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WORKING TOWARD A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

A REPORT FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA

BACKGROUND

Since the 2011-12 school year began, the British Columbia Federation of Teachers (BCTF) has engaged in a job action to pressure the BC government to negotiate a new contract. The job action has essentially been a work to rule action with teachers refusing to meet with administrators, administer standardized tests, and refusing to do report cards. This job action has insured that the BCTF's demands have remained on the front page of newspapers and in the minds of parents and students. Rather than motivating the government to negotiate, this job action resulted in back to work legislation, Bill 22, being passed on March 16, 2012, although teachers managed to squeeze in a three-day strike before they and students dispersed for spring break.

Teaching was legislated an essential service in 2001, one of the first moves made by the Liberal party that has been in the provincial Legislature since then. Then Minister of Education Christy Clark, now the premier, has maintained a steady assault on the BCTF in the last decade and Bill 22 is a draconian measure that goes much further than demanding that teachers get back to work and indeed changes the ground rules for the how's and why's of labour negotiations. The government's passage of Bill 22 makes walkouts illegal, and this is coupled with what must be considered some of the most onerous fines ever, \$1.3 million per day for the union, union leaders or representatives \$2,500 per day, and individual teachers \$475 per day of illegally striking.

The BCTF Annual General Meeting was held in Vancouver in late March 2012 and the union focused its attention on formulating a planned response to Bill 22. In a news release the BCTF announced its intention to legally challenge the bill as well as taking membership votes on future actions such as a withdrawal of voluntary extra-curricular activities, a commitment to doing only year-end report cards, and a full scale walkout. The BCTF has used legal action in the past, in 2002 against Bills 27 and 28, laws that stripped teachers of the ability to bargain class size and composition. This legal challenge took nearly 10 years before a judge ruled in the federation's favour.

The current labour dispute is an intensification of the battle between the government and the teachers' union that began in 2001 with the election of the still in power Liberal party in British Columbia. Over the ten plus years since the Liberals have been in power, this relationship has continued to erode. The neo-liberalism that has beset BC since 2001 can be seen in all areas of public policy—health, transportation, social services, as well as public education. These broad reaching effects of neo-liberalism in BC are discussed in E. Wayne Ross' "Resisting the Common-sense of Neoliberalism: A Report from British Columbia," *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor* #17.

The following speech was given at the BCTF's annual general meeting on March 20, 2012 in Vancouver, BC:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. As a professor of education, a long standing union member and a parent I am glad to lend you my support and encouragement in your efforts to make schools positive places where high quality teaching and learning occur.

Last Thursday, I and some of my colleagues who work together at UBC under the umbrella of The Institute for Critical Education Studies sent a petition to Christy Clark and Gordon Abbott with 400+ names... people in post-secondary education who stand with the teachers in demanding the right to fair contract negotiations.

I understand how challenging the current climate and circumstances are for you as individuals and a collective. For more than 15 years I was a member and local chapter delegate of UUP, the United University Professions, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers and the NYS United Teachers. I recall those years: working without a contract; receiving 0 or near 0 salary increases; and walking the halls of the legislature explaining higher education needs to legislators. I also recall in those years: walking picket lines with K-12 teachers in Albany, NY, while we as members of UUP were not permitted to strike. More recently, I walked the picket lines with you in 2005 at various schools in the lower mainland, although I regret I wasn't able to out there with you a few weeks ago

So, I do understand your issues, your dedication, your frustration, your anger.

I am also a parent of a 12th grader in Vancouver, and we have stood in solidarity with teachers through your current job action. We have gladly managed work arounds to get college applications submitted, and to keep up with my son's progress. And whatever the upcoming days and months bring, as a family we will continue to stand in solidarity with you.

I wish I had solutions and answers to offer that would make the immediate future more rational or even just more palatable. I wish I knew from whence to get the additional resources so needed in public education. Given that a certain corporation seems to have a spare \$35M in hand, perhaps we could work out a deal to sell the naming rights for the Ministry of Education to Telus... maybe renaming the Ministry of Education the "Telus World of Learning"!

More seriously, what I do have to offer is some thoughts about how the discourse about schooling and school quality in British Columbia has been hijacked by particular political interests... and some thoughts about alternative discourses and how they might be strengthened and heard over the roar of the current neo-liberal narrative of accountability.

Let me begin by clearly stating that I am not opposed to accountability. There can be no doubt that schools, indeed all public institutions, should be accountable.

Having no accountability is like planting your vegetable garden and then neglecting to water, weed and feed your plants... but returning in late summer and expecting to harvest food. Quality garden produce comes from monitoring, intervening, knowing when it's the right time to act or to let nature takes its course. Quality education and quality schooling also come from monitoring and intervening when appropriate.

Accountability in education is therefore important, not necessarily because schools are doing poorly (although arguably they are in a number of areas), but because schooling in a democratic society should continually be monitored and concerned with a wide range of the issues:

- of student achievement,
- of equity,
- of overcoming racism when student bodies are becoming ever more ethnically, linguistically and ability diverse,
- of societal changes related to technology and changing human relations...
- and issues related to conditions of teaching and learning—including such things as
 - class size,
 - teacher preparation for diverse learners,
 - sufficient and sensible materials for teaching,
 - and high quality learning materials

In other words, accountability in education should be focused on continual review, improvement and renewal.

However, these are not currently the main issues in the narrative of accountability in education in British Columbia. Instead, the narrative of accountability is one

that declares adequate resources are already available for quality schooling,
 that emphasizes outcomes measures over conditions of learning,
 that suggests that schooling is a commodity in the free market,
 that distrusts the professionalism of teachers, and
 that blames teachers and the BCTF for pretty much any problem in education.

I will come back to this narrative in a minute, but let me explain first what I mean by a “narrative.” Narratives are stories or sequences of events that explain, assign responsibility, and describe social relationships. In public policy arenas, narratives develop when there is a perceived problem for which there is a perceived solution. Public policy narratives create the story for justifying what counts as a problem, who is to blame for that problem, who can solve it and how. These narratives are not created by a single person, not usually even a single interest group, and at some level these narratives require the participation of all stakeholder groups to be sustained.

These narratives are created through various strategies, including

- Political ideologies
- Management strategies
- Laws
- Protest and resistance
- Media

More specifically narratives of accountability tell us

- Who has power
- What the power relationships are
- What is valued, and they
- Reflect struggles among government, citizens, special interests

The dominant narrative of accountability in schools in BC

The dominant narrative of accountability is based on a particular value perspective... and that is... neo-liberalism. It is helpful to unpack the term neo-liberalism to understand how this value position comes to define our notions of accountability, in general and in education, particularly.

Liberalism, in the classical sense, is the idea that free markets and free trade are the best mechanism for providing cost-effective, quality goods and services that are valued (In education, this is manifest in the ideas of school choice and privatization of schooling... in other words, non-government funded schools among which parents and students can choose, based on both costs as well as values... such as religious beliefs or cultural heritage).

But, of course, liberalism in the classic sense does not exist anywhere in the world and indeed cannot exist because of the existence of governments, whether they are democratically elected or not. And this is the NEO part of neo-liberalism. “Free markets” in neo-liberalism are enabled and supported by governments and governmental bureaucracies. Governments must facilitate these free markets, as they are the means by which individual freedoms, most especially a freedom to choose, are safeguarded (You can see the link here to governments providing vouchers, for example, so that families can make a choice about where to send their children to school, rather than simply stepping away from being involved in education altogether).

While a more nuanced analysis would take some time to develop, I think it is safe to say that neo-liberalism arrived and blossomed in British Columbia in 2001 with the election of the Liberal party under Gordon Campbell’s leadership and has continued to today. This is not the place to talk about the many indicators of this values change, but it has been marked, for example, by:

- cuts in personal income tax,
- reduction of regulations for businesses,
- the sales of BC Rail and BC Ferries,
- the arrival of private health clinics.

There are many things you can say about the BC Liberals but one thing is certain, they have applied neo-liberal values pretty consistently across all areas of public policy.

So, as I said a few moments ago, the narrative of accountability in education in BC is characterized by a number of refrains that are reflected in practices that are motivated by and supported by neo-liberal values.

Let's look at each of the refrains I mentioned.

declares adequate resources are already available for quality schooling,

We see this, for example, in concomitant cuts to education funding and the creation of school district business companies and the active recruitment of tuition paying international students. As well as fees for activities, shifting responsibility to parents to fund improvements at the school building level. All of these are practices that push the responsibility for revenue generation to the local level.

emphasizes a few outcomes measures to determine quality

Like the FSA results. There are many forms of accountability, but the current narrative of accountability assumes an emphasis on bureaucratically controlled outcomes so that common and simple measures of quality are available. And, the government has shared neo-liberal values with the Fraser Institute and at least some of the local media, both of who have popularized and advertised the idea that the quality of schools can be judged by a few flawed outcome measures.

suggests that schooling is a commodity in the free market,

In many countries of the world the narrative of accountability clearly connects the idea of schooling as a commodity to privatization and strategies like vouchers or charter schools are employed. This privatization idea does not resonate so well in BC (maybe not throughout most of Canada) and instead the commodification of schooling is reflected more in a freedom to choose. We see this in the creation of cross-boundary student enrollment, public subsidies for courses offered by private schools, and parent satisfaction survey results framed as data to help parents make choices, as well as an efficiency and profit orientation to funding education. While I will shortly advocate for genuine parental involvement in education, we can also understand the creation of school planning councils and parent advisory councils as crafting a framework of parents as consumers of schooling.

distrusts the professionalism of teachers,

I will confess to not understanding all of the nuances of the relationship between teaching as a profession, BC's education law, and the practice of teaching in British Columbia, but it seems that BC's teachers have always struggled for their professional identity and autonomy. The recent replacement of the College of Teachers with the Ministry of Education Teacher Regulation Branch is a significant recent signal that teachers are not executing professional integrity on their own.

And education minister Abbott uses the rhetoric of the safety of students as a primary argument, in other words, teachers cannot be trusted to insure the safety of those they teach, because, he says, they are focused more on self-preservation. While it might seem that neo-liberalism would take governments out of the business of centralized control, often quite the opposite is the case. This is so because there are additional compatible values underlying this narrative, values about who should control knowledge and toward what ends. So this de-professionalization of teachers is manifest in centralized control of

- Educational outcomes (as test scores, for example)
- Educational conditions (such as class size)
- Educational content (specifying what ought to be in the curriculum).

These are controls that are meant to insure economic prosperity by making certain a minimal level of literacy and numeracy skill is imbued in the next generation of workers.

blames teachers but especially the BCTF for pretty much any problem in education.

In a neo-liberal value system, unions are always perceived to be bad news and we see a broad based attack on the bargaining rights of all public workers. Unions are typically seen as pesky third parties getting in the way of market forces. In 2001, shortly after being elected, Campbell introduced essential service legislation, a first step in limiting your bargaining rights and strategies. This part of the narrative seeks to separate the union from teachers, suggesting

that to be a professional and a union member are some how incommensurable But, I don't need to recount a history you know all too well, a history of government actions to impale the BCTF. And you have spent much of your time over the last several days talking about Bill 22, the latest action to strip the union of its ability to represent its members.

And an important part of this narrative is that quality and control must be achieved through a top-down, centralized, surveillance heavy relationship between the government, and school districts and teachers. This is government's role in giving the public what they think it needs, and safeguarding the public from special interests, in the case of education the special interests of teachers and their unions.

Developing alternate narratives of accountability

Other narratives of accountability in education exist, but they are mere whispers drowned out by the roar of the neo-liberal narrative of accountability.

An important part of the current dominant narrative of accountability is to blame teachers for the shortcomings in schooling and education. While it is ridiculous to blame any single stakeholder group for failings in education, this is a key feature of compelling narratives—simple plot lines that identify who is to blame, who the savior is and what actions will be taken to keep those to blame in check so that the problem can be remedied.

Deming, the business guru and perhaps an unlikely source of inspiration, reminds us that if there is a problem in the system, we should look to fix the system, not the people in it. This is very helpful advice in these times, when it seems that teachers are being blamed most and often solely for the problems encountered in schools. So, a key feature of alternative narratives of accountability is to shift the blame away from teachers and to the “system,” in this case a system created and perpetuated by the provincial government, that is through its neo-liberal values diminishing the quality of education in British Columbia.

There are multiple alternative narratives, but let me offer just one, what I will call a narrative of authentic accountability, which might look something like this.

A narrative of ‘authentic accountability’

- Emphasizes and expects adequate and fair educational funding
- Assumes that accountability is reciprocal and multi-directional
- Sees students, parents, and local communities as the primary clients of schooling
- Makes decisions about the means and ends of schooling at the local community level
- Assumes schools are accountable for
 - physical and emotional well being of students
 - student learning and assessment
 - teacher learning and evaluation
 - equity and access
 - improvement and renewal.

This narrative is not based on neo-liberalism. It is a narrative that assumes that public schools ought to be about promoting democracy through the preparation of students to be knowledgeable, engaged citizens and that being educated should mean a better life for all, individually and collectively. This is not an idealistic narrative, and indeed it is the narrative of accountability in a few places in the world, especially the Scandinavian countries.

I think the BCTF has made some gallant efforts to promote an alternative narrative by raising public awareness, for example, about the impact of budget cuts in education... the 2003 Caravan Against Cuts was a clever strategy.

Creating alternative narratives relies, as you already know, depends on finding allies and creating coalitions. Who are the strongest allies in creating an alternative narrative? I lived for about 25 years in the US, where arguably the conditions in education are worse than in BC, and I learned that the most powerful allies schools can have to create these alternative narratives of accountability are Parents and Students. In my experience, the strongest resistance to the dominant narrative is when teachers and families work together.

You know this... because of the success of your campaign to have parents opt their children out of the FSA has had in disrupting the testing program, and compromising the data so that school rankings are even more dubious. A collective strategy like opting out, works best if it is seriously concentrated in schools, rather than sprinkled throughout the province's schools.

Alliances between teachers and parents are critically important, and I would never suggest they are easily created. Both teachers and parents are diverse groups, each reflecting a wide range of perspectives and interests, so it is critically important that alliances between parents and teachers not be cast as an all or nothing venture. And if teachers don't make allies of parents, those more wed to the neo-liberal narrative of accountability will. The Fraser Institute attempts to position itself in an alliance with parents and families, providing the *best* information about schools. In the US, the disastrous parent trigger laws that allow a school to be taken over by outside interests when 51% of parents are dissatisfied with a school grew out of a push from conservative corporate foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. And parents in states like Florida find themselves having to battle against the implementation of such laws because of the road to privatization of public schools that trigger laws lead communities down.

Alliances with parents and students are complex, but essential.

There are other allies who can help work toward an alternative narrative: let me just list a few without going into much detail:

- Other workers, unionized or not: We know that every time the job security, working conditions, and wages of one group of workers is undermined, it makes it easier for employers to undermine them for all workers.
- First Nations community
- BC Civil Liberties Association: I am reminded of the admonition that when you have a problem you need lawyers, not hugs.
- Media
- Post-secondary education: You have friends in higher education, for example, the Institute for Critical Education Studies and the Rouge Forum (coalition of educators...professors, teachers, activists... students and parents).

The alternative narrative of accountability I am suggesting here, requires working more at the school community level, although this is not to suggest that broad informational campaigns, lobbying legislators, and working with the media is not important. Obviously it is. But to develop this narrative of authentic accountability schools needs to shift their gaze from the province to the immediate community. I realize this seems painfully slow, but it is likely that changing the narrative of accountability is a long-term project. I am reminded of a quote about the power of resistance one person at a time: in his book *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott says...

“Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly; a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own.”

I am suggesting that developing this alternative narrative of accountability requires...

- Direct involvement of constituents
 - if school planning councils and PACs aren't effective means for involvement, then other means need to be developed
- A person to person, organizing model
 - It is critical to recognize that every stakeholder group... teachers, parents, students... are diverse and none can be painted with one brush...
 - this requires thinking not about parents as all the same or teachers as all the same, but instead working at an individual level
 - we need to be spending time educating one another about what we want and need from schools and this must be done person to person, broad campaigns will not be enough
- Building, enhancing and preserving trust among constituents
- And promoting the notion of Reciprocal accountability

- accountability ought to be reciprocal... teachers should be accountable for student learning, but to make this genuine then school and district administrations, and provincial governments need to provide adequate conditions and support for student achievement to occur.
- parents, students, and communities should also be brought into this reciprocal accountability relationship, for example, safe and multiple opportunities for kids to participate in out of school recreation might be expected for success in school.

Well, practically speaking, what can be done to work toward a different narrative of accountability?

The narrative must be changed school by school, where each school takes responsibility to develop strong relationships among all its constituents—teachers, parents, students and other community members. And, teachers will likely have to start the ball rolling, to model the ways in which the school community can work together for the benefit of all. It may be that Bill 22 provides the impetus to begin thinking about how to resist the neo-liberal narrative of accountability. I know you have had thoughtful discussions about strategies for resisting this legislation, but in that context let me illustrate what I mean with just one strategic idea—teach-ins.

Teach-ins, educational experiences that are meant to be practical, participatory, and oriented toward action, might be done during the school day in lieu of regular classes. Perhaps even be modeled on the Occupy movement or the Freedom Schools, which were created during the civil rights movement to foster political education and participation among students. Doing teach-ins during the school day is a form of organizing and resistance that means

- you as teachers are doing your job—you are teaching
- students are doing their job—learning
- parents are doing their job—participating

Teach-ins can involve many constituents but just to throw out some ideas if you wanted to focus on *educating and engaging parents* about the issues currently on the table you might:

- have a teach-in to give feedback about student performance in lieu of report cards, and at the same time educate parents about that part of your work—the assessment of student learning... how it is done, what the most meaningful information is, how assessment serves multiple functions in the teaching-learning nexus;
- educating parents about the time teachers' spend on their work;
- concrete illustrations of the \$\$ teachers spend on supplies in order to teach;
- illustrations of the impact of too many students in a class;
- illustrate and discuss what it's like to have students with multiple kinds of disability in a single classroom;
- illustrations of what fully funded schools look like—things like small class sizes, aesthetically pleasing buildings and classrooms, healthy lunch programs for teachers and students;
- and so on

And you could focus on *educating and engaging Students*:

- especially secondary students could experience quite a social studies lesson if you focused on teaching about the neo-liberal conditions that create the current conditions of teaching and learning;
- investigation of the economic arguments that support huge salaries for a few and no funding for public services;
- or teach about the many meanings and the role of volunteerism in a contemporary democracy;
- or develop an understanding of the idea that an injury to one is an injury to all

There are many examples of militant and direct actions taken by teachers and parents to disrupt the neo-liberal narratives of accountability:

- In Detroit, there have been wildcat strikes including the 1999 Books, Supplies and Lower Class Size strike and the 2006 Blackboard Flu strike
- In Oaxaca, the 2006 teacher strike included take-overs of government buildings, radio stations & solidarity with other unions, businesses, NGOs
- In 2001, Scarsdale parents staged a complete boycott of the NYS testing in elementary schools

- Last year, parents in the largest urban school district in North Carolina rolled back a plan to introduce 52 new achievement tests by threatening to keep their kids at home
- And, of course, the 2005 BCTF walkout

It is likely that *both* slow, steady building of coalitions at the local community level and large scale direct actions will be needed to shift the narrative of accountability to one that promotes schooling for the democracy we want.

Today is the first day of spring. Let's declare today a new season of educational growth and change in British Columbia.

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