

Neo-liberalism in British Columbia Education and Teachers' Union Resistance



Changes in teachers' work and the challenges facing teacher unions

Howard Stevenson, Guest Editor

Neo-liberalism in British Columbia Education and Teachers' Union Resistance

Wendy Poole

ABSTRACT: Since the election of the Campbell government in 2001, teachers have experienced heightened conflict with the provincial government. An analysis of the discourse and power relations between the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and government reveals a neo-liberal agenda on the part of government and anti-neo-liberalism on the part of the BCTF. However, this is more than an intense disagreement about political ideology; the conflict is about the vision and purpose of K-12 public education and the meaning of professionalism.

Neo-liberalism is a political ideology grounded in an unshakeable belief in unbridled markets as the source of all benefits for a society and its citizens. Neo-liberals believe the application of market principles to the public sector will result in greater efficiency and contribute to overall economic prosperity.

Neo-liberals conceptualize education as a commodity to be bought by customers (students and parents) and sold by suppliers (schools and others). From a market perspective, schools are training grounds for future workers and consumers, as well a multi-billion dollar industry offering opportunities for profit. Efficiency, accountability for student outcomes (usually measured by standardized test scores and other measures like graduation rates), choice for parents (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, within-district school choice), privatization (e.g., public funding for private schools, user-pay fees, contracting with private firms to operate public schools, private-public partnerships for school construction, school-business partnerships), and attacks on teachers unions are hallmarks of neo-liberalism in education.

This paper examines conflict between the Campbell government in British Columbia and the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF), using an analysis of discourse and practices of the two groups. While the Campbell government employs decidedly neo-liberal rhetoric and policy, the BCTF is vehemently anti-neo-liberal. The conflict, however, is grounded in more than political ideology. Also contested are conceptions of teacher professionalism and the purpose of education.

Although I have not previously taken an ideological stance on the politics of education, years of observing the impact of neo-liberalism on education in countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, has led to me becoming alarmed at the rapid spread of neo-liberal philosophy around the world. I feel compelled to raise the consciousness of educators and citizens about this important issue.

Neo-liberalism in British Columbia

Neo-liberalism arrived with a vengeance in the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) with the election of a Liberal government (no affiliation with the federal Liberal Party) under the leadership of Premier Gordon Campbell in 2001 and has continued since its re-election in 2005. The Campbell government was first elected after a campaign that emphasized deficit reduction, lower taxes, deregulation, and the creation of a business climate conducive to economic growth. Since May 2001, reforms have been fast and furious. One of the first changes implemented was a 25% across-the-board cut in income tax. In 2005 taxes were further reduced for those earning less than \$26,000 per year, and in 2007 taxpayers earning less than \$100,000 received an additional 10% cut in income tax. Regulations affecting businesses have been significantly reduced and some public services have been privatized (e.g., BC Rail was sold to private investors and private health clinics have been allowed to operate).

Soon after assuming power in 2001, all government ministries were forced to trim their budgets to reduce government spending. Tight constraints on spending for social programs have affected vulnerable BC residents, including children and families, women, the disabled, the homeless, and the elderly. The civil service has been reduced and their power curtailed through legislated changes to contracts and contracting out of public services to the private sector. The Campbell government has gone far beyond deficit reduction to post record surpluses-\$3.1 billion in 2005-2006 and \$4.1 billion in 2006-2007 (Skelton, 2007b), most of which reportedly will be invested in infrastructure projects and the remainder used to pay down the province's debt (Skelton, 2007a).

Education Policy

Public K-12 education has undergone considerable reform. The BC Liberals state their goal is to "make BC the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent" (BC Liberals, 2007a). However, underlying the rhetoric of quality education and children's rights to education are other goals that demonstrate a far more instrumental view of the province's children. For example, a BC Ministry of Education spokesperson, speaking to educators and educational researchers in Toronto declared, "Every child counts-either as taxpayers or social welfare recipients"(Anderson, 2006). Such a statement portrays children in solely economic terms, as either means or obstacles to achieving economic prosperity and the dismantling of the welfare state. Another clue to the economic goals underlying education policy was the Ministry of Education's new graduation requirements that emphasized preparation for careers. One of the stated goals of the newly created Achieve BC program is to help students plan a career.

Financing for education is the responsibility of the provincial government and the Campbell government quickly shifted to a per-pupil funding allocation formula. Grant allocations to school boards were frozen in 2002/03 and 2003/04 (Malcolmson, 2005a, 2005b). The government claims to have increased average per-pupil spending by \$881 since 2001, despite a decline in enrollment of 30,000 students since 2000, which they give as evidence of its financial commitment to public education (BC Liberals , 2007b). While per-pupil spending has increased since 2005, it has not kept pace with inflation (Malcolmson, 2005c). Underfunding, coupled with the legal requirement that school boards balance their annual budgets, has meant that many school boards around the province have faced the tough tasks of cutting programs and staff and closing schools. As many as 150 schools have closed as of June, 2007 (BC Teachers Federation, School Closures, 2007).

In keeping with a neo-liberal emphasis on market-based management, Bill 34-2002 enabled the creation of school district business companies (School Amendment Act, 2002) as a means to generate additional revenues to finance educational programs. As of October 2006 a total of 14 school districts had established business companies (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2006) and have used them to engage in business activities such as operating overseas schools and selling district-generated curriculum. Several school districts in the province now actively recruit tuition-paying international students as a means of boosting revenue. Bill 20-2007 (School (Student Achievement Enabling) Amendment Act, 2007) enabled school boards to establish "specialty academies" for which fees may apply and enabled boards to charge fees for certain purposes related to trades education and the use of musical instruments.

Accountability has been a consistent catch phrase of the Campbell government. Another provision of the already packed Bill 34-2002 required every school district in the province to prepare an accountability contract with respect to improving student achievement in the school district along with any other matters ordered by the minister. In 2007, the term 'achievement contract' replaced the former accountability contract and emphasized early learning programs, standards for student performance, plans for improving student achievement and literacy. Bill 20-2007 (School (Student Achievement Enabling) Amendment Act, 2007, 2007) created the new position of superintendent of achievement with sweeping powers to inspect and even revoke school board decisions. Mechanisms such as accountability/achievement contracts and superintendents of achievement are indicators of increased centralization of power in the hands of the Ministry of Education and increased top-down surveillance.

The measurement of student achievement is of paramount importance under a neo-liberal policy agenda, and two measures have come to dominate achievement measurement in BC-high school graduation rates and test scores from the provincial Fundamental Skills Assessment (FSA). The FSA is administered every year to students in grades 4 and 7 to measure achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. The Ministry of Education places considerable emphasis on FSA testing and school boards in the province are expected to use the results to develop their annual accountability/achievement contracts for school improvement, although no specific test improvement targets are set by the Ministry of Education. FSA results have acquired increased attention in the province because of annual school rankings produced by the right-wing, business-funded think tank, The Fraser Institute. The Fraser Institute rankings for both elementary and secondary schools are published annually by two of the largest newspapers in the province, The Province and The Vancouver Sun. Private schools, particularly many elite schools that require entrance examinations and charge high tuition relative to other schools in the province, inevitably cluster at the top of the rankings.

Market-oriented competition and a customer focus among schools is a neo-liberal aim within education and the Campbell government has taken steps to achieve these goals. Parents are viewed as the primary customers to whom schools market their educational programs. In 2002 government made catchment boundaries between schools permeable so that, with some restrictions, parents could select what school their child attended. It remains unclear how much movement between schools this policy has created (Brown, 2004). The Web site for Achieve BC provides information regarding school performance, graduation rates, and satisfaction surveys to aid parents in selecting schools (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, Achieve BC, 2007). Bill 22-2007 (Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2007, 2007) provides public subsidies for courses offered by private schools.

As part of its customer orientation, the BC government has taken steps to increase parental involvement in school. Bill 34-2002 created mandatory School Planning Councils (SPCs) in every school in the province. By law, SPCs were to comprise three parents elected by parents, one teacher elected by teachers, the school principal, and one student (in secondary schools only). School boards are required to consult with the SPC with respect to allocation of staff and resources in the school, educational services and educational programs in the school, and matters related to the board's accountability contract relating to the school. The SPC was charged with preparing and submitting to the board a school plan for improving student achievement. Bill 34-2002 also gave parents the right to form District Parent Advisory Councils (DPACs) in their school district, in addition to the existing school-based Parent Advisory Councils. DPACs have the right to advise the board on any matter relating to education in the district (BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, 2007, emphasis included). In 2002, the Ministry of Education began to administer satisfaction surveys to students, parents, and school staff to measure satisfaction with educational outcomes (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2002). The satisfaction surveys were, in part, a means of assessing parental satisfaction with educational outcomes, limited to the priorities set by the Ministry of Education.

The Neo-liberal Agenda and the Status of the Teaching Profession

In accordance with neo-liberal philosophy, unions are viewed as obstructions to achieving economic prosperity. Teachers unions are not exceptions. Critics of teachers unions blame unions, but not necessarily teachers, for problems in public education. Typically, teachers' unions are viewed by neo-liberals as third parties, separate from teachers, that interfere in the relationship between teachers and their employers. Often, teachers are characterized as victims who are simply being used by unions (Moe, 2006).

Arguably, the most provocative policy changes initiated by the Campbell government relate directly to the status of the teaching profession in British Columbia and the ability of teachers to engage in collective bargaining through their union, the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF). Within 90 days of his election in 2001 Gordon Campbell had implemented essential service legislation in K-12 education through Bill 18-2001. Specifically, if a strike were called by teachers, the Minister of Skills Development and Labour would direct the Labour Relations Board to designate as essential services those facilities, productions, and services that the Board considers necessary or essential to prevent immediate and serious disruption to the provision of educational programs. The new legislation meant that teachers' right to strike would be limited by Labour Relations Board rulings regarding essential services. This would have significant implications for job action by teachers in 2002 and 2005, as will be discussed later in this article.

The BC College of Teachers (BCCT) was created in 1987 and serves as the self-regulatory body for licensed K-12 educators in BC. Its mandate is to set standards for professional educators, issue teaching certificates, and review conduct and competence matters (British Columbia College of Teachers, 2007). The Council comprises 20 members; originally, this included 15 elected members and 5 members appointed by government. Since the creation of the College, the BCTF has successfully elected candidates endorsed by the union. Minister of Education, Christy Clark, called the College "partisan" and indicated her intention to "rebalance" it (Steffenhagen, 2003a). In 2003, the Campbell government dissolved the College council and replaced it with a transitional council of 20 new members, appointed by the Minister of Education, who would serve for an indefinite period (Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2003). The transitional council implemented many new policies in the absence of elected teacher representatives, including Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia (British Columbia College of Teachers, 2006). Bowing to demands from the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, government passed Bill 21-2007 (Teaching Profession (Teacher Registration) Amendment Act, 2007). The legislation calls for the College to maintain a public registry that reports disciplinary action with respect to member teachers for misconduct or competence that breaches the College's standards, which would impact the privacy of teachers who are disciplined.

Premier Campbell's stated agenda is to communicate directly with teachers (BC Liberals, 2007c), thus bypassing the BCTF. The government criticizes the BCTF for being politically partisan and unprofessional. During her tenure as Minister of Education, Christy Clark blasted the BCTF for being "disruptive, irresponsible and . . . bringing the politics straight into the classroom" (Beatty, 2002). In 2006 the Campbell government initiated what they intend will be an annual Teachers Congress, where they will communicate directly with teachers about educational issues.

The initiatives outlined above are evidence of the government's neo-liberal policy agenda and its assault on the BCTF. Further evidence of the government's objective to significantly weaken or break the teachers unions is found in Campbell's actions to quell teachers' job actions in 2002 and 2005, matters that will be discussed in a later section.

The BC Teachers' Federation Resists

If the Campbell government has declared war on the BCTF and imposed neo-liberal policy within BC education, the BCTF has fought to defend itself and an alternative, humanistic, social democratic view of education. A search of the BCTF Web site reveals what it views as "key issues" for advocacy and action in education. The issues they target for political action are things like increasing privatization and commercialization in BC education and the erosion of public funding for public schools with its negative implications for class size and composition, school closures, cuts to student services (e.g., ESL, special education, and counseling), and deteriorating teaching and learning conditions (BC Teachers' Federation, Key Issues, 2007a). The BCTF Web site contains the official positions of teachers on these matters and an examination of these positions, a few of them discussed below, reveals a discourse that is staunchly anti-neo-liberal.

Education finance. The BCTF has been a vocal critic of education finance under the Campbell government. While government argues that education funding has increased since 2001, the BCTF points out that funding increases have not kept pace with inflation and the result is serious underfunding of education.

In 1990, the government spent 3.4% of the GDP on public K-12 education. By 2006, this amount had been reduced to 2.3%. When similar calculations are done using government revenues, the same pattern emerges. Government spending on public K-12 education has declined from about 17% in 1995-96 to 14% in 2005-06. (BC Teachers Federation, Education funding questions and answers, 2007b).

While they acknowledge that enrollment has declined across the province, the BCTF argues that the number of teachers declined by a higher percentage (7.6%) compared to the decline in the number of students (5.0%) between 2001 and 2006 (BC Teachers Federation, Education funding questions and answers, 2007b). They also argue that the province has downloaded costs to school districts by failing to include certain cost increases, including costs associated with legislated changes and collective bargaining, in the per-pupil funding formula. School boards had to pay these costs but provincial funding did not increase to cover them. It is illegal in BC for school boards to prepare a deficit budget and boards have been forced to cut programs and staffing to make up shortfalls. According to the BCTF, cuts made by school districts have disproportionately affected special needs students: "The majority of cuts were targeted at specialist teachers such as teacher-librarians, counselors, learning assistance, special education and ESL teachers. Over 56% of cuts between 2001 and 2005 were to specialist teachers" (BC Teachers Federation, Education funding questions and answers, 2007b).

Acting in solidarity with other unions such as the BC Government and Service Employees Union, the Hospital Employees Union, and the BC Federation of Labour, teachers participated in a number of rallies in Victoria and across BC in 2001-2002. In 2003 teachers voted to affiliate with the BC Federation of Labour for a three-year trial period and they renewed their affiliation in 2006. Affiliation with the BC Federation of Labour formalizes an important political alliance within the broader labor movement. As private and public unions operating within a neo-liberal environment, members of the labor federation share common issues and struggles related to funding for public services and workers' rights.

In 2002, the BCTF prepared a Report Card on the BC Liberals that it published in newspapers around the province, posted in schools, and presented to parents at parent/teacher conferences. From February 3-12, 2003 the BCTF launched a campaign called Caravan Against the Cuts, during which five buses took separate routes and wended their way between communities around the province, collecting impact statements from students, teachers, and parents regarding education funding. Before the 2005 election the BCTF launched another campaign to inform the public about the impact of education underfunding; this campaign involved billboards, print, and television ads.

Privatization. The BCTF Web site, which includes both written and multi-media information, is clear that teachers hold the BC government responsible for fully funding K-12 education in the province:

Adequate, stable funding that covers all costs associated with the delivery of fair and equitable education is essential to maintaining quality public education. How education is financed is key to both quality and equity. (BC Teachers Federation, Education finance, 2007c)

The BCTF opposes any form of privatization. Privatization, in the BCTF's view, "includes any actions by government to avoid its responsibility to fully fund the public education system and thus to encourage private funding, services or commercialism in public schools" (BC Teachers Federation, Privatization backgrounder, 2007d).

Through the BCTF, teachers oppose privatization for a number of reasons: (1) it "creates a two-tier education system and threatens democratic values and practices, as well as social equity;" (2) "the commercialization of education and a corporate presence in schools undermines the school as a public space aimed primarily at the social and personal development of students;" and (3) privatization "creates a danger that public education will come under the provisions of international trade agreements that would open education to private companies from other countries"(BC Teachers Federation, Privatization backgrounder, 2007d). Themes of social equity, democracy, the public good, and local control over education are evident in the BCTF's rationale for opposing privatization. Also inferred are the primary goals of education in the BCTF's opinion: social justice and the social and personal development of students. These goals are quite different from the primary educational aim of economic prosperity promoted by neo-liberalism.

Actions that the BCTF says signify privatization include public funding for independent schools, school district

business companies, charter schools, fees for resources or for participation in curricular programs, parent fund-raising and the sale of junk food to finance educational programs, and corporate advertising in schools. The BCTF has joined with other groups in BC-Canadian Union of Public Employees, BC Government and Service Employees' Union, Canadian Federation of Students, College Institute Educators' Association, and Confederation of University Faculty Associations of BC-to oppose the commodification of education. The Coalition has sponsored two conferences in BC, both entitled Public Education: Not for Sale! (BC Teachers Federation, Public education: Not for sale: Proceedings of a conference sponsored by The Coalition for Public Education, 2007e). In March of 2007, the BCTF participated in a forum on public-private partnerships and another on the Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA).

Accountability. On the issue of accountability, the BCTF objects to a system that emphasizes external mechanisms and understates internal accountability that teachers assume as members of the teaching profession:

An external accountability system implies that internal accountability does not exist or is not sufficient. External accountability models demonstrate a lack of trust in teachers and the teaching profession. Teachers in BC find this lack of trust unjustified and hard to accept. (BC Teachers' Federation, Accountability in public education, 2006)

One objection, then, is identity-based. Teachers self-identify as professionals and they view themselves to be already accountable to the profession, to their school districts, and to parents, for teaching practices and for learning outcomes. Increasing levels of bureaucratic accountability measures, therefore, are insults to the teaching profession.

Teachers also argue that external accountability measures, such as large-scale assessments and the Fraser Institute rankings, are blunt instruments that can have a deleterious effect on teaching and learning by narrowing curriculum and instruction, decreasing student motivation, and further disadvantaging already disadvantaged communities (BC Teachers' Federation, Accountability in public education, 2006). Accountability measures, they believe, should be developed for all levels of the education system, including the Ministry of Education and government, to match the responsibilities specific to each level (BC Teachers' Federation, Accountability in public education, 2006).

Teachers are concerned about the time accountability measures take away from teaching and learning because of "the proliferation of testing and ranking, relentless data collection and increased paperwork" (BC Teachers' Federation, Accountability, 2007f). The BCTF opposes the FSA tests on grounds that they, like other large-scale assessments, narrow instruction and promote teaching to the test, causes students to focus on short-term performance, cause test anxiety, and convince some students they cannot succeed. In addition, test results are inappropriately used as measures of school quality. Parents inappropriately use them to select schools for their children, contributing to the movement of students, and therefore funding, away from schools in poorer neighborhoods. The BCTF encourages teachers not to administer the tests and encourages parents to withdraw their children from the FSA assessments. The latter strategy must have met considerable success because the Deputy Minister of Education addressed the issue in his April, 2007 Report on Education:

To be clear, the FSA is not an optional activity that students or parents can opt into or out of. It is a required educational activity in the same manner as instruction in the Language Arts curriculum is required. . . Parents should not expect that their child will be excused from participation because they write a letter of request motivated by the BCTF miscommunications about FSA. (Dosdall, 2007)

The BCTF objects to school growth plans and district accountability/achievement contracts. The union argues that these accountability measures have led to a standardization of goals that target literacy, numeracy, and social responsibility. Because school growth plans have to match district goals that, in turn, have to be in line with the ministry's standardized goals, the union claims that the process is "artificial and unresponsive to school needs" (BC Teachers' Federation, What really counts! Rethinking accountability, 2007g).

The BCTF objects to the structure of School Planning Councils, which are responsible for developing the annual school plans, because teachers have only one representative, while parents have three, and school board employees whose children attend the school are disqualified from serving on the councils (BC Teachers' Federation, School planning councils/Parent advisory councils, 2007h). At their Annual General Meeting of the BCTF in 2006, teachers

voted to withdraw from participation in School Planning Councils. In October 2006 the BCTF held a public conference on the subject of accountability entitled, *What Really Counts! Rethinking Accountability*, during which teachers and researchers presented critiques of the Ministry approach to accountability in education.

Conflict over the BC College of Teachers (BCCT). In 2003, when Bill 51-2003 dissolved the Council of the BCCT and replaced it with 20 members appointed by the government, the BCTF protested, arguing that teachers were now the only professional group in the province required to belong to a body run by government appointees rather than elected practitioners (Steffenhagen, 2003b). The BCTF convinced the majority of teachers to submit their 2003-2004 annual College fees to the BCTF (approximately \$2 million) to be held in trust rather than submit them directly to the College as legally required (Steffenhagen, 2003b). This action placed school boards in the awkward position of employing teachers not in good standing with the College and, therefore, not legally employable. The College attempted to intimidate teachers by telling teachers that they risked losing their jobs, but teachers held firm. Eventually Christy Clark backed down and Campbell reshuffled his cabinet, reassigning Clark to the portfolio of Children and Families, and appointing Tom Christenson as the new Minister of Education. In 2004, Christenson restructured the College once more, restoring to 12 (compared to the former 15) the number of seats to be elected, with eight seats appointed. This action ended the standoff, but the BCTF continues to hold the 2003-2004 fees in trust, refusing to turn them over to the College. They have called for the repeal of many decisions made by government-appointed Council, including the standards adopted for the teaching profession.

The Direct Assault on Collective Bargaining

Following the election of the Campbell government and the passage of essential service legislation in 2001, teachers found themselves with an expired contract and frustrated by lack of progress in negotiations. The BC Labour Relations Board (LRB) ruled what job action was permissible under the new essential services law, and teachers initiated limited job action. As it turned out, teachers were permitted to engage in a host of job actions that effectively disrupted schools without withdrawing instructional services. Schools remained open and teachers continued to teach, but they refused to fulfill a number of duties including supervising students outside of class, attending staff meetings, and preparing report cards-all declared non-essential services by the LRB.

In January 2002 the government ended the strike by passing legislation (Bill 27-2002 and Bill 28-2002) in a whirlwind session. The bills imposed a contract on teachers (Teachers' Collective Agreement Act, 2005) and removed from the scope of bargainable items issues such as class size and composition, staffing levels and ratios, the school calendar, and hours of instruction (Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, 2002). In addition, the legislation led to the appointment of an arbitrator assigned to strip from the teachers' contract any clauses inconsistent with Bill 28-2002. As a result, hundreds of lines were stripped from the teachers' agreement.

Teachers, justifiably, viewed this legislation as an attack on their collective bargaining rights. The BCTF sought and received a ruling from the International Labour Organization (ILO) condemning the legislated contract as a violation of international labor standards that had been endorsed by Canada, but the Campbell government simply ignored the ruling.

Though they were no longer in a legal strike position teachers withdrew from extra-curricular activities, which are not part of their contractual obligations, and they staged a one-day "protest" walkout on January 28 and initiated a legal challenge to the constitutionality of Bills 27 and 28. At least in the short term, the 2002 legislation was a victory for government. It eroded teachers' collective bargaining rights and it imposed a contract that was largely favorable to government. Previously bargainable issues that have a direct impact on teachers' working conditions, such as class size and composition were now controlled by the School Act and no longer negotiable as part of the terms and conditions of teachers' work.

The legislated contract ended in June 2004 and negotiations between teachers and the BC Public Schools Employers Association (BCPSEA) stalled. The BCTF called for government to negotiate directly with teachers, and when the government refused, the BCTF held a strike vote. On September 23, 2005 the BCTF announced a strike mandate of 88.4%. Rotating strikes were scheduled to begin on October 11 and if no progress was made by October 24, a full-scale strike would begin on that date. The government appointed a fact-finder who reported on September

30 that a negotiated contract was not possible.

Then, in a surprise move on October 3, before the LRB could rule on essential services and three weeks before full-scale strike action was scheduled, the Campbell government swept in legislation (Bill 12-2005) that imposed a second consecutive contract on teachers, extending the previous contract until June 2006 (Teachers' Collective Agreement Act, 2005). Teachers would receive no salary increase and would make no gains on class size and composition. A few days later, Campbell announced the creation of a Learning Roundtable that would, as part of its mandate, seek a solution to class size and composition issues. The BCTF was invited to participate in the discussions, which they later did. Strategically, from Campbell's perspective, it was a brilliant move. There would be no strike, he assumed, and he would be publicly perceived as working with teachers about legitimate issues related to class size and composition. However, the meetings were to be consultative and many groups would be at the table in addition to teachers, including parents and school trustees. The Roundtable was far from collective bargaining and it did little to appease the anger teachers felt at being subjected to a second legislated contract in three years and the curtailment of collective bargaining.

The BCTF called for the repeal of Bill 12-2005 and held another strike vote, this time in support of illegal strike action. They reported a mandate of 90.5%, stronger than the previous mandate (88%) when striking would have been legal. On October 7, teachers began a province-wide full-scale strike. Days later, the B.C. Supreme Court found teachers in civil contempt of an LRB ruling to return to work and ordered the BCTF to cease using its financial assets to support the strike. Teachers remained on strike.

The government underestimated teachers' anger and their willingness to defy the law. Campbell told a Vancouver Sun reporter, "I certainly agree that we anticipated that people would obey the law, there's no question about that... In the past, every time a government has imposed a contract or legislated a solution... people would obey the law" (Cernetig, 2005). The Campbell government had counted on teachers returning to work under a legislated contract, just as they had in 2002. The government resorted to rhetorical tools to try to intimidate teachers, condemning the strike as illegal, and referring to teachers as law-breakers and poor role models for students. Teachers, they argued, must obey laws, regardless of how they feel about them. Teachers, on the other hand, framed their strike as civil disobedience against an unjust law.

On October 18 Campbell appointed labor relations mediator, Vince Ready, to the dispute. Two days later Ready booked out, saying the two sides were too far apart to come to a settlement. He left behind a set of non-binding recommendations that included increased pay for Teachers on Call, harmonization of salary grids across the province, improvements to teachers' long-term disability fund, increased funding to address issues of class size and composition, and changes to the School Act to include class size limits for grades 4-12. The cost of these recommendations would be over \$100 million dollars.

The government announced that it would accept Ready's recommendations unconditionally and a few days later, on October 23, teachers voted 78% to accept the mediator's recommendations. On October 24, 2005 teachers returned to work.

When the second legislated teachers' contract expired in 2006, the Campbell government was motivated to ensure labor peace with all public sector unions until after the conclusion of the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver and Whistler. Finance Minister, Carole Taylor, used some of the government's budget surplus to offer modest salary increases and she sweetened the deal by offering signing bonuses for union members who negotiated agreements by specified dates. The strategy worked. By the end of June 2006 new collective agreements had been ratified across the public sector, including one with teachers, concluded at the eleventh hour. For the first time since Campbell's government was first elected in 2001, teachers had a bilateral, as opposed to a unilaterally imposed, contract.

Epilogue. Unions in BC won a significant battle in June 2007 when the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that freedom of association, guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms includes a procedural right to collective bargaining (*Health Services and Support-Facilities Bargaining Assn. v. British Columbia*, 2007). This decision reversed earlier Supreme Court rulings dating as far back as 1987 that had emboldened neo-liberal governments in Canada to be less respectful of collective bargaining and collective agreements. The Court suspended its ruling for a

period of 12 months and it remains to be seen how the Campbell government will respond and how it will affect existing legislation, but it does mean that government must take the collective bargaining process more seriously in the future. Teachers now have legal support for their own challenges to BC legislation that are still pending.

Discussion

Since the election of the Campbell government in 2001, teachers have experienced heightened conflict with the provincial government. An analysis of the discourse and power relations between the BCTF and government reveals a neo-liberal agenda on the part of government and anti-neo-liberalism on the part of the BCTF. However, this is more than an intense disagreement about political ideology; it is conflict over the vision and purpose of K-12 public education and the meaning of professionalism.

The Purpose of Education

In part, the conflict is a war of words. Government rhetoric focuses on economic growth, markets, choice, customer satisfaction, flexibility, accountability, efficiency, careers, and achievement. BCTF rhetoric, on the other hand, emphasizes equity, social justice, accessibility, public versus private education, adequate public funding, teaching and learning conditions, and professional autonomy.

The objective of the Campbell government is economic prosperity. In accordance with neo-liberal philosophy, public welfare will be a by-product of economic prosperity. Education is perceived as a means to achieve economic prosperity, not an end in itself. Vocationalism figures quite prominently since the primary emphasis is on basic education, especially literacy, and considerable emphasis goes to career planning and preparation. Education is perceived to be a commodity to be bought and sold, parents and students are perceived to be consumers of educational services, and schools and school districts are perceived to be suppliers marketing educational services and academic achievement credentials. Large-scale assessment scores are one of the most important measures of educational quality that parents can use to select schools for their children. Test scores, and other accountability measures such as graduation rates, and unique programming that differentiates one school from the next, are what drives demand and forces schools to compete for students. Competition is the market force that will optimize quality, and education becomes a process of giving parents and students what they want. Eliminating boundaries between catchment areas, restricting the level of funding for public schools, enabling school districts to generate revenues through school fees and school district business companies, and subsidizing courses offered by private schools are all part of a plan to make schools operate more efficiently (meaning with less public funding) and more competitively.

The BCTF emphasizes the importance of education in the achievement of social justice and personal development, not economic prosperity. Indeed, the BCTF opposes the neo-liberal philosophy with respect to education. They argue that choice does little more than exacerbate existing inequities because families that have greater economic, social and political capital have more power in a market-driven system than less advantaged families. The result is a two-tiered educational system where the privileged few receive greater benefits than the disadvantaged majority. Large-scale tests are biased and they are better measures of socio-economic status than of intellectual ability and academic prowess. Using test scores as means for ranking schools is unethical because schools in wealthier communities typically have higher test scores than those in less affluent communities, which makes it appear that schools in affluent communities are better schools when this may not be the case. Accountability measures, especially those tied to large-scale assessments, absorb too much of teachers time and energy and work to the detriment of equity in education.

Quality education, from the perspective of the BCTF, needs to be equally accessible to all students, and this means that education needs to be free. Underfunding public education is probably the worst thing that a government can do because it erodes the ability of public schools to provide the same quality of education as fee-generating private schools. School fees in the public system and subsidization of the private system simply create greater advantages for the already advantaged in society; these, and other mechanisms related to privatization are unacceptable from this perspective.

Professionalism

The BCTF declares itself to be a union of professionals (BC Teachers' Federation, 2007). This statement of self-identity indicates that teachers perceive no contradiction between being a professional and being a union member. The union serves the interests of teachers and students in promoting public education. As professionals, teachers expect to be self-regulating and to have a high degree of autonomy in their work. Because of their expertise, teachers expect to be consulted on matters that relate to education policy. The Campbell government's policy and rhetoric challenges the BCTF's identity as a union of professionals and this leads to conflict.

The rhetoric and action of the Campbell government suggests a much different view of professionalism. Neo-liberals view unions of any kind as third parties that interfere with the natural operation of market forces, including the forces of supply and demand operating between employers and labor. The teachers' union is framed similarly, as a special interest group operating within provincial and local politics to serve the needs of its members. The union, then, does not serve the interests of students. In order to work with teachers on a professional level, the government believes it needs to by-pass the union and communicate directly with teachers. The Ministry of Education, while it was under the direction of Christy Clark, perceived the need to dissolve the Council of the College of Teachers because the majority of members were elected through endorsement of the BCTF, therefore such a Council represented teachers' self-interests, not those of students. Similarly, collective bargaining processes and collective agreements are believed to serve teachers' interests and not those of students. The belief is, in fact, that collective agreements often work in ways that are contrary to student interests.

The approach that the Campbell government takes with respect to the BCTF begs critique. The union is an obstacle to the government's educational agenda; therefore government action may be merely a means of weakening or even breaking a political enemy. Perhaps the appeal to professional teachers, versus a political union, is just rhetoric designed to legitimize political intent and action—a means of manipulating teachers to accept the government's will as their own.

However, if we take the government's rhetoric at face value, there are still problems with the logic. The assumption that neo-liberals, including the Campbell government, seem to be making is that one cannot have more than one identity—teachers cannot be unionists and professionals, too. It is a limited, modernist view of identity as unitary and fixed that leads to the construction of dichotomies and to simplistic either/or thinking. A postmodern perspective, on the other hand, conceptualizes identities as complex, multiple, and fluid (Nicholson & Seidman, 1995). A postmodern perspective accommodates teachers' views of themselves as representing multiple interests that are often complementary (Poole, 2000).

Regardless of whose vision of education or whose view of professionalism is right, if indeed there is a right or wrong perspective, it is not up to government to decide who will represent teachers. Teachers will decide who best represents their interests; that is their moral and legal right.

As is typical of those who apply a neo-liberal agenda to K-12 education, the Campbell government assumes that the BCTF is a third party that somehow forces teachers to do things they oppose and this is possible because membership is mandatory. Undoubtedly, sometimes teachers feel this way and some teachers may always feel this way, but if the phenomenon were widespread we would likely see teachers in BC behaving quite differently than they have in the past six years. Like any organization, not every member supports every decision and the degree to which a union speaks for, or diverges from particular teachers' understandings of their group identity varies from one context to the next (Bascia, 1994). Sometimes the majority establishes policies that minorities or individuals oppose; nevertheless, teachers unions are democratic organizations. Unions are representative democracies that set policy direction through elected delegates to representative assemblies and annual general meetings and, in the case of matters such as potential strikes, they are highly participative democracies that make decisions through direct voting by members. If one makes the general argument that unions do not represent their members, one must demonstrate that unions are not democratic organizations. Far from being separate from them, unions are a part of teachers' professional communities and, if anything, we may not yet fully understand the complexity of that relationship.

As this case indicates, teachers unions are important spaces for teacher resistance to neo-liberalism. Unions have the available resources to conduct research, network with other unions, critique the motives behind educational policy, educate teachers, and lead teachers in open resistance. BC teachers, through the leadership of the BCTF,

have demonstrated tenacious resistance to neo-liberal policy in education. They are highly critical of standardized testing, market-oriented approaches in education, and cuts to public education funding. The BCTF condemns neo-liberalism as undermining quality, equally accessible, free public education. When teachers choose civil disobedience (as they did in BC when they turned their College fees over to their union and when they voted overwhelmingly to defy Bill 12-2005 and engaged in strike action) they send clear messages to government that they do not support its policy direction.

That BC teachers are willing to engage in these acts is evidence of their support for their union and their anger and distrust toward government. The BCTF successfully appeals to teachers' sense of democracy, their frustration with underfunding of education, their sense of social justice, and to a definition of the purpose of education that is much broader than an economic, competitive one. Cases such as this one in BC are evidence of teachers' resistance to neo-liberal policy. As long as neo-liberalism conflicts with teachers' self-identities and their conceptions of educational purpose and the meaning of professionalism, we can expect the struggle to continue.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). Every child counts, Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Toronto.

Bascia, N. (1994). Unions in teachers' professional lives: Social, intellectual, and practical concerns. New York: Teachers College Press.

BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. (2007). A brief history of parent involvement in BC. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/about/histparentinvolv.html>

BC Liberals. (2007a). Great goals for a golden decade, Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.bcliberals.com/media/Page03.pdf>

BC Liberals. (2007b). For public education--The most funding ever. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.bcliberals.com/media/Page09.pdf>.

BC Liberals. (2007c). For BC students--The best in education. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.bcliberals.com/media/Page07.pdf>

Beatty, J. (2002, April 30). Clark blasts BCTF as 'disruptive'. The Vancouver Sun, pp. 1, 2.

BC Teachers' Federation. (2006, November 7a). Accountability in public education. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5724>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007). Key issues. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/ContactUs.aspx?id=5360>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007). Education funding questions and answers. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from [/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=10718](http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=10718)

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007). Education finance. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=10720>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007). Privatization background. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5962>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007). Public education: Not for sale: Proceedings of a conference sponsored by The Coalition for Public Education. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5922>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007a). Accountability. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from

<http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5528>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007b). What really counts! Rethinking accountability. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/NewsAndEvents.aspx?id=9298>

BC Teachers' Federation. (2007c). School planning councils/Parent advisory councils. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Education/Accountability/SchoolPlanningCouncils.pdf>

British Columbia College of Teachers. (2006). British Columbia College of Teachers. Retrieved August 2, 2007, from <http://www.bcct.ca/default.aspx>

Brown, D. (2004). Open enrollment and school choice. Retrieved July 20, 2007, from http://sae.ca/analyst/C_022.1_ABG_LON.php

Cernetig, M. (2005, October 18). Liberals didn't bargain on a confrontation. The Vancouver Sun, A3.

Dosdall, E. (2007). Foundation Skills Assessment: What is all the fuss about?, Retrieved December 4, 2007, from <http://weblogs.elearning.ubc.ca/newproposals/DMReportApr27.pdf>

Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2007. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2007 Legislative Assembly: 3rd Session, 38th Parliament.

Health Services and Support-Facilities Bargaining Assn. v. British Columbia, 2007 SCC 27 (Supreme Court of Canada 2007).

Malcolmson, J. (2005a, January). Another year of funding restraint for schools. Finance Watch, 1, 1.

Malcolmson, J. (2005b, January). Cost inflation within school budgets: benefits. Finance Watch, 1, 2.

Malcolmson, J. (2005c, May). Do we need a new funding formula for our schools? Finance Watch 1, 2-3.

Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia. Achieve BC. Retrieved July 20, 2007, from <http://www.achievebc.ca/tools-and-resources.asp>.

Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia. (2002). 2002 Satisfaction Survey: Technical Report. Retrieved December 4, 2007, from http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/sat_survey/02survey_tech_report.pdf.

Moe, T. (2006). Union power and the education of children. In J. Hannaway & A. Rotherham (Eds.), *Collective bargaining in education: Negotiating change in today's schools*. (pp. 229-256). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nicholson, L. J., & Seidman, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Social postmodernism: Beyond identity politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poole, W. L. (2000). The construction of teachers' paradoxical interests by teachers unions leaders. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 93-119.

Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2001 Legislative Assembly: 2nd Session, 37th Parliament.

School (Student Achievement Enabling) Amendment Act, 2007. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2007 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 38th Parliament.

School Amendment Act, 2002. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2002 Legislative session: 3rd session, 37th

Parliament.

Skelton, C. (2007a, July 12, 2007). \$4.1-billion surplus shows Liberal policies are working, Taylor says. The Vancouver Sun, pp. C1, C2.

Skelton, C. (2007b, July 12). Tax cuts proven to pay for themselves, Liberals say. The Vancouver Sun, pp. C1,C2.

Steffenhagen, J. (2003a, May 03). Clark planning teachers' college change. The Vancouver Sun.

Steffenhagen, J. (2003b, October 8). Teachers don't like college fee, BCTF says. The Vancouver Sun, p. B5.

Teachers' Collective Agreement Act. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2005 Legislative Session: 1st session, 38th Parliament.

Teaching Profession (Teacher Registration) Amendment Act, 2007. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2007 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 38th Parliament.

Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2003. Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. 2003 Legislative Session: 4th Session, 37th Parliament.

Wendy Poole

Wendy Poole is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She teaches courses related to educational leadership, including one course that examines union-management relations in education and teachers' unions as spaces for educational leadership. Her research interests include teacher unionism, union-management relations, the intersection of neo-liberalism with teacher and administrator identities, and organizational learning and change in education.

Department of Educational Studies
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z4

wendy.poole@ubc.ca