

# The Challenges of Partnership in School-to-Work Transition\*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the challenges of partnership through an examination of a high school apprenticeship program in carpentry in Ontario, Canada. Focusing on the relationships between schools, trainers, employers, and government, my analysis suggests challenges related to the ability to coordinate the program across institutions, achieve agreement on the goals of apprenticeship, gain commitment from employers, and promote a culture of learning in the workplace. These areas need to be addressed more systematically by policy-makers and partners if such programs are to foster the learning and development of young people.

## Introduction

Both in countries with and without strong institutionalised connections between employers and initial education and training, there is growing interest in education-industry partnerships as a way of sharing responsibility for young peoples' transitions. Such partnerships are most relevant—and perhaps most needed—in societies that do not have strong traditions of close collaboration between government, employers, trade unions and community organisations. (OECD, 2000, p. 128)

Instead of the tradition of social partnership characteristic of vocational education and training (VET) in many European countries, a 'market-based model' is evident in Canada (Heinz, 2003; Krahn, 1996). Within this type of deregulated, voluntaristic training system, it is arguably more difficult to develop and sustain work-based learning (cf. Keep and Payne, 2002). However, as noted above, in countries like Canada, partnerships are increasingly seen as a policy solution to address perceived problems in young people's transition to work. They are consistent with new public management approaches, which emphasize alliances, shared responsibility, increased transparency, and accountability for results (Armstrong and Lenihan, 1999; Pal, 1997). Further, they

reflect an interest in devolving decision-making to the local level although governments are often key initiators of new partnerships (Billett and Seddon, 2004).

This paper draws on data from a case study of a high school apprenticeship program in carpentry in Ontario, Canada to identify some key challenges of partnership. My analysis highlights tensions within and between schools, union trainers, government, and employers rooted in differing institutional practices, values conflicts, and power relations in the workplace. Following discussion of conceptual influences and an introduction to the case study, these tensions are discussed in terms of: 1) coordination and articulation across institutions, 2) different visions for apprenticeship 3) commitment to apprenticeship, and 4) promoting a culture of learning. Accepting that learning is contextual (Hagar, 2005), tensions within and across partner groups will no doubt present challenges for programs designed to foster the learning and development of young people. However, recognizing systemic tensions and developing mechanisms for coordinated cooperation may promote more effective partnerships (cf. Keep et al., 2002).

### **Conceptual influences**

Writers in Canada and the UK agree that effective partnerships require social cooperation and institutionalized linkages between schools, colleges, trainers, unions, and employers (Schuetze, 2003; Keep and Payne, 2002; Fuller and Unwin, 1999). At the same time, writers agree that developing effective new partnerships is difficult when they involve different institutions, ‘operating under competing regimes of performance indicators, targets and objectives, and with their own territory to defend’ (Keep et al., 2002, p. 238). For example, attempts by governments and unions to establish training

requirements for employers are likely to conflict with the latter's interest in maintaining flexibility in employment. Further, governments are observed as unwilling to impose anything that might be construed as a burden on employers (Keep and Payne 2002). Employers are generally less concerned than unions about providing opportunities for workers to gain a range of skills (Senker et al., 1999). An employer-led training approach is therefore seen as problematic for writers who argue that the interests of workers are likely to be compromised (Ashton, 2004; Evans et al., 1997; Spencer, 2001).

Different groups may also have different visions for apprenticeship—for example, the vision of apprenticeship as a vehicle for social inclusion contrasts with a vision of apprenticeship as a high-quality training route (Keep and Payne, 2002). Similarly, the focus on partnerships as a means of building capacity to promote economic goals differs from a view of building capacity for social democratic purposes (cf. Billett and Seddon, 2004). Changes in work may also create tensions for partnership. For example, Clarke (1999, p. 38) notes that the craft-based aspect of apprenticeship in the construction industry in the UK is 'at odds with a labour process that is more industry-wide, integrated, mechanized, and skilled.'

In sum, school-to-work programs take place in environments that are inherently competitive and involve institutional players with somewhat divergent interests and goals related to work and learning. They are therefore likely to be sites of struggle and require a great deal of developmental and organizational work to become effective. Further, the relationships between partners, sponsors, and the community, and within VET partnerships are likely to have 'a powerful impact on learning' and are therefore an important focus for analysis (Billett and Seddon, 2004, p. 62).

### **The Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)**

[The carpentry OYAP] is the Cadillac of all training. No one can match the standards, the expectations, the quality of the instructors, the quality of the management, and the resources they have. And they have the pulse on the industry. (I-6, School district coordinator)

Several Canadian provinces developed high school apprenticeship programs in the 1990s to address the shortage of skilled trades workers and to facilitate the transitions of young people from school to work. For example, programs in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario allow high school students to combine their studies with apprenticeship training (Lehmann and Taylor, 2003; Schuetze, 2003). In Ontario, students who have completed grade 10 and are at least 16 years old can register as apprentices (Government of Ontario, 2002; TV Ontario, 2004). The carpentry apprenticeship program that is the focus of this paper was developed in an urban centre in Ontario for students in their last year of high school. Key players include four surrounding school districts, a joint management-union training centre, students, and employers. The program is relatively successful in that approximately 70 percent of students successfully completed the Basic level of their carpentry apprenticeship while earning a high school diploma. In the two metropolitan school districts where the program began, the usual process for students was as follows:

Interested students applied to the carpentry apprenticeship program, candidates were interviewed, and in the two largest school districts, successful students participated in a four-week pre-apprenticeship course. They then travelled to the joint management-union training centre for eight weeks, where they participated in the first in-class phase of apprenticeship training. Students had the opportunity to earn high school credits and to

obtain their phase 1 qualification. Instructors at the training centre placed successful students in their first work placement, where they earned the first year apprentice rate of pay and co-operative education (co-op) credits to fulfill the requirements for their high school diploma. Interested students then become union members and were indentured to the union while they completed their in-school training and the hours needed to complete their apprenticeship.

The funding for this program comes from the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities and from the training trust fund. Since educators and organized labour consider it to be exemplary, it provides a good case for examining multi-stakeholder partnership. This paper draws on data from interviews with individuals from education, the union, and the construction industry who were involved in the program. In total we spoke to 12 employers/supervisors, 7 representatives from the union training centre, and 9 representatives from school districts (including tech teachers, counsellors, and administrators).

### **Coordination and articulation across institutions**

Keep and Payne (2002) suggest that a ‘vibrant work-based route cannot be delivered without the active cooperation of partners’—government, employer organizations, trade unions, and trainers. This requires clear roles and mechanisms for coordinated cooperation. It also requires significant effort on the part of government, educators, and trainers. For example, an educator involved in the carpentry apprenticeship comments:

[I]t’s a heck of a lot of work to design one of these [OYAP] programs and go through the approval process to organize the meetings. You have to bring in the

ministry, you have to bring in the training delivery agents. You have to develop mock timetables that prove that we're meeting both guidelines--the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (I-2, Tech teacher)

To help coordinate partnerships at the local level, the government provided some funding to business-education councils and similar groups to broker partnerships between school districts and employers (Taylor, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Youth apprenticeship partnerships were therefore initiated, supported, and funded to some extent outside of the relationships and communities in which they were to be enacted (cf. Billett and Seddon, 2004). But in the case of the carpentry apprenticeship program, the local partnership group did not participate and it was left to educators and trainers to develop a workable program that articulated school and apprenticeship curricula. The teacher who oversees the program in his district noted that this articulation was challenging:

I bridge the gap between the Ministry of Education's requirements for diploma and what they're trained in while they're here [at the training centre]. Because they're taught specifically to be carpenters here, and for the ministry that's not broad enough, that's not good enough to get them a credit. ... The ministry is not interested in, does the kid go to work after this? It's, how much of this meets diploma requirements? (I-4, Tech teacher)

The fact that public and Catholic school districts were partnered with the training centre also presented challenges because of jurisdictional boundaries. For example, although it may have made sense to coordinate the program across the urban centre, this was seen as impossible and resulted in ineffective use of resources in some cases.<sup>2</sup> The largest district was fortunate to have a committed teacher with a background in carpentry who initiated a four-week course to prepare students in his district for the training centre. This course focused both on conceptual areas where it was clear that students were weak (e.g., math, geometry) and on acculturating them to the discipline of the training centre

and workplace (e.g., conforming to rules around punctuality and attendance, handing in homework on time). The second largest district also adopted this model to try to improve the success rate for students at the training centre.

Because students were receiving high school credits for their learning at the training centre, certificated teachers were required to be involved. This necessitated some negotiation of roles according to interviews with teachers and union trainers. The teacher with a background in carpentry had most credibility with union trainers and therefore taught at the centre, while teachers from other districts played a less active role. Over time, collegial working relationships appear to have developed. The preceding discussion suggests that effective partnerships require a significant amount of time and energy on the part of participants to articulate programs, resolve differences, ensure consistency of expectations, and address jurisdictional concerns. In my view, the reason the carpentry apprenticeship was seen as a ‘Cadillac’ of training was because a number of committed individuals had engaged in this process. However, other areas of tension were observed.

### **Different visions for apprenticeship**

The question of whether apprenticeship is viewed as a vehicle for social inclusion or a high quality training route (Keep and Payne, 2002) arose in conversation with school staff and instructors from the training centre. Teachers were more likely to emphasize the former view while trainers promoted the latter.<sup>3</sup> For example, although he notes that the quality of applicants to the program has increased since its inception, an instructor observed a difference in approach between the school system and training centre:

[I]n some instances I think a high school environment, it cocoons them. ‘It’s ok. You don’t have to do that. You can go here.’ It’s like they fall back into

mediocrity. And here, we go the other way around. I say, 'I only want the best.'  
(I-1, Union trainer)

For instructors, 'the best' were students who had developed good 'hand skills' and could meet the 'academic' requirements. Not surprisingly, employers also wanted only 'the best' young people, although they were more inclined to emphasize a strong work ethic and positive attitude.

According to trainers, high school staff did not always send 'the best' because they were not aware of the requirements of the trade:

That's the biggest thing that I get, 'oh I didn't know they were going to do that.' ... They don't know what a carpenter does. The first thing that half of them are telling me is construction, to me is a labourer, and they have no idea what we do. They don't understand, they think that the drawings for a house say exactly how to build the house. (I-33, Union trainer)

On the other hand, carpentry teachers were concerned that the program may exclude capable students:

[T]here are students in our system who have taken this program ... that could be in the trade and possibly will end up in the trade, but in my opinion should absolutely be in the trade, and they didn't make it through [the training centre course] because they couldn't do the academic end of it. (I-54, Tech teacher)

The tension between teachers and trainers is only partly rooted in teachers' lack of knowledge about the academic requirements of apprenticeship. More fundamentally, it is related to the strong divide that has developed historically between academic and vocational curricula in schools and the lack of value and resources given to non-college/university pathways (Taylor, 2005; Young, 1998). Tech courses tend to be conceived as 'hands on,' practical, and a-theoretical, and are recommended for students who are having difficulty with academic courses. On the other hand, trades pathways are

seen as inappropriate for students who are successful academically, as a carpentry teacher observes:

[T]here are only a few schools who really promote this. Now I think that OYAP and apprenticeship will grow as success comes along. But there is a reluctance in some schools to feel that their students should transfer to another school and be part of an OYAP program. Because quite often it's not the student they'd like to see go. Quite often, it's the ones they consider some of the brighter students. They think it's a shame that they're throwing their life away. (I-4, Tech teacher)

This is particularly true of schools with a strong academic reputation, while schools that are more 'tech-oriented' are concerned that if they transfer students, their programs will decline further. Cuts to education funding and lack of valuing of 'vocational' courses have meant that technical courses and facilities are threatened. As a result, most students are not exposed to the kind of learning in schools that would allow them to choose a career in the trades. The lack of value given to the trades may explain why apprenticeship made up only 12.6 percent of post-secondary enrolments in Canada in 1998 (Sharpe and Gibson, 2005). This systemic issue needs to be addressed by policy-makers if high school apprenticeship partnerships are to provide pathways for a wider range of students. Another fundamental tension that affects partnerships concerns the degree to which apprenticeship qualifications are recognized and valued by employers.

### **Commitment to apprenticeship**

Added to tensions between schools and trainers are those between government, trainers, and employers over different aspects of apprenticeship training. And as with the preceding discussion, some challenges are more intractable than others. The tensions that have most evident implications for high school apprenticeship partnerships are: 1)

achieving agreement over in-class technical training, 2) ensuring demand for apprentices, and 3) valuing apprenticeship credentials.

### **Agreement on technical training**

The provincial government sets apprenticeship curriculum with input from a provincial advisory committee (PAC), which has equal employer and employee representation. The PAC has a curriculum advisory committee (CAC) with representatives of all training delivery agents. However, the government has not responded to two PAC requests in recent years: first, to extend the in-class period of training and second, to make carpentry a mandatory trade. Union trainers expressed the rationale for adding a fourth period of in-class training as follows:

I think there's been so many changes and so much new technical change that some of the people responsible for the decision-making at the different provincial levels fail to recognise the additional workload that is required of apprentices and have failed on several requests to increase the number of days or weeks required to complete the in-school training portion, which in turn results in a lot of failures at the exam. (I-29)

We have eight weeks to cover the curriculum and realistically we need twelve weeks to do it. ... So I personally find it difficult to cram everything in there. I can't do as good a job as I want to do in certain areas.

*A: And why isn't it twelve weeks? Do you just not get funding for that?*

Yeah I think it's funding from the ministry. I think in the Provincial Apprenticeship Committee which comprises of all community colleges and the union, they've been pushing to get a fourth in-school phase. But it just comes down to dollars and cents. (I-15)

Allowing adequate time for training can be seen as particularly problematic for high school apprentices who usually have less prior experience than other apprentices.

Sequencing of curriculum was also problematic:

In the apprenticeship program here in Ontario they learn residential construction in their Intermediate phase. They learn formwork in their Advanced phase ...

whereas in Phase One they're learning hand tools, powers tools, joinery, which doesn't necessarily prepare them for the market place. ... [S]ome of the stuff that they learn in their Phase One is very important to becoming a carpenter but maybe not so important for your first job, right? (I-19, Union trainer)

Since the majority of OYAP apprentices worked for scaffolding or formwork companies in their first year, the sequencing of curriculum was important to their employability. At the same time, it was clear that employers' training needs varied significantly and it would be very difficult to meet all needs in the initial training phase. Conflicting labour market trends toward, on the one hand, specialization in particular aspects of the carpentry trade, and on the other hand, multi-skilling, also made it difficult to be responsive to employers. Therefore it was incumbent on employers to supplement in-class training of apprentices. However, because they paid for training through the management-union trust fund, union employers tended to expect an immediate return on their investment. For example, OYAP employers expressed concerns about the in-class part of apprenticeship training as follows:

Actually the carpentry program that's there for these guys is outdated ... I find that the union is using the system to collect money and they're not really giving them what they should be, they're leaving it to us.

*A: Would you like to see more teaching that's relevant to the kind of work you're doing?*

Absolutely ... I picked up the phone, called [training centre director] who's supposed to be in charge of the apprenticeship program, whatever, I said, 'I've got a good one for you. I'm going to bring one of the third year kids to the hall and his material and myself and with your boys, we'll build this article or whatever it is. It's not a big deal right?' 'Oh no, we can't do that, you know, it's not in the curriculum, blah, blah, blah.' (I-65, Employer)

*A: And has [your industry association] seen what they'd like to see as far as training goes?*

No, but we're pretty concerned about it. Because there's a lot of money that we pay our scaffold companies to the training fund at the [union]. And most of us don't feel we're getting our money's worth. Like it's millions of dollars over a period of a couple of years. And you know, these guys are coming out with three or four days training [related to our work], it's not good for us. (I-74, Employer)

Most employers agreed with the sentiment that ‘we’re signatory to the union and we’d better get what we want’ in terms of training (I-66).

### **Monitoring demand for apprentices**

In addition to trying to be responsive to changing workforce needs, unions were concerned about ensuring the sustainability of the apprenticeship system. In the carpentry trade, the provincial government had set a minimum ratio of four journeypersons to one apprentice to control the supply of apprentices and ensure adequate on-the-job training. Whether employers adhered to ratios depended on their willingness to train apprentices, their ability to comply (given the shortage of qualified journey persons), and enforcement of ratios by union business agents. A training centre representative describes the training challenge:

[W]e have technical committee meetings with the contractor associations to talk about their specific needs within that sector of the industry and how to deal with it with respect to recruitment and the future needs of that industry and anything new that takes place within that sector of the industry.

*A: So do you get feedback at those meetings about programs like OYAP?*  
Well the feedback you get is typical from contractors. The apprentice is never good enough or productive enough, right? That’s a typical, to be expected. You don’t always get that positive. ... [S]ome other companies don’t particularly like to hire apprentices and they only want to hire journey persons. So we have to deal with that because we have in our collective agreement a one to four ratio. (I-29)

In the high school program, the union was faced with the task of finding work placements for approximately 70 apprentices in less than a month. Finding employers who were willing to train was therefore critical. The union was also concerned that the apprenticeship certification be recognized and valued by employers.

### **Valuing apprenticeship credentials**

Despite the policy focus on the supply of apprentices through the school system and other sources, Sharpe and Gibson (2005) argue that the market for apprentices in Canada has been constrained more by a lack of employer demand. In their view, employers have been concerned about poaching externalities and are reluctant to get involved in a system that they see as over-regulated and inflexible. This may explain the very small growth in apprenticeship registrations in carpentry (.2%) between 1991 and 2002. In addition, completion rates for apprenticeship are low—Sharpe and Gibson (2005) report that only 25.3% of apprentices had become certified in the carpentry trade in Ontario in 2002. This is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that carpentry is a ‘voluntary’ trade in Ontario and several other provinces. Therefore although it is part of the Red Seal program, which is an inter-provincial standards program to promote mobility of trades workers across the country, a carpentry certification is not required to work in Ontario.

Not surprisingly then, employers placed little importance on carpentry apprenticeship credentials (the certificate of qualification or Red Seal). In fact, none of the eight employers interviewed used them as key criteria in their hiring. Some suggested that credentials do not adequately measure required skills, while others (usually in scaffolding or formwork companies) felt that a general qualification was not necessary.

For example, a scaffolding employer remarked:

What we see happening here is when we get a young apprentice and we start training him [sic] and we keep him, after about two or three years they kind of realize that this sort of a trade inside a trade. They don't need to have all that apprenticeship training to be a scaffolder because there's no accreditation for it. So they tend to yeah drop out of the big course because they can focus on just scaffolding. And there's no real need for training. They're not real carpenters but

they're still on the list as a scaffolder, so they can make the same amount of money and everything else as a carpenter.

*A: Is that sufficient for you as an employer?*

Well it doesn't really make a difference to us because we're not getting sufficient training in the first place. (I-74)

A second scaffolding employer pointed out that the certification did not matter to his company because 'we don't treat people as what they are, we treat them as what they do' and pay them accordingly (I-63). A third employer felt that because the in-class training did not deal with the new materials involved in his business, the credential had little value. These comments are consistent with the finding that the high drop out rate in apprenticeship is partly due to the lack of importance given to completion in certain trades and a lack of congruence between the structure and content of apprenticeship programs and the training needs of the labour market (Sharpe, 2003). For most employers, previous work experience was what counted.

The preceding discussion highlights systemic tensions that have implications for high school apprenticeship partnerships. While achieving agreement between government, employers and trainers over the duration, content, and sequencing of in-class technical training may be difficult given the diverse needs of employers, the tension between unions and employers regarding the value of apprenticeship training is a more fundamental concern. A final area of tension relates to the predominant culture in construction workplaces and implications for learning.

### **Promoting a culture of learning in the workplace**

Sharpe and Gibson (2005) suggest that apprenticeship in Canada has historically not been about the school-to-work transition of young workers but rather retraining older

workers. For example, the median age for apprentices is 27 to 30 years old and in 1999, only 4.4 percent of apprentices were less than 20 years old. Employer generally preferred to hire older apprentices with prior work experience. Similarly, a carpentry training centre representative states, ‘we’ve gone from having the average apprentices of 29 years of age to having an 18 year old going out on the site, and more of them.’ Trainers, teachers, and employers all commented on the new generation. For example:

I’d say that for the youth coming up—they’re far more vocal. ... Now that’s very unusual for the other side [employers] to take. ‘What do you mean, somebody’ll blow me off and actually say goodbye. Nobody does that.’ (I-1, Union trainer)

And we raise our kids differently today from what we did in years past. Kids tend to be more challenging of authority than they ever were before. (I-4, Tech teacher)

[A]ttitude is really, really important. And that goes right down to how you dress. I mean we had one occasion where we had... a person of colour, this black person. And he came and he was probably 19 or 20 and the crotch of his pants was down below his knees ...well it took him about an hour, and he was off the jobsite and gone home to get dressed properly... He came back and he was ok for a couple of weeks. ... But still it was an authority thing. He had a boss and he wasn’t quite prepared to accept the fact that somebody was going to tell him what to do. (I- 69, Employer)

The last quote suggests that increasing ethnic/racial diversity of young apprentices may also represent a change that some employers are more willing to accept than others. While union trainers and teachers were ambivalent about whether students of colour were more likely to face discrimination, they all agreed that young women had a more difficult time. Not only did females face a more restricted set of possible work placements because of employer attitudes, but they had to walk a fine line between being assertive and not threatening existing power structures (I-1, Union trainer). Equity in hiring in carpentry and other trades in Ontario was voluntary and therefore trainers and educators had to rely on the goodwill of employers.

While a couple of OYAP employers welcomed changes in demographics, others were critical of the lack of ‘work ethic’ and inappropriate ‘attitudes’ of young people. Furthermore, most expected new apprentices to adapt and were not prepared to change their way of operating. For example, the norm in apprenticeship (regardless of age) was for ‘first years’ to do the ‘dirty work’:

In general, the first year apprentices have to push the broom and stuff like that. Some of them do get the opportunity to hone skills they’ve learned and others are just slugging equipment around. (I-15, Union trainer)

They’re the ‘immigrants’ in the industry... and they’re going to have to do the jobs that nobody else wants to do. (I-15, Union trainer)

The apprentices are, well to be honest with you, they are gofers at the beginning. And we do that for more than one reason. And not because they’re cheap labour or anything like that. But if you give the kid the dirtiest or the roughest or the heaviest job and he does it well, that means to me that he’s showing me that yeah, he wants to be here. And he’s going to listen and he’s going to learn and he’s going to be a good mechanic one of these days. So far that method hasn’t let hardly anybody down. (I-67, Employer)

Another workplace norm was to hire several apprentices when the company was busy and to retain the ‘best’ ones during slower periods. OYAP employers suggested that their retention rates tended to be between 30 and 50 percent. Therefore, apprentices (particularly young inexperienced first years) can expect to experience frequent periods of unemployment. These trends suggest that despite the discourse of labour shortages, employers are not necessarily changing their practices (cf., Braid, 2003). As a training centre representative comments:

One of the areas that we’re still trying to deal with is the education of the people in the workplace, the supervisors. How do we get them to have a bit more understanding for a first term apprentice going out there—instead of shouting and screaming at them the first day, give them a bit of encouragement. (I-29)

In addition to changes in hiring practices and treatment of new apprentices, there are issues around the quality of training that can occur in worksites where productivity is foremost. For example, training centre instructors mentioned the unsafe practices that apprentices feel pressured to adopt on worksites as they try to work faster. They also acknowledged the danger of ‘monkey see, monkey do’ training as follows:

Where did you learn that? Well I just watched the other guy do that. Where did he learn that? By watching somebody else do that. At some point when the decision was made to change, you know they forgot that the people behind them have no idea of the original knowledge that went into it. And yeah, that’s carpentry. That’s a lot of other trades as well. (I-1, Union trainer)

In general, there appeared to be little support for apprentices on many sites. For example, the supervisor of an OYAP apprentices discussed his company’s approach, as follows:

The construction business is kind of a bit different from your regular corporate kind of office work and stuff. [In office work] they might sit down and talk about your problems and your career, things that we wouldn’t normally do.

*A: So there isn’t a lot of mentorship?*

No, I would say not. And maybe somebody should start some construction company that takes on that. But I can’t see any company who’s out there trying to make money that would spend time behind some apprentices unless they know that those apprentices are going to be with them and that they have the interest and the motivation and the dedication and the commitment. ...

*A: Is there more employers could do or do you think they’re doing enough?*

I think employers could do a lot more actually you know. It’s hard to get employers to do a lot more because they’re busy and their time is valuable. And I think it really is really left up to the employee to make it good for themselves ... to fit in, to show that they want to learn, to show that they want to work, to be readily available, you know, for whatever. So I’m saying the onus is a hell of a lot more on the employee than the employer. Basically the employer wants you to work and make him money. That’s the nature of the business and if you’re not doing that, you’re no good to them. (I-57, Supervisor)

The preceding comments suggest that the ‘affordances’ of the construction workplace may be limited (cf. Billett, 2001). New workers may experience learning that is inappropriate yet available and sanctioned within the workplace. They may be unable

to access the activities and guidance that would develop their practices further because of a lack of expertise on the part of colleagues or an unwillingness to share knowledge.

Traditional ways of doing things, which serve the interests of particular groups, are likely to therefore underpin the structuring of opportunities and barriers to learning.

The tension between the interest of employers in obtaining job-ready workers and the interest of trainers and educators in fully developing the capacities of young people reinforces the view of partnerships as a site of struggle. Further, the balance of power tends to favour employers. For example, because students received cooperative education credits for their first work placements, teachers were required to both monitor placements and to organize ‘integration’ days where they could engage students in reflection on their formal and informal learning. However, in practice, teachers tended to find ways around this requirement largely because they did not want to burden employers by asking them to complete paperwork or to provide release time for students. For example, teachers from different districts comment:

[W]ith the intensity of the program from the carpentry apprenticeship we’re trying to do all of the hours in basically about six and a half or seven weeks at the end, and ... we’re supposed to include six integration days legally. The employers don’t understand that it’s a high school program and that students should be coming back to school once every week or once every other week.

*A: They don’t make allowances for them?*

I don’t ask them to because I think if I was to go to the employers and say, ‘Look you may have the student today but I would like them the next day.’ I think a lot of the employers would say it’s just not worth the hassle because they want apprentices. (I-44, Tech teacher)

I don’t like to take time away [when I visit students] because [the employers] might be very polite but I don’t know how much I’m affecting their work at the time, and then therefore later they might say, ‘you know, I don’t want to take on these students because somebody wants to talk to them for half an hour and to me for half an hour.’ Because that’s one of the things we’re supposed to do is also talk to the employees at length and they’re also supposed to fill out all these evaluation forms. (I-54, Tech teacher)

Therefore, although from an educational perspective, attempts to help students to see the relationship between their formal and informal learning is a laudable goal, their concerns about burdening employers reflect the disproportionate power of employers.

The preceding discussion suggests that current workplace practices may not be conducive to retaining young people in the trade and providing structured opportunities for development. Certainly, the goal of promoting ‘expansive learning’ seems remote (Fuller and Unwin, 1998). Therefore, although high school apprentices tend to be seen as those most likely to complete their training because they are unlikely to have the financial commitments of older apprentices with families and mortgages, it could be argued that they are also more likely to leave the apprenticeship because of hostile work environments, instability of employment, and peer pressure. My sense is that although partnership work (dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration) has occurred in the high school-training centre nexus, less of this work has occurred in high school-employer and training centre-employer relations. This is a critical omission that must be addressed if partnerships are to provide effective learning opportunities for the development of young people.

### **Concluding comments**

[W]e cannot fully understand the process of workplace learning unless we locate it in the context of the underlying structural relationships that underpin the process. These underlying relationships determine the range of opportunities for learning, the knowledge that is made available to be learnt, the support available for learning and finally, the rewards that are available for successful learning. (Ashton, 2002, pp. 150-151)

Although Ashton is referring only to structural relationships within the workplace, his comments highlight for me the importance of looking at the impact of structural relationships on learning through school-to-work transition partnerships. This paper identifies key institutional tensions revealed in a high school apprenticeship partnership between government, high schools, a union trainer, and employers. Many of these tensions would be generalizable to other trades and partnerships, and some are more easily resolved than others. For example, the provincial government could take action to improve the coordination of high school apprenticeship programs and to more effectively support educators and trainers. Recognizing that the ‘demand’ side of apprenticeship may be more of a problem than the ‘supply’ side, the province could also examine ways of encouraging employers to provide opportunities for young people and to address equity in hiring. Currently, no group is taking responsibility for equity issues, and in 2004 only one of 70 carpentry apprentices was female. The education department and school districts could also endeavour to ensure that greater priority is given to the learning side of high school apprenticeship—for example, supporting integration days and other opportunities for students to learn about the industry and to relate formal and informal learning.

Other tensions are more difficult to address. First, I see the academic/vocational divide in secondary school curriculum and the lack of value given to non-college/university pathways as highly problematic. These systemic issues affect the way apprenticeship is viewed by educators, the preparation and quality of applicants, the ability to articulate high school and apprenticeship curriculum, and the level of support provided by the school system. Second, the low level of commitment of employers to

apprenticeship is exacerbated by the fact that carpentry is a voluntary trade and apprenticeship credentials are given little value by employers. While the provincial government (with input from employers and trainers) could make carpentry a mandatory trade and could more effectively address challenges related to the content and sequencing of apprenticeship curricula, encouraging employers to train apprentices and to recognize credentials is a larger issue which affects the sustainability of apprenticeship training.

Third, while government policy has focused on providing a greater supply of young people and significant work has occurred on the high school-trainer side of the partnership, less attention has been given to relations with employers and practices in the workplace. Even in interviews with employers who have hired OYAP apprentices, it is clear that low trust relations, a lack of formal feedback and mentoring, and a general lack of attention to the retention and development of young apprentices are common. Although some employers expressed a willingness to invest in training and development of apprentices, it is clear that this cannot be assumed. In their recommendations to improve Canadian apprenticeship, Sharpe and Gibson (2005) suggested that sector committees should be strengthened and given responsibility for promoting apprenticeship with firms. In my view, such committees also need to promote changes in workplace practices to better support the learning and development of workers.

In sum, it should be apparent from the preceding discussion that partnerships are not a panacea. Rather they are best viewed as sites of struggle. In the case of the high school apprenticeship program in carpentry, partnerships between government, school districts, the union trainer, and employers reflect pre-existing institutional tensions. School districts and the trainer have invested significant time and energy in the

partnership to strengthen the school-trainer nexus. However more work is needed at the school/trainer-employer nexus by local, sectoral, and provincial partners to promote the value of apprenticeship and to foster more democratic workplace relations.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Although it has been argued that the presence of trade unions can provide a collective voice for employees on training and development (Keep et al., 2002), the Ontario government has not mandated their involvement and they are usually absent from local discussions (Taylor, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> For example, a centrally coordinated effort to recruit students for the program and to prepare them for the training centre might have more effectively utilized the strengths of the different districts. In addition, teachers from the Catholic and public urban boards were often required to visit the same job sites to monitor their district's students, which resulted in duplication of effort.
- <sup>3</sup> Although school staff emphasized inclusion based on 'ability' there had been little effort at the school or training centre to address issues of inclusion for equity-seeking groups such as women, visible minorities, people with disabilities or Aboriginal students.