespeople for 2003 [who are mobile] ... But I want to stay away from this myopic let’s train for one industry and let’s train for one sector of the economy. That’s what [industrial employers] want to do. They want to train using the community college system.

Comments from business and labour participants suggest tension between providing an education that will produce ‘appropriately trained workers with the required skills, attitudes and behaviour for efficient production and capital accumulation’ versus an education to enhance ‘opportunity, mobility, equality, democratic participation, and the expansion of rights’ (Carnoy & Levin, 1985, p. 230). Labour participants suggest that SWT programmes should aim to provide employment and not simply employability skills for young people.

Several participants recognised the need for labour to be more actively involved in order to make programmes more effective for students. For example, an educator involved in apprenticeship saw labour as a critical player in delivering effective SWT programs:

[My district] offers OYAP programmes in seven different areas where there is industry recognised training certification. And if I were to compare how well they work when we have the support of labour as opposed to when we work with non-organised sectors, there is so much more work for us to do when it's non-organised. Because [union representative] has a structure in place, he's got the contacts. We have instant credibility with the contractors when he calls them as opposed to just cold calls from us. So when there is that structure and that approach and that vision ... But it's in the absence of those kinds of programmes that SWT programmes are finding difficulty. Because what you have is a lot of piecemeal approaches, left and right. And there is some certification here that's not connected there. (Focus group 4)

Other participants echoed this concern about the lack of coordination and articulation of SWT programming. Further, the government's market approach of devolving delivery of SWT to local communities and providing pockets of funding to youth employment centres, consultants and business–education councils was seen by some as exacerbating the fragmentation and competition within the field. For example, there was competition between classroom teachers, and those in guidance, co-op and special education because of cutbacks in staffing. In addition, a lack of understanding of the role of guidance counsellors combined with government's interest in contracting out 'inefficient' public services reportedly led to unhealthy competition between groups and resulted in 'a million little isolated initiatives' (Focus group 5).

Education participants tended to view the shifting of resources to external 'experts' and encouragement of an entrepreneurial climate as problematic both for school staff and for workplace–destined students. Authors examining secondary transition initiatives in two other Canadian provinces, Nova Scotia and Quebec, similarly concluded that a disadvantage of promoting partnerships involving a multiplicity of players is that it can lead to an uncoordinated maze of initiatives and programmes (OECD, 1999). On the other hand, brokers from IECs appeared to accept and even welcome the new entrepreneurial climate.

In addition to the lack of coordination associated with a market approach to SWT, educators critiqued the fact that school reforms tended to reinforce academic bias. For example, participants argued that the 'standards movement' supports the perception that 'the academic is what really matters' and 'kills school-to-work every time' (Focus group 5). If school administrators were faced with a choice of scheduling university versus college or workplace courses, they usually privileged university courses. An apprenticeship coordinator argued that conservative think tanks like the Fraser Institute also perpetuate academic bias by publishing report cards that rank schools based on criteria that privilege academics (Focus group 4). The market approach to schooling in general, and SWT in particular, can therefore be described as a 'class strategy' that deepens social division (Ball, 2003).

The fact that responsibility and accountability for SWT programme outcomes were unclear relative to other programme areas also made them a tough sell. A government representative suggested that better coordination and clarity of roles was the way forward (Focus group 1). A school district administrator added that it was critical for business and other community groups to take more responsibility for preparing young

people for the future (Interview 9). However, it was difficult to promote ownership for SWT programmes within the school system, according to this Ministry of Education representative:

[Cooperative education] tends to be the programme that gets supported because it's a credit programme and because you receive funding for staffing. It's programmes that don't fall within that staffing formula that cause the difficulties ... And because the principals see that [co-op] meets the needs of a lot of kids, they're willing to do things within the timetable to allow kids to get out and get this experience ... What we're trying to do is to expand the menu and say that, in addition to co-op, they need to do more developmental work early ... And it's a tougher sell because nobody really owns it in the school and it's an add-on to something. (Focus group 1)

Further, SWT programmes were seen as difficult to measure (Ministry participant, Focus group 1). The elusiveness of the programme, in an era of measurable outcomes and accountability, raised questions about whether SWT policy was primarily symbolic. The fact that government was providing few resources to support programmes reinforced this impression. For example, a participant from an IEC suggests that facilities and resources had declined:

When you look at school closures, what's closed in virtually every community are the vocational schools because they're the most expensive to run and the funding formula does not support it ... Now we're sitting with sectoral committees saying the biggest single impediment to moving forward with our skills shortage is we don't even have an area to get kids an awareness of what technology is and why they should be interested and do some based programming. So what are the chances of trying to get that back? Well the chances aren't great. (Interview 3)

Furthermore, technical teachers were in short supply; according to an education participant:

1500 tech teachers are expected to retire by the end of 2003 and we train 125 to 130 a year. (Focus group 5)

The provincial approach of raising standards via a more rigorous secondary curriculum and trying to encourage low academic students to make more 'realistic' choices meant that school efforts appeared to be aimed more at *re-culturing students* than *re-culturing the school* (cf. Ray & Mickelson, 1993). It was tacitly assumed that the values, attitudes, expectations, choices and skills of youth must 'adapt to the disjuncture between the world of schooling and the world of work' (Carnoy & Levin, 1985, p. 235). However, curriculum reforms were also increasing the number of students who were unlikely to successfully complete high school. A participant from an IEC summed up concerns when he stated that:

nothing has changed by changing the terminology [of course streams] ... The only thing that's changed is those kids used to have a chance of being successful. (Focus group 3)

A guidance participant added:

We've raised the bar and we've thrown away all the supports. (Focus group 5)

These comments are consistent with an Ontario survey conducted in 2000, which found that although almost three-quarters of respondents agreed that all students could meet the higher standards for graduation, only one-third of teachers agreed (Livingstone *et al.*, 2003, p. 27).

Therefore, as a Ministry of Education participant suggested, 'it's hard to find positive news around school-work transition'. Although he attributes this, as do many participants, to societal values that privilege post-secondary education and professional work, it could be argued that education policies have done little to re-culture schools by increasing the chances for more students to be successful. Instead of reducing differentiation across programmes, the Pathways Report recommended that boards develop *magnet schools* to offer specialised vocational programmes (Government of Ontario, 2003). And instead of revising its new curriculum, the Ministry of Education introduced a 'skills passport' that could serve as an alternative credential for students who could not achieve a high school diploma.

The preceding discussion suggests that SWT policy continues to be a site of struggle. Interview data indicate that there are divergent interests around education and training across and, to some extent, within employer groups, educators and organised labour. Further, the state's limited partnership approach to SWT policy within the broader context of market-oriented education reforms has resulted in intensified positional competition and the privileging of the needs of capital over more democratic forces.

Concluding comments

The preceding discussion highlights concerns voiced by interview participants about SWT policy introduced in Ontario in the late 1990s. First, although policy-makers idealise the corporatist systems of VET in countries like Germany, neo-Fordist reforms in Ontario perpetuate a market system. Programmes rely on voluntary partnerships coordinated by brokers who are to act as catalysts in increasing the responsiveness of educational institutions (cf. Lackey, 2004). However, as a youth employment centre participant commented, schools lack the necessary stability, incentives and resources to engage in effective partnerships (Interview 7). Programmes also rely on employers to provide training opportunities, although evidence suggests that they are more interested in defining skills for schools than developing them in students. Finally, the partnership model developed by the state is limited by its failure to engage the perspectives of organised labour and educators as a counter-balance to employers' focus on productivity. In sum, the state appears to have left students' futures to the market through policies that 'put in place new modes of regulating the institutions and processes that socialize and qualify labour power in Ontario' (Dehli, 1993, p 94).

Second, the introduction of more differentiated and 'rigorous' course streams within a quasi-education market undermines young people's employment futures. For example, differentiated programmes encourage differentiated schools, potentially leading to increased class and racial polarisation and waste of talent (Ball, 2003;

Brown & Lauder, 2004). Recognising that the equal valuing of practical knowledge has not occurred, the majority of students continue to opt for courses that provide entry to post-secondary destinations. It is therefore no easier to identify the non-college-bound students who are seen as candidates for SWT programmes. Despite the discourse of re-culturing schools, policy seems intent on re-culturing ‘at risk’ students by encouraging them to stream themselves more efficiently. However, their destinations are increasingly uncertain since employer involvement has increased the rigour and lowered the success rate for students in workplace destination courses. Therefore more students are unlikely to meet graduation requirements or qualify for SWT programmes and opportunities for already disadvantaged youth are reduced.

It is clear that historical struggles have helped to shape the current context, and ‘to change the basic institutional patterns that have evolved would take a coordinated and consistent political intervention over a period of time’ (Gaskell, 1991, p. 81). However, our analysis suggests principles that could guide thinking about policy as follows.

First, government should be held responsible for its role in allocating opportunities and rewards to young people through schools. SWT programmes therefore ought to be more accountable in terms of economic outcomes for students. As a starting-point, students should be tracked after leaving high school. Second, recognising divergent interests around education and training and the problems with the existing limited partnership, the policy process must include greater participation from educators and unions to ensure that coherent and effective SWT programmes are developed.

Third, programmes must challenge instead of promote academic and vocational distinctions—the restructured Ontario curriculum continues to be delivered in streams leading to different hierarchically ordered labour market destinations (cf. Young, 1998). Programmes should involve the integration of academic and practical knowledge, and given the high educational aspirations of youth in Canada, secondary vocational pathways that link to post-secondary destinations are critical. This is consistent with recommendations that government should play a greater role in the articulation and coordination of school–college pathways (School–Colleges Project Advisory Committee, 1994).

Fourth, policy-makers need to acknowledge that much of the concern with secondary schooling relates to its declining legitimacy as a mechanism for distributing life opportunities (cf. Shapiro, 1990). A shift from the supply-side focus to recognising the need to *re-culture the workplace* is key. Instead of adjusting students to restructured work, vocational preparation could address themes of cooperative management of the workplace, and worker participation in decision-making (cf. Shapiro, 1990; Livingstone, 1999). The objective is to develop policies that increase opportunities for students to understand and shape the practices that define their lives.

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Notes

1. We use the term 'non-college-bound' to refer to students not destined for college or university education.
2. The term 'broker' is used to describe organisations designed to liaise between key players, usually high school educators and employers. The Conservative Party was defeated by Dalton McGuinty's Liberals shortly following data collection, in fall 2003.
3. According to Gidney (1999), 278 new vocational or composite schools were built and 55 additions completed between 1961 and 1966.
4. Workplace preparation courses are said to be 'challenging, but in a different way from University and College preparation courses. They emphasize hands-on experience and skills application rather than theoretical learning' (Government of Ontario, 2003, p. 81).
5. In effect, locally developed courses have been used as an additional stream of courses for students requiring remedial attention.
6. Decreased public funding to Ontario's community colleges in recent decades and government funding for private training has encouraged them to privilege their role in preparing young people for employment (Dennison & Levin, 1996; McWilliam, 1996). Therefore, although this paper focuses on secondary school policy, changes in the college system are also very pertinent to discussion of SWT.

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