

'Bright lights' and 'twinkies': Career pathways in an education market

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Abstract

This paper examines what happens to “vocational education” within an education market. We ask the question: how does the emphasis on competition and choice fit with the policy rhetoric of requiring schools to do a better job of facilitating the school-to-work transitions of all students? Findings from interviews with high school principals and representatives from the Edmonton Public School Board in Alberta, Canada confirm that policies which promote parental choice and partnerships with employers and post-secondary institutions create pressures on schools to attract high academic students (the “bright lights”) while reducing their numbers of low achieving students. Differences across schools in student populations and programming reflect these influences. As a result, what is offered to low achieving students and those without concrete career plans (“twinkies”) to facilitate their transitions is arguably less valuable than what is offered to high academic students. After examining the effects of neo-liberal policies, we discuss how the development of a high skill, high trust system may be promoted.

Introduction

The discourse of the “knowledge economy” and criticisms of the employability skills of young workers have prompted renewed policy discussion about the role of schools in preparing young people for work in recent years (OECD 2000, 1999). The Canadian government, like governments in most industrialized countries, accepts the view that the average level of skills required of the labour force has increased and that formal education must respond to this up-skilling trend (Government of Canada, 2002; Smith, 2001). Increased interest in developing intermediate skills and concerns about the number of early school leavers has led to the introduction of pre-vocational programs such as apprenticeship or work experience at the high school level.

At the same time, education markets have developed in several countries including England, New Zealand, and Canada (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995, Lauder, Hughes, and Watson 1999, Taylor and Woollard 2003). Such markets combine elements of planned public service with a market emphasis on choice, diversity, self-determination,

demand-driven funding, and competition (Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998). Critics argue that the result is increased polarization in school intakes and student performance (Ball 2003, Thrupp 1999). Other researchers (Taylor C. 2002) have conducted large-scale empirical studies suggesting that market effects are less pronounced than critics suggest. Although little systematic research has been done on education market effects within the Canadian context, an Edmonton study argues that pressures on parents and students to individualize risk tends to reinforce socially-structured inequalities and encourage the commodification of social relations (Taylor and Woollard 2003).

This paper examines what happens to “vocational education” within an education market in Alberta, Canada. More specifically, are such markets consistent with or do they work against the policy rhetoric of requiring schools to do a better job of facilitating the school-to-work transitions of all students? Although much recent work focuses on choice and the involvement of parent consumers as a primary feature of education markets, we expand this conception of the “consumer domain” (Woods et al. 1998) to consider the influence on schools of receiving institutions (employers and higher education) as well as parents. In examining how the current organization of schooling influences students’ futures, this study raises critical questions about the role of schools in processes of social reproduction.

Theoretical influences

Two questions are particularly relevant to this study. The first is how schools can best prepare young people for contemporary society and the second concerns how to ensure that schools address the needs of all young people. The question of preparing

young people for the new economy is framed by Brown and Lauder (1992) as the choice between high trust, high ability or low trust, low ability systems of education and training. They argue that a low trust system assumes that intelligence is fixed and unchangeable and therefore aims to provide a “rational basis for social selection into a rigid hierarchical division of labour” (p. 13). The result is the privileging of a narrow academic education and a significant waste of talent. A high trust system, on the other hand, assumes that all students are capable of significant practical and academic achievements and aims to provide a comprehensive education that encourages open access to all forms of post-secondary education.

Young (1998) outlines a curriculum for the future in greater depth. Starting from the premise that knowledge is socially stratified in society and in school, he critiques the insularity of subjects, the separation of academic and vocational learning, and the separation of school from non-school learning. At the same time, he acknowledges the threat to the existing power structure represented by attempts to de-stratify or give equal value to different forms of knowledge given the ability of the privileged to define what counts as educational success. Working-class parents may also resist attempts to de-stratify knowledge given their historical engagement in struggles to gain access to academic curriculum for their children. However, the policy response of increasing the differentiation of curriculum to better prepare “non-college bound”¹ youth for employment has been problematic since pre-vocational programs tend not to provide students with real workplace skills or the knowledge needed to progress to higher education. Brown and Lauder (1992) agree that vocational programs have failed to

provide a parity of esteem since they continue to “deny access to the real vocational prizes” (p. 31).

Similar to the alternatives proposed by Brown and Lauder (1992), Young (1998) recommends the development of a unified curriculum that connects general and applied studies, provides a clear sense of the purpose of curriculum, offers opportunities for progression and credit transfer, and provides a high level of general education for all students. However, authors are not optimistic that this is likely given policy directions that encourage increased competition among schools and consumer choice. Young suggests that the market approach lacks an understanding of the social conditions for learning and results in schools trying to choose the students they think will succeed. Brown and Lauder similarly argue that free market solutions to education and training problems produce low trust, low skill systems. Authors agree that the introduction of vertically differentiated programs and schools within an education market undermines young people’s employment futures through increased class and racial polarization and waste of talent.

Other authors have also critiqued the polarizing effects of markets. Ball (2003, p. 45) argues that, “where schools compete to recruit students on the basis of reputation and examination performance, then certain types of students become more sought after.” Recognizing that “a school can be only as good as its intake,” middle class families use choice as a strategy to gain advantage in the competition for credentials (p. 155). In the New Zealand context, Lauder, Hughes and Watson (1999) and Thrupp (1999) agree that school performance is largely determined by student background, prior achievement, and the mix of students within the school rather than school policy and practice. Thrupp

(1999) recommends that governments intervene to reduce social class segregation across schools. Although he acknowledges the tension between “teaching for relevance and teaching an academic curriculum,” he pragmatically suggests that “it is only through academic success in schools and tertiary institutions that most students can gain entry to high socio-economic occupations and life chances” (p. 11).

Therefore, while authors agree that markets in education exacerbate existing inequities, they propose different solutions. Writers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS 1981) suggest that struggles in England historically have also emphasized different dimensions of the problem. For example, educational provision has been critiqued on the basis of *access* and the systematic exclusion or disadvantaging of children. But it has also been critiqued in terms of *content*—the constitution of knowledge and modes of acquiring it, *control*—the forms and contents of schooling, and *context*—the assumed place of schooling within the family-school-production complex (CCCS 1981, p. 38). Similarly, some members of policy communities believe that contemporary struggles should focus on achieving greater access for working-class students to academic curriculum and middle-class schools while others argue that there is a need to challenge curriculum and other aspects of public schooling that promote inequity.

The research discussed above from the UK and New Zealand is relevant to the Canadian context although institutional differences in education and training systems must also be acknowledged. For example, the private school sector is larger in Britain than in Canada. In Britain, there tends also to be an early routing of students into different streams and a strong tradition of leaving school at age 16. In contrast, the Canadian

system attempts “to provide large numbers of students with a general high-school education and the possibility of studying at the post-secondary level” (Ashton and Lowe 1991, p. 7). Enrolment in tertiary education (expressed in relation to the 20 to 24 year old cohort) was the highest in Canada of all the G7 countries (Livingstone 1999). A recent national survey suggests that by age 20, 85 percent of respondents had graduated from high school and two-thirds of these were pursuing further education (Bowlby and McMullen 2002).

Although Canadian transition routes may be more extended than in Britain, they are also less clear-cut. And while streaming may be less overt in Canadian schools, different courses in Canada, as in the UK, have “different value and different links to labour market positions” (Gaskell 1991, p. 66). Canadian writers, like some of their British counterparts, argue that “a succession of reforms have not abolished the effects of social class...on student achievement or life chances” (cf. Gidney 1999, p. 283). In both countries, early school leavers tend to be the most disadvantaged segment of the youth population (Ashton and Lowe 1991).

Method

Data for this study include a total of fifteen interviews with seventeen participants--two from the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) and fifteen from the majority² of high schools within this district. Statistics collected by the school board were also analyzed. Interviews were conducted at schools and were subsequently transcribed and coded in N6 (software to facilitate qualitative data analysis). Pseudonyms are used for all schools and participants, and in some cases the gender of a participant has also been

changed. Data obtained from the school district included information about where grade ten students came from (e.g. feeder schools, within/outside catchment), school enrolments and capacities, enrolment in specialized programs by school, student enrolments in grade ten core courses by school, and credits earned in “vocational” options. *Table 1* summarizes relevant information about the schools represented in this study as follows:

- area of city (north, south, east, west, central)
- size (large = 1,800-2,500 students, medium = 800-1,600, and small = < 500)
- whether the school was at, over, or under capacity
- whether English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) and students with special needs made up greater than or less than 15 percent of the school population
- whether International Baccalaureate (IB) students made up greater than or less than 15 percent of the school population (only available for schools offering IB)
- the percentage of grade ten students in academic stream courses
- whether the school offered 16 level (the lowest stream) of courses
- whether the school awarded apprenticeship (RAP) credits

Information contained in this table provides a sense of differences across schools in populations and programming. More specific information was not included in order to protect the identities of schools.

Insert Table 1 around here

The policy context: Choice and new vocationalism

The education market in Edmonton has been influenced by changes introduced by the province over time. For example, a 1975 amendment to the *School Act* permitted the establishment of alternative schools. The 1988 Act went further to state that alternative programs that emphasized a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter could be introduced if a school board judges that there is sufficient demand (Alberta: Section

16.2). In the early 1990s, Alberta was the first (and to date the only) province in Canada to introduce charter school legislation, which also increased the competitive environment in education. Other reforms included allowing choice through open boundaries and promoting school-based decision-making (Taylor 2001).

Developments in Edmonton (one of the two largest cities in Alberta) reflect these provincial changes. In 1974, the EPSB developed a policy that laid the groundwork for alternative programs, and changes in the School Act coupled with administrators who were positively disposed toward choice led to the development of several programs. 97 percent of Edmonton students were enrolled in schools within the publicly-funded sector (including public and Catholic schools) according to a 1999 City of Edmonton census question. The remaining three percent attended private or charter schools or were home-schooled. The EPSB includes close to 81,600 students in 208 schools while the Catholic district (also publicly funded) is less than half that size.

The EPSB promotes itself as a “district of choice” and has actively forestalled the establishment of charter schools and outflow of students to private schools by developing a variety of alternative programs in recent years. These currently address religion, culture, and language (e.g. Aboriginal culture, bilingual programs, Christian programs), age groupings (combinations of elementary, junior, and senior high), special interests (fine arts, sports, military, technology), modes of delivery (home schooling, virtual schooling), gender (all girls), and exceptionality (students with disabilities, gifted).

In response, the mobility of students within the public school system has also increased over time. For example, between 1984 and 2001 the percentages of students who did not attend their designated school jumped from 49 to 62 percent at the senior

high level (Personal communication, EPSB staff, November 5, 2002). Most schools in the EPSB must serve students in their catchment area first. If they have more applicants than places, it is common to select out-of-boundary students through a lottery. However, there are exceptions—for example, if the district designates a school as a site for a particular program, it may select qualified students from across the city for that program.

In addition to responding to the interests of some parents in choice, recent education reforms in Alberta have responded to employers' perceptions of the poor skills of graduates (Taylor 2001). For example, the education ministry released a *Framework for Enhancing Business Involvement in Education* as part of its goal to enhance linkages between schools and the private sector (Alberta Education 1996). It later supported the establishment of the *CAREERS the Next Generation Foundation*, an organization funded by government and business to mobilize communities to provide work experience opportunities for Alberta students. This group has promoted the registered apprenticeship program (RAP) and summer internships for students in health occupations to high schools, students, and employers across Alberta.

As part of reforms in the late 1980s and early 90s, the department of education also developed new vocational curricula. It was decided that vocational education in Alberta (then called “practical arts”) must be updated to “help students prepare to enter the workforce with the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to help ensure Alberta a competitive place within the global trading community” (Curriculum Development Branch 1989, June, p. 4). The stated aim was to revitalize curriculum and promote equity of access by updating old courses and developing new ones to reflect changes in the

world of work (p. 16). Technology was also to be integrated into all practical arts courses as reflected by the new program name – *Career and Technology Studies* (CTS).

The CTS program was phased in between 1992 and 1996 and its curriculum structure was modular. It includes courses related to both goods-producing industries (e.g. agriculture, manufacturing and construction) and service-producing industries (e.g. business, health and finance). Offerings were to vary between high schools, boards, and regions partly in response to local interest and demand. To increase relevance and responsiveness, business was to be more involved in its delivery (Alberta Education 1994, p. 4).

At the district level, a proposal for a Career-Focused Education model to enhance students' school to work transitions was introduced by the EPSB in late 2002. The goal was to ensure that all students leaving high school have clear ideas about career options and how to pursue particular pathways. A question arising from the preceding discussion is how high schools within the education market of the EPSB are responding to the demand to prepare all students for the future.

Reinventing trade schools

An interesting theme in interview data was the imperative for under-subscribed schools to “reinvent” themselves. Most participants cited the examples of Calvert High, which “phoenixed” from an inner-city school to become an arts-focused school in the mid 1980s and Duncan High, which “rose from the ashes” of an old trades school to become a science and technology-focused school in the early 90s. In both cases,

declining enrolments and poor reputations were overcome by creating magnet schools which drew students from across the city.

In the UK market, Ball (2003, p. 46) similarly observes that many schools have “reoriented their general offering” to attract more academically able students. In the Edmonton case, both Calvert and Duncan were considered “trades and services” schools. Duncan was built in the late 1960s when the federal government provided funding to the provinces to build vocational facilities and programs. A principal discusses the early days with some nostalgia:

When I was at Duncan [in the 1970s], it was a very high profile. When we had open houses the mayor came. ... We had all kinds of provincial politicians who came. ... And the parking lot was full... You parked and walked for three blocks to get to the school. ... it was seen as a really worthwhile program.

He adds that Duncan High was so successful that plans to build a similar school on the north side of the city were developed. When the provincial government put a freeze on construction, the district moved the staff and plan into a wing of Calvert High, which operated as a school within a school until the district abandoned the plan and trades and services became a department there in the late 1970s.

Trades and services programs were geared toward “the middle group of students who were capable enough to finish high school but were going to be going from school to work.” However, over time enrolments declined³ and Duncan reportedly became populated by students with behavioural problems and/or very low academic achievement. A principal who was involved in the reinvention process recounts this part of the history as follows:

[In 1990, Duncan] had about 250 students [with a capacity of 1500] ... a really bad reputation. Nobody wanted to go. Terrible building. And we had to change it. ... we were helped a little bit because at that time science and technology was the

big thing. So [school administration] decided and the district decided that we would have a focus of science and technology. ... We were given some money to redesign part of the school. So we needed new colours and new physical look. ... We decided on new vision. ... Then we had to go out and get the kids. ... three of us went out as a team to all the junior highs in the area. ... And we eventually persuaded 160 youngsters to come. ... [A]nd then we started working with them to develop a new culture. ... And we started in September with 165 [students], some old staff, some new staff, and a whole lot of old kids that didn't want us because those 200 odd were still there...

Interviewer (Int): How did the demographics of the old kids and the new kids differ?

Totally different... when the numbers dropped off, it became the dumping ground for all the bad kids.

The ingredients of reinvention appeared to include attracting new more academically-focused students, new subject-specialist teachers (from trades to academics and technology), new partners (from industrial employers to the science faculty at the university), and the modernization of facilities (e.g., old shops became a gym and fitness facility). Most participants refer to this reinvention as a success story—the school grew from a student population of around 200 to 1,000 in four years. In terms of CTS programming, the new administrators eliminated automotives, food prep, and welding and maintained beauty culture, horticulture, and carpentry (because “a lot of high-end kids did that as an option”). They also added six computer labs.

Such reinvention stories appear to have made a lasting impression on high school principals. Since the school district appears to rotate high school administrators every four or five years, more than one knew the histories of Duncan and Calvert firsthand. Most were also familiar with stories of other under-subscribed schools that had revitalized themselves by introducing elite academic programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP)⁴ programs. Further, it was evident that in addition to other barriers associated with offering a wide range of CTS programming

(costs of equipment, difficulty in finding qualified journeyman teachers, higher cost of delivery because of smaller class sizes), the spectres of the old Duncan and Calvert schools affected their decisions about programming. For example, the principal of Dennison High comments:

Our automotives program is full. We have a lot of students that wish to register for our automotives program as well as our cosmetology program and those programs are thriving. Well at some point, you have to then ask yourself...should we look at expanding the program? Or should we then look to the district offering it in another school? And again, balancing things off. Because we've known from our history that in the same way you can have students that refer to a school as an IB school, some schools in the past have had a reputation of being a vocational-directed school.

Int: Is that negative?

I believe if the school becomes identified as a vocational school it will lose its draw for a student who wishes to have a more regular high school experience... in the past we've had that and one of the reasons we've had to look at changing the reputation of a high school was because it got too strong of a vocational reputation...

Another principal, from Beatty High School, suggests that their proximity to a school with a strong reputation for academics has made it more difficult to maintain a "comprehensive" approach:

Our biggest battle, to be honest with you, over about thirty years is the *stigma attached to a trade school*. And particularly if you look at the west end where there's two major high schools and one is basically academic. And the other [Beatty] is academic with a trades component. ...[P]arents who grew up in the west end know [Beatty] as a pretty rough and ready school. And you know people kind of felt if you were bright and academically-oriented and probably going to head to university, the academic school's the better choice. On the other hand, if you really don't like school that much and your knuckles drag on the ground when you walk around, then probably the trade school would be just right for you. ... And so the biggest challenge for us is to establish ourselves as a truly academic school without dropping the support for our trades program because they have huge value. [emphasis added]

This participant adds that the only way to battle the negative perceptions associated with offering vocational courses is to "have a strong academic program to

offset it.” The principal of Allen High agrees, “we don’t want to have our kids at the lower end exceed our kids at the higher and be known as a school for predominantly those kids.” Several participants mentioned introducing either AP or IB to attract high academic students because “they’re the school’s bread and butter; they give the schools good reputations.” The principal of Atkins High, located in a low socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhood with a higher than average proportion of immigrant families, expresses a commonly held view:

If we [principals] are charged with improving performance, the one way to do that is to bring in a higher-class calibre of youngster. Performance will go up by definition. And at the same time, if I get a referral to this school, I don’t get many IB students referred to me. I get a lot of special needs students referred to me.

Int: Is that why you introduced the AP program?

Partly as a counterbalance.

Int: Because I think almost every high school now has either AP or IB.

You need some program for your high flyers; otherwise you won’t get any high flyers.

The principal of Andrews High, who is credited with significantly increasing its enrolment, also acknowledges that her school previously had a reputation as a trade school. All of the principals who were concerned about “balancing their populations” by growing elite academic programs came from schools in below-average SES neighbourhoods. Several of these had a student mix that included disproportionate numbers of new immigrant families (and students of colour) and participants implied that imbalance in this area was also problematic.

Principals of schools with an academic reputation, on the other hand, were not as concerned about being comprehensive by providing a range of CTS courses. For example, the principal of Bellamy High suggests that his school offers few options since academics are the “driving force” for students and “this is a community that doesn’t

require [vocational-type courses].” The principal of Chambers High, a “university-prep” school that is able to select its students and enrolls 100 percent of its students in the IB program, refers to a “comprehensive academic program” as including “all sciences, all the maths, the second languages, the histories, the English.” In her view, “trying to be all things to all people sometimes is a mistake bigger schools make.” But we argue in this paper that trying to be all things to all people stems from market pressures on schools in low SES areas to control their student mix by attracting more academic students.

While the goal of offering a strong academic program to students in all schools may be laudable, the principal of Grosvenor High suggests that the efforts of schools to “get rid of” the trade school image is unfair to “the kids out there that don’t fit that academic mould.” For example, when asked which schools offer a range of CTS courses, the principal of Beatty could name only a few others—Andrews, Greenwood, and Atkins. The remainder tend to have more limited capability and focus on computer instruction rather than the “heavier trades.” Therefore, “academic” students are deprived of opportunities to experience different forms and areas of learning. At the same time, there was talk at the district level of revitalizing Atkins High, which is seriously under-subscribed, by introducing “Tech Prep”—a program that requires students to combine applied academic courses and work experience in a particular career area. The principal of Atkins expressed concerns about this reinvention plan:

I think everyone would like a Tech Prep program in somebody else’s school. Because what we’ve learned is where you have a substantial percentage of students taking a single program in one school, it warps the entire school—either the internal operation or the external perception.

The differentiation of schools according to their balance of academic and vocational courses is reflected in statistics from the school district. *Table 2* reports the

number of CTS credits per student in the high schools examined in this study. The data suggest a clear divide between the schools with a reputation for academics (Dawson, Chambers, Bellamy) and the schools without (in lower SES neighbourhoods) (Atkins, Andrews, Allen, and Dennis). Students in the former earned less than four CTS credits each while those in the latter earned more than 5 credits.⁵ Greenwood, Duncan, and perhaps Andrews were the only schools that appeared to have achieved a reputation for both academic and vocational courses.

Because CTS strands include a wide range of courses, *Table 2* also provides a ratio of credits earned in new “white-collar” courses (information processing and computer technology) compared to more traditional “blue-collar” courses (construction technology, electrical technology, mechanics, fabrication studies, and cosmetology). Despite the fact that we are comparing only two new vocational courses to five that are more traditional (and that in addition to these courses, the ministry requires technology to be integrated into all academic courses), the ratios demonstrate that in the “academic” and magnet schools (Bellamy, Dawson, Calvert, Duncan, and Chambers) more students earned credits in new vocational courses. Three schools, Allen, Atkins, and Greenwood were relatively balanced, and in the others (Beatty, Andrews, Grosvenor, and Dennison), students earned more credits in courses related to the trades.

Insert Table 2 around here

The preceding discussion suggests that most schools are making a concerted effort to attract academic students but few are providing a wide range of CTS courses. In

addition to the influence of school histories, size, and facilities, the pressure for performance appears to also impact programming in schools.⁶ As the principal from Dennison High comments with reference to the lowest stream of courses (16 level), “it’s almost dangerous to do as good a job as what I believe we are doing” because other schools and district personnel are likely to refer more of that type of student there. Old vocational courses are associated with students who are low achieving and who often have special needs.

In addition, performance pressures have encouraged high schools to introduce earlier and more rigid streaming. For example, the principal of Atkins High, the most under-subscribed high school in the district, replied to our question of how to bring around a “turnaround” in the school as follows:

[W]hat we’ve done internally is change a number of our marking primaries. We’ve put in a heavy filter at the 20 level [usually taken in grade eleven]. I’d rather have you fail 20 and take 20 twice than go to 30 [usually taken in grade twelve] and take 30 twice. Partly because 20’s not measured on that standard and 30 is. ... We’ve changed our internal assessments to make them more parallel with diploma exam assessments.

Other principals talked about the importance of appropriate “placement” of students when they enter high school. For example, the principal of Allen High comments:

Typically this school used to really push kids into the [academic] stream because ... we wanted all kids to have the opportunity. We discovered that sets up a lot of kids for failure. ... But what we’ve done for next year is we’ve put in some pretty stringent guidelines for our course registration. So if you had a certain percentage last year, you would need to register in this course. ... They can appeal that. But then they have to go see somebody. They have to make a good case for it.

While most principals argue that more rigid streaming ensures that schools improve students’ chances of successfully completing high school, placement appears to

be related also to their interest in ensuring that more students meet provincial standards on grade 12 diploma exams. For example, a few principals mentioned the influence of the *Report Card on Alberta High Schools*, which ranks schools on criteria that include average exam marks and diploma completion rates. This report is produced annually by the Fraser Institute, a think tank that promotes competitive market solutions to policy problems.⁷ And although participants argue that there is mobility for students across streams, a couple acknowledge that moving “up is always tougher than down.” In addition to streaming within schools, the EPSB has developed two schools for “special” populations. Connors High was established in 1997 for students who do not complete high school within three years but who are under 20 years of age. It therefore draws students from across the district and is very focused on career preparation. Grosvenor High was built as a vocational school in 1969 and has since become a school for students with special needs.

The above discussion suggests that while there has historically been residential segregation across schools, choice and school-based decision-making are likely to exacerbate differences. As the principal of Atkins states, open boundaries “simply lead to relocated performance.” Markets and devolution offer incentives for schools to attract high academic students and disincentives to offer traditional vocational courses. The market emphasis on being responsive to *parents* through choice of schools and programs during high school is therefore important to our analysis of how schools within an education market prepare students for the future. The next section examines another aspect of education markets--the pressure on schools to be responsive to *receiving institutions*—for example, colleges, universities, and employers.

What is offered to “twinkies” vs. “bright lights”

You know, I call them my twinkies ... when they come in in grade ten ... they have no clue. And so I think our job as educators is to, you know, to be doing some forward thinking. Like Faith, the woman who wrote that popcorn book, “always looking for your heavy.” That’s our job, is to look ahead and see what kids really need and help them shape a school to provide some good viable opportunities. (Principal, Andrews High)

The process of selection and promotion of students in high schools is less of a problem when the educational provision for different groups is equally valuable. However, we argue in this section that what is being offered to low-achieving students and those without clear aspirations (“twinkies”) in terms of school-to-work transition programs is inadequate compared to what is offered to high academic students (“bright lights”). The lowest achievers tend not to meet the requirements for apprenticeship or for the more desirable work experience placements. Students who do meet the requirements must make decisions early and may miss out on a broad-based school experience. They also engage in learning off-campus and in school that is fragmented rather than integrated. Students in elite academic programs, on the other hand, are more likely to experience a “seamless transition” because their off-campus learning is related more directly to high school learning and they are engaged in partnerships through their schools that enhance their social and cultural capital. We elaborate these differences in this section.

When asked which group of students needs most help with transitions, principals’ responses tended to be split between “all students” and “students with special needs” or “at risk” students. The latter view is more consistent with research findings suggesting that students who do not complete high school tend to be most disadvantaged in the

labour market (Ashton and Lowe 1991). At the same time, principals acknowledged that RAP and work experience programs were not catering to these students.⁸ For example, the principal of Andrews High comments:

[T]he apprenticeship program] only wants your real *bright lights*. ... They don't want my little *twinkies* who, you know, can't figure out where the school is for the first week of September. ... [emphasis added]

In reality, the RAP program attracts a small number of students who are in the middle group in terms of performance and who have very clear work goals since “bright lights” tend not to apply and lower achieving students do not meet the criteria related to grades and attendance.

Developing partnerships with the private sector to help meet the needs of lower achieving students more generally was difficult. For example, when asked about the pros and cons of involving employers in the delivery of courses, the same principal replied:

Well, I think they're employers, they're not teachers. And so oftentimes they get frustrated when they show you something once and they think you should get it. I have a buddy who works in industry who says, “Yep, I can tell by the end of the first day whether I'm keeping that employee or not.” I mean, that's how quick. Because the dollar is paramount for them, they make a decision. They don't want to give that kid a four-month trial. Well, I know the first day might be horrible, and the teacher knows that. So I think the partnership between school and employer has to be critical before we give the responsibility to the employer because they don't have the skill set to work through the bugbears with kids.

Int: Do you think there's more pressure because of budgets to do more of the off-campus delivery?

Well you try but it's not always effective. You know, we have a significant high needs population here... And the identified are the 23 point something percent and the unidentified, you can add another ten percent. And so an employer doesn't know how to work with those kids.

Int: Just talking about that group, what kinds of things do you do?

That's the most challenging group to deal with. Because that's not the group the employers are looking for. If [name of employer] says he wants to partner with us, he's looking for the same things that the U of A [University of Alberta] wants. So where do I slot those kids in?

Employers as well as schools were therefore interested in attracting high achieving students through partnerships. At this school, a former business partner reportedly did not see it as a “school for the future” because of low enrolments and performance and withdrew.

In addition to the issue of which students are left out of school-to-work transition programs, the question of what kind of experience is provided to those who make the grade is important. Interestingly, the principal of Beatty High felt that schools with good CTS facilities could provide a better educational experience “in house” for students who were interested in apprenticeship:

[I]n Edmonton Public, high school students are limited to three years in their neighbourhood high school. If you’re going to take a student out for half a year, or half a day for a year, that’s one sixth of their total high school experience. And if you look at the actual training, there’s a value in that, but there’s also value in the high school experience, just in terms of socialization and growth and there’s the leadership and citizenship and all those things. ...[So] for a school like ours that has excellent facilities ...in terms of the educational experience, we can provide the training in the building and augment it with a work experience program.

He believed that the integration of school and work-based learning was more likely to occur when schools play a more active role. However he acknowledged that few schools had the facilities to provide effective “in house” programs. A participant from Connors High expressed the additional concern that RAP students must select a trade early in high school (when very few are ready) and those who change their minds may find it difficult to move back into the mainstream program. In a context where almost two-thirds of fifteen-year old high school students aspire to university education according to a recent national survey (Krahn and Taylor 2005), asking some students to

make early career choices while encouraging the rest to keep all their options open is problematic.

Several participants also questioned the value of *work experience* courses. For example, a school district representative commented on the gap between policy and practice as follows:

Work experience is supposed to be a program designed by the student in concert with the principal or counsellor and that program is then individually tailored to that student with individual results and assessments put in place. That's all supposed to be coordinated by the work experience coordinator or by the principal in a small school. So quite frankly, it's rare when that happens according to Hoyle. ... Most times, it's a cheap employee and you get five credits for pumping gas, and that sort of thing. ... I think in Edmonton Public we've cleaned up a lot of that ... by ensuring that work experience coordinators are very careful about ensuring there's an individual program plan...

The principal of Andrews High, however, suggests that work experience courses continue to be problematic:

[T]he work experience [course] has a very strong footing in this school but not for the right reason. So many of our kids work to survive and when you figure out you can work and get credit, then you go to work experience. Does it do the training aspect that it's supposed to? I would say "no" and I would say we're not the only school where it would be "no."

This participant was also critical of the modularization of CTS curriculum because it fragments and trivializes the learning that occurs: "Two bits of paper, two bits of knowledge. You know, you're missing the bigger picture." These comments and those of other principals suggest that pre-vocational programs may not be providing students with either appropriate workplace skills or the knowledge needed to progress to higher education (cf. Young 1998, Brown and Lauder 1992).

In addition to the challenge of finding willing business partners and trying to make pre-vocational programs coherent and effective, principals of schools with higher

than average numbers of students with high needs faced the reality that their students' "horizons of action" differed in the main from those in highly academic schools (cf. Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). The principal of Atkins High (the school with large numbers of low SES and new immigrant students) had also taught at the university prep school (Chambers High) and was therefore able to articulate these differences as follows:

Int: Are kids thinking in the future [at Atkins]?

No. Next Friday maybe. ...

Int: In different schools, would parents and students be thinking more about their futures?

Well, when I was at [Chambers High], one of the recruitment tools we would make is "I don't expect you to be moving from grade 9 to grade 10. I expect you to be planning the next seven years of your life—three years of high school and your first post-secondary degree. And that was the thinking of 100 percent of the students and 100 percent of the parents. ... It's a different clientele here. ... [T]his crowd is short-term driven and part of that's economic necessity. Part of that is their reality. When you're at [Chambers] the father will drop the youngster off in the morning and the mother will pick that youngster up at night. ... A lot of these youngsters [at Atkins] need what in the trade is called "resilience." They need to learn to fall down seven but get up eight. ... We're encouraging that longer term planning but it's a battle.

While the comments above highlight extremes across schools, data from other schools support the argument that what is offered to academic students in elite programs in some schools to facilitate their transitions builds on and enhances their social and cultural capital. For example, a few principals referred to the fact that since IB programs require students to engage in community service, they have opportunities to do volunteer work that allows them to explore different careers. This emphasis on the learning and career exploration aspects of volunteer work in IB programs provides an interesting contrast to the focus on providing students with work experience credits for the paid work they are already involved in, mentioned above.

In addition to relationships with community groups, some schools had developed partnerships with post-secondary institutions. For example, the principal of Greenwood High, which had the largest IB program in the city, commented that the university had been very good about “providing specialized services” to their students—staff came to do a special registration and provided additional information sessions. In addition, she comments “the U of A library works with our librarian for our IB kids to go over there and do some work on research skills so there’s a nice working relationship there.” This contrasts with a participant from Connors High (for fourth and fifth year students) who complained that his school had struggled unsuccessfully to develop links with the university.

A few other principals also refer to links between staff involved in elite academic programs and the university. For example, the principal of Duncan High, the magnet school for science, discussed a program at her school for “high flying science students” who want to learn about work applications and career opportunities:

The person who’s been in charge for the last three years has just done a fantastic job and I really see a niche for the job that he’s done. He runs it very much like a work experience program, but instead of working they’re out with people in the science and technology fields. So it’s like a sort of a job shadowing type of thing and it works incredibly well. Lots of people from the university and it’s a very, very powerful program for kids.

The principal of Chambers High (the university prep school) refers to their informal partnership with the university:

It’s most definitely one of the most involved partnerships I’ve ever seen. I know I’ve been in schools where we had a plaque on the wall with a designation that we were partnered up with this company or that company, but our involvement with the company for various reasons was more ceremonial or token. These kids are most definitely involved with a lot of different people at the university, as are our staff.

Int: With what sorts of things?

Well every summer they will work in the labs, an awful lot of them are interested in the health sciences field so they will develop contacts with professors over there, either through their biology, physics or chemistry teachers here who are in touch with them. A lot of the people [at the university] are former graduates of the school so that's a nice contact... they come back to the school occasionally and give special lessons or enrichment classes after school for both staff and students. ...You can go to the university hospital any day of the week ...and you'll see our students there volunteering. ...As I said, it's probably the most effective partnership I've ever seen in true meaning. It's not sort of going to a meeting once or twice. They come in and they actually do things with the kids.

The comments above suggests that coordinators of elite academic programs in a number of schools have developed informal relationships with post-secondary and community organizations that provide opportunities for students to explore different programs and careers. The university and colleges are active partners because they wish to attract these students. Partnership activities include elements important to developing career pathways such as the integration of theoretical and more practical activities, career exploration, and the development of a knowledge base that supports a variety of choices.

Conclusion: Meeting the needs of all students

Ball (2003) argues that strategies of social advantage pursued by middle-class families through the discourse of choice has negative consequences for other social groups who are likely to find themselves excluded or closed off from certain pathways and confronted with services of a lower standard. Our focus on pre-vocational programs leads us to argue further that the strategies of schools in response to both middle-class families and "receiving institutions" (employers and higher education) also perpetuate these new forms of closure.

Examination of data from interviews with high school representatives leads us to agree that education markets are likely to exacerbate the polarisation of school intakes

that already exists on the basis of residential segregation (cf. Lauder et al 1999). This impacts programming since no school wants to be known as a “vocational” school given the fate of previous trades schools. However, schools in low SES neighbourhoods feel obliged to offer a range of CTS courses that will help their large numbers of low and middle academic students with transitions to work, in addition to providing elite academic programs to attract the “bright lights.” At the same time, there are few incentives for schools to provide pre-vocational programs when they are associated with low achieving students with special needs.

One policy solution to the decline of practical arts has been to enlist the help of employers in the delivery of CTS, work experience courses, and the high school apprenticeship program. However, the shift to off-campus delivery using private sector partners raises issues around the quality of provision, the integration of work-based and school-based learning, and access to programs for the most needy students. In contrast, through partnerships with the university and volunteer work opportunities in the community, students in elite academic programs like IB gain access to networks and exchanges that are likely to provide advantages in the labour market. These opportunities open up “socio-scapes which are national and global rather than, as in the case of working-class students, mostly local” (cf. Ball 2003, p. 85). They are consistent with a model of school-to-work transition that allows students to explore careers and see the relevance of their formal learning while keeping doors open.

Advantaged students are therefore likely to become more advantaged while those who are disadvantaged fall further behind. The contrast between what is offered to different groups of students brings us back to the question of whether policies of *choice*

and *partnership* are likely to promote a high skill, high trust or low skill, low trust system of education. Data suggest the latter—as one principal suggests “we’re good at taking care of our top 15 percent of our kids; I don’t know if we’re good at taking care of the bottom 15 percent.” Furthermore, evidence suggests that there are pressures on schools to become more specialized in the area of options like CTS because of the costs associated with offering a range of courses. Schools are already specializing in terms of the streams of academic courses that they offer.

In contrast to the proliferation of vertically differentiated programs and schools encouraged by the market approach, we agree with Brown and Lauder (1992) that high skill, high trust systems are more likely to be produced by comprehensive systems that provide all students with a good broad-based education until age 18. This is particularly true in Canada given the high educational aspirations and attainment of young people and the existence of a community college system that has been effective in providing vocational and technical programs (cf. Livingstone 1999). In developing a broad-based program that will prepare young people for the future, more attention must be paid to modifying the advanced level curriculum, which has provided the standard against which other knowledge forms have been judged. As Young (1998) suggests, more often changes have been made to the organization and content of vocational curriculum while the academic program remains untouched.

The development of an alternative unified curriculum would benefit from making explicit the vocational aspects of academic subjects as well as the academic aspects of vocational subjects. Resistance could be countered by making explicit the connections between the processes by which students are selected for different types of schools and

course streams and the processes by which curriculum knowledge is selected or excluded (cf. Young 1998). We argue therefore that it is necessary but not sufficient to suggest that more working-class students should have access to middle-class schools.

The preceding analysis suggests that the concept of career pathways within an education market confronts a number of challenges associated with the existing hierarchy of value and the pressures on schools to “cool out” the aspirations of particular groups of students. Middle-class parents, employers, and post-secondary institutions all influence what goes on in schools. Recognizing these pressures, it is important to advocate for a system of education where the students in all schools have similar opportunities for growth and development.

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Table 1: Selected information about schools in study, 2002

School pseudonym	Area in city	2002 size by enrolments	Enrolments surpass limit?	ESL and special needs students: less than or more than 15 % of population	IB* or AP students/course selections: less than or more than 15 %	% of grade 10 students in academic cores (average)	Offer 16 level Courses?	RAI cred awa
Beatty	NW	large	No	less than	less than*	66	no	r
Duncan	SE	medium	Yes	less than	less than	67	yes	y
Andrews	NE	large	at limit	greater than	less than*	57	yes	r
Atkins	NE	medium	No	greater than	less than	35	yes	r
Bellamy	NW	large	Yes	less than	greater than*	73	no	r
Greenwood	SW	large	Yes	less than	greater than*	85	no	y
Chambers	Central	small	Yes	less than	greater than*	100	no	r
Dawson	SE	medium	Yes	less than	greater than*	84	no	r
Allen	NE	medium	No	less than	less than	57	yes	r
Calvert	Central	medium	No	less than	greater than*	71	yes	r
Dennison	SE	medium	No	greater than	less than	57	yes	y
Grosvenor ¹	SW	small	No	greater than	n/a	n/a	yes	r
Connors ¹	Central	n/a	n/a	less than	n/a	n/a	no	y

¹ Grosvenor is a school for students with special needs and Connors is a school for students who do not complete high school within the expected 3 years, and therefore some information is either not applicable or not available.

Table 2: CTS Information from schools in study, 2002

School pseudonym	CTS credits awarded per student	Ratio of white collar CTS to blue collar CTS
Beatty	6.4	.73
Duncan	6.7	2.4
Andrews	8	.4
Atkins	5.5	.95
Bellamy	3.6	2.5
Greenwood	5.8	.79
Chambers	3.2	no blue collar
Dawson	3.8	1.2
Allen	5.7	1.09
Calvert	1.7	1.4
Dennison	7.7	.65
Grosvenor	4.5	n/a
Connors	n/a	n/a

Endnotes:

¹ Since assessments about which students are likely to go on to post-secondary education are future-oriented, the process of separating out those deemed to be capable of success from those who are not is likely to produce the anticipated outcomes when curriculum differentiation is vertical rather than horizontal and when there is little mobility between streams.

² Two principals declined to participate. We did not request interviews with principals of a couple of very small schools. However, the schools that did participate were representative of choices within the district. In one case the principal was interviewed with a counsellor, and in another an assistant principal and counsellor were interviewed.

³ One influence on enrolment in vocational courses around this time was the province's introduction of a dual track leading to a differentiated diploma. The response of students was to choose courses in the more academic track. A single diploma was reintroduced in 1994.

⁴ According to the International Baccalaureate Organization website, the IB program was created in 1968 as a demanding pre-university course of study for "highly motivated high school students." It was born out of efforts to establish a common curriculum and university entry credential for students moving from one country to another. Advanced Placement (AP) was developed in the United States in response to concerns that students were not being sufficiently challenged by high school and college courses. Both

programs have grown significantly across Canada in recent years. Students usually are required to have honours grades (around 80 percent) to be admitted.

⁵ The magnet school for science and technology offered the highest level of CTS courses per student because of the high numbers of computer-related courses taken.

⁶ Results on grade 12 provincial diploma exams are reported on a school-by-school basis in the media.

⁷ The most recent Report Card can be found on the Fraser Institute website: www.fraserinstitute.ca.

⁸ Most high schools were not prioritizing RAP regardless of their student population. The majority used a central agency linked with the school district to coordinate the program as opposed to hiring someone in-house. Four schools only had 2 students each, while the highest number of students in a school was 16.