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Devolution, Choice, and Accountability in the Provision of Public Education in British Columbia: A Critical Analysis of the *School Amendment Act* of 2002 (*Bill 34)*

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Abstract

This critical policy study provides an understanding of the different actors—individuals, interest groups, and other organizations—involved in influencing and defining, through their narratives what public education in BC ought to be, thus capturing the core intellectual dispositions that informed and determined the kind of policy problems that were posed, the kinds of explanations that were offered, and the kinds of policy options suggested as solutions in the restructuring of public education in BC. The study provides an account of the manner in which policy problems were posed, of the explanations constructed, of the policy directions formulated, and of the policy issues to which policy makers ultimately paid attention with enactment of *Bill 34*.

Introduction

This article presents a critical policy study that sought to explicate and understand in context the key features of the policy process that led up to the emergence, formulation, and adoption of a set of policy directions introducing market forces into the provision of public education in the province of British Columbia (BC) since 2002. The researchers attempted to construct a plausible understanding of the change in policy directions embodied in the *School Amendment Act of 2002* (*Bill 34)(Government of British Columbia, 2002)*, an understanding grounded in the narratives of actors, interest groups, and institutions involved in influencing and defining, through those narratives, what public education in the province of British Columbia ought to be. In this policy study, the researchers sought, to capture and convey the core intellectual dispositions that shaped the policy problems that were posed, the kinds of explanations that were offered, and the kinds of policy options suggested as solutions.

Bill 34 (2002) imposed a set of policy changes that re-presented and reconfigured issues of equity, social justice, and quality education within notions of choice, efficiency, accountability, autonomy and a free-market approach in areas of BC public education where the government of the day deemed such principles feasible. The central themes of accountability, parental empowerment, decentralization, choice, and the establishment of a quasi-free market in education, school-district *providers*, student *consumers*, and an increasing role for entrepreneurship became entrenched as organizing principles for the provision of public education in British Columbia.

This article is comprised of three major sections. The first section outlines the context and the purpose of this policy study by examining the policy content of *Bill 34* (2002) as a global as well as a local phenomenon. The second section presents the conceptual framework for policy analysis and the research methodology employed. In the third section, we describe and

discuss findings dealing with the origin, development, and adoption phases of the policy process that led to *Bill 34* (2002). This last section provides an account of the manner in which policy problems were posed, the explanations constructed, the policy directions formulated, and the policy issues to which policy-makers ultimately paid attention.

Context and Purpose of the Study

In 2001, the Liberal Government in British Columbia introduced policy changes in education within a context of sharp criticism of the responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of public schools in preparing a flexible workforce required for enhanced competitiveness within the global market. The need for structural changes to the public education system was first outlined by the BC Liberals in their election platform *A New Era for British Columbia: A Vision for Hope & Prosperity for the Decade and Beyond* (BC Liberals, 2001). Central to this policy agenda for public education was the overriding objective of opening public education to market forces. After their election in 2001, the new Liberal Government set up a task force (made up of 12 elected members of the Government: eleven from the British Columbia Liberal Party and one member of the BC New Democratic Party). The Select Standing Committee on Education (SSCE), with a mandate to come up with recommendations pertaining to policy changes, needed to improve the system in terms of operational principles, goals, and objectives. Their report, *A Future for Learners: A Vision for Renewal of Education in British Columbia* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002), criticized the education system for being unresponsive to learners' needs and to parents, for being over-centralized, and for lacking accurate measurement of its quality. The centerpiece of the report was promotion of a market- and consumer-driven, decentralized education system of high public accountability. The *School Amendment Act* of May 30th, 2002 (*Bill 34*) [1] was the government's response to the Select Standing Committee on Education Report and it embodied nearly all of its recommendations.

[1] Bill 34, *School Amendment Act*, 3rd Session, 37th, Parl., British Columbia, 2002

Bill 34 (2002) encouraged development of a quasi-market in public education by introducing (a) an explicit statutory framework for creation of for-profit school-board business companies, (b) parental choice and school autonomy (through the creation of school-planning councils), and (c) a considerable degree at least ostensible public accountability (through school-board accountability contracts). Table 1 provides an overview of the key policy features of *Bill 34* (2002).

Table 1

Overview of Bill 34, School Amendment Act, 2002

Purposes	Rights and obligations
Enhancing the opportunity for parental involvement Part 2, Division 2, sections 8.1 to 8.5	Bill 34 requires establishment of a school planning council in every school in British Columbia. The school planning council is responsible for drawing up an annual plan that identifies the school's strengths and weaknesses, sets goals for improvements, monitors its progress, and allocates resources within the school.
Enhancing the freedom and financial flexibility of school boards to make decisions according to their local needs Part 6, Divisions 1 and 2 – Part 6.1, Divisions 1 to 9	School boards may share administrative services with other school boards, municipalities, or corporate entities. School boards may dispose of surplus capital assets and share in the resulting revenue in proportion to their share of the purchase. School boards may create separate entities to engage in entrepreneurial activities to market their intellectual capital.
Holding school boards *accountable* for financial and academic matters Part 2, Division 2, sections79.2 and 80	School boards must complete accountability contracts. A special advisor may be appointed to review the progress of boards where they are not meeting student achievement goals set forth in the contracts.

Providing *choices* in terms of schools and educational programs	Students will be able to attend schools in any catchments area in BC (subject to space availability).
Part 6, Division 2, sections 74.1 to 75.1	Schools must be more responsive to the needs of their community of learners.

These policy changes were not exclusive to British Columbia. They developed within a global and globalizing policy environment in which general patterns and apparent commonalities or convergence in terms of policy initiatives emerged across widely varying policyscapes (Appadurai, 1996; Ball, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Levin, 1998). Several of these policy reforms introduced market elements into the provision of public schooling by promoting consumer choice and competition among providers coupled with a considerable degree of public accountability and government regulation over policy-making, evaluation, and curriculum. In doing so, these reforms have, in varying degrees, reframed public education as a consumer and hence "private good to be pursued and provided in terms of individual self-interest" (Lubienski, 2001, p. 656). Such reform attempts to introduce market principles and private decision-making into the provision of public education and thus transform it into a quasi-market (Whitty, 1998; Woods, 2000).

The policy changes introduced by *Bill 34* (2002) converged on a set of principles similar to those underlying many current international perspectives on educational reform, most notably, neo-liberalism, institutional economics, public choice, accountability, institutional devolution, autonomy, functional flexibility, and competitiveness (Ball, 1999; Levin, 1998). The educational reform in British Columbia, then, can be seen as an instance of *policy transfer* insofar as some generic policy ideas and instruments from other jurisdictions found their way into the process of agenda-setting and policy formulation that led to *Bill 34* (2002) (Pal, 1997). In some cases, policy changes take place as an "interaction between national processes and

international trends" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2000, p. 11). However, as Levin (1998, p. 136) noted: "there is much evidence of what Halpin & Troyna (1995) called 'policy borrowing' for largely symbolic purposes than there is of governments looking carefully at the results of each other's experience".

The purpose of this policy study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of how and why these policy directions came to be part of *Bill 34* (2002) by describing and analyzing why they arrived on the policy agenda and how they came to be defined and constructed. Therefore, the focus of the policy study was on the policymaking development and adoption processes as shaped by "the participants who are active, and the processes by which agenda items and alternatives come into prominence" (Kingdon, 1995, p.15).

Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

Policy Origin, Formulation, and Adoption as a Focus of Study

This study was exploratory: "analyzing policy is akin to trying to figure out which maps people used by studying the paths they took on their journey" (Pal, 1997, p. 13). In this part of the study, we did not focus on determining how the set of policies in *Bill 34* (2002) have fared "in action" in terms of its perceived intention and results (although another part of larger the study did examine results in two British Columbia school districts). Our attention here was directed on the processes by which issues were recognized as such and placed on the government policy agenda, were perceived and defined by various interested policy actors, then further explored, articulated, challenged, in some cases, given an authoritative definition while keeping others off the policy agenda (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). Therefore, we needed a policy-analysis model that would capture the incremental and complex nature of policy development and formulation, and take account of the roles that the full range of policy actors played in the policy definition and development process. With those goals in mind, we adapted Levin's (2001) and Blaikie and Soussan's (2000) analytical framework (see Table 2). It reflected a balance between the

linearity of rational models (Bridgeman, 1998; Grindle, 1991; Lasswell, 1951; McCool, 1995) and the multi-staged, developmental, and iterative nature of critical models (Ball, 1998b; Dye, 2002; Levin, 2001; Prunty, 1985; Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993).

Table 2

Stages of Conception and Implementation of the Policy Cycle

Stages of Policy Cycle	Elements of Analysis
Policy origins	*Key policy milestones*: focus on the *what* and the *why* from the past; policy history, legislation, specific events and so on; the sources of the policy that impacted both policy issue initiation, formulation, and adoption. *Social and political context*: focus on the social and political framework, change trends, policy drivers, and key political actors at play as well as on the situational pragmatics and intricacies of politics in action. *Interests and ideas*: focus on core beliefs that shaped the policy; the framework used to think about the key policy issues; the competing problem definitions and interpretations.
Policy formulation and adoption	*Policy development and adoption process*: focus on the interactions and responses of actors around policy formulation; multiple roles and power of the main actors in the policy process; their strategies to represent their position in the policy process; the main actors' impacts on the policy processes.

Research Methodology

Given the focus of this study, an exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive policy study method was used (Jensen, 2001; Robson, 1993; Yin, 1993). This policy-analysis research method was integrated into a multi-method approach (triangulation) in which the same phenomenon was investigated using several procedures and data sources: content analysis, archival data, policy documents, semi-structured interviews, and research literature. Senior

officials of the Policy Branch of the British Columbia Ministry of Education, elected officials (MLAs) members of the Select Standing Committee on Education 2002, representatives of interested parties (local and provincial parents organizations, students and teachers unions, post-secondary institutions, business organizations, school districts, etc.) involved in the policymaking development and adoption processes were interviewed for this policy study. Out of a total of thirty-two potential research participants, twenty-one accepted to be interviewed.

The data were analyzed across the policy phases, and within each major analytic code or category, to interpret and explain the process through which the policy directions came to be, were developed, and eventually became part of *Bill 34* (2002). (see Table 3).

Table 3

Research Phases, Research Questions, and Data Collection Methods.

Research Phases	Research Questions and Data Collection Methods	Analytic Codes
Review of the research literature	**Question:** *How is the phenomenon of opening up public education systems to market forces conceptualized and treated in the research literature?* **Source of data**: Research literature review on the impacts of the emergence of a market-oriented approach to the provision of public education.	• Policy history: past policies, legislation, catalytic events, etc
Analysis of policy origins development, and formulation process	**Questions:** • *How did the policy directions embedded in* Bill 34 *come to be defined and constructed and why were they placed on the policy agenda of the BC government?* • *How was that policy agenda transformed into policy directions embedded in Bill* 34*?* **Aims**: This phase of the study aimed at providing a policy history of *Bill 34*—why, how, and when were these directions set? Accordingly, it sought to provide an account of changing political and social trends	• Social and political framework and trends • Key political actors at play • Policy narrative that shaped the policy

	related to policy directions being studied, a profile of the process through which the policy directions were made, the main policy actors involved, and the core policy narratives that shaped the policy directions. **Sources of data:** documentary reviews, policy documents, policy review documents and drafts, and archival material. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews (Anderson, 1998) of key policy actors and stakeholders.	

Analytic case summaries were developed for each of the policy-analysis phases by using the analytic coding system developed to organize the findings (see Table 3). Finally, the data were analyzed within each major analytic code or category to interpret and explain the process through which the policy directions came to be and were eventually embedded in *Bill 34* (2002).

Findings and Discussion on the Policy Process Leading to Bill 34: Policy Origin and Development

The Campbell Government's Election Platform: A Basis for Reforming Public Education

The Campbell government was first elected in 2001 in the context of a perceived financial crisis. The need for *structural* changes to the ways in which the province was run was outlined by the BC Liberals in their election platform *A New Era for British Columbia: A vision for Hope & Prosperity for the Decade and Beyond* (BC Liberals, 2001) (see Table 4). This election platform was clearly identified as the main base for policy reform in education in the province of British Columbia :

> Many of the policies were laid out fairly specifically in the "A New Era for British Columbia" document as well as defined by the Minister of Education at the time, Christy Clark. Our former Minister called them the three As and the C: achievement, accountability, autonomy, and choice. (Interview with a Ministry of Education Official)

The BC Liberals claimed to want to create a world-class education system for economic competitiveness by ensuring that "young people have the skills and knowledge to compete with

the world's best and win" (BC Liberals, 2001, p. 7). This policy agenda clearly emphasized the economic functions of education.

Table 4

Key Features of the BC 2001 Liberal Election Platform on Education: "A New Era for British Columbia: A Vision for Hope and Prosperity for the Next Decade and Beyond."

Policy Issues	Proposed Policy Options
Mandate of public education The purpose of public education is to ensure that individuals have the skills and knowledge to compete with the world's best and win.	o To put more computers in schools and increase resources to improve computer literacy for students o To work with employers and post-secondary institutions to increase training and apprenticeship in trades and technical sectors o To strengthen the network of colleges and institutions and online learning o To expand job training and skills development opportunities
Access, choice, and flexibility School boards need to have the flexibility and the resources to meet the students' needs.	o To extend more autonomy and control over the delivery of educational services to school boards o To give school boards multi-year funding envelopes in order to facilitate long-term educational planning and budgeting o To entitle parents to volunteer their services provided they do not result in the displacement of existing staff service o To create new opportunities and better access to advanced education through skills training, research, and development
Quality and accountability Public education should provide for more local autonomy and financial and academic accountability.	o To establish specific goals and outcomes to measure the success of educators in public schooling o To devote more of each dollar to improving the quality of education and less towards bureaucracy

In a presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Education (SSCE) in October 2001, the Minister of Education summarized the main features of the Liberals' proposed policy

reform for public education in these terms (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, October 16, 2001):

> As you know, we ran in the last election on a platform that we called the *New Era* document, and that document made much of how important we think education is. It talked about the pillars of our philosophy in education. It talked about granting school boards more autonomy to allow them to be able to meet local needs and look at what a local community wants and to be able to meet those needs in a way they deem appropriate instead of having Victoria make those decisions for them. (p. 25)
>
> Focusing on student achievement, after all, should be the center of our education system. For years we have in Victoria, I think, gotten so focused on the inputs in our education system that we've tended to ignore the outputs from it. (p. 25)
> Choice in the system. Surely parents and students who are the consumers of education in British Columbia should have choice about the kinds of education that are available to them. Our system shouldn't be one-size-fits-all. (p. 25)
>
> Of course, accountability. I talked about autonomy earlier, giving school boards the opportunity to be able to spend their money in a way that meets local needs, but you can't have autonomy unless you also have accountability. We in the government have a responsibility for taking care of taxpayers' dollars and making sure that they're spent appropriately and efficiently. (p. 26)

Central to this policy agenda for public education (K–12) was the overriding objective of opening it to market forces. The architects of the *Bill 34* (2002) reform assumed that establishment of a quasi-market in education would enhance learning possibilities and opportunities because parents know best what is good for their children: “The NDP’s (The New Democratic Party) ‘one size fits all’ approach to education has forced schools to cut services and has compromised student learning possibilities” (BC Liberals, 2001, p. 7).

The proposed policy called for an increase in market-like dynamics, but framed within a government-administered, common-school model (Lubienski, 2001). Although the BC Liberals wanted to inject competition through choice by borrowing aspects of quasi-market models, they clung to the notion that schools in British Columbia should still be publicly owned, funded, and governed, and be accessible to all.

Process of Problem Definition and Formulation: The Select Standing Committee on Education in 2001–02

Against this backdrop, the fledgling Campbell government established a Select Standing Committee on Education (SSCE) in 2001 and gave it a mandate to make recommendations to improve access, choice, flexibility, and quality in public education. The SSCE served as a key element of the problem-structuring or definition part of the policy cycle (Howlett, 2003; Pal, 1997; Parsons, 1999; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). Submissions and presentations were mainly policy claims made by various education stakeholders and were generally framed as narratives or stories outlining weaknesses or strengths of the public system, and either demanding policy changes or advocating strengthening of the public education system. Some stakeholders tried to get policy makers to see new educational challenges or to see old ones in new ways.

What emerged as the main challenges that necessitated a change in education policies in British Columbia? What policy issues were identified by stakeholders, and what, if any, evidence exists of broad agreement or consensus among them? How were key policy issues embedded in the SSCE terms of reference and how were they interpreted by the various stakeholders and policy actors? Which issues were ultimately legitimated by the Committee?

Analysis of SSCE transcript data on the respective merits of different conceptualizations of how to organize public education revealed that the majority of policy actors or communities agreed that in an increasingly pluralistic social, cultural, economic, and political environment, policy-makers must embrace difference and plurality of needs if the allocation of education programs and services is to be judged legitimate by users and providers alike. However, they differed on the policy solutions to this challenge. Several stakeholders were firmly committed to the values of collectivism, social welfarism, and social trusteeship, whereas others championed more competitive arrangements within the public system as a way of improving efficiency, consumer choice, accountability, and flexibility in the delivery of programs and services.

Contrasting key features of the mandate of public education.

The analyzed data highlighted competing conceptions of public schooling. Some participants argued that for British Columbia to position itself advantageously within the global economy, it needed to restructure public education in such a way that it would be fully committed discursively and practically to the "competitive state project" as outlined by Robertson (2000) and Weiner (2003). Such restructuring would mean realignment of government educational priorities to embrace the primacy of the need to compete in the global market by cultivating and providing a flexible and competitive workforce for the economy through education and training (Lubienski, 2001).

> British Columbia needs a strong education system if we are to ensure that the province has the highly educated workforce needed to compete in an increasingly global and competitive economy (David Rees, the CEO of the Centre for Education Information). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, October 17, 2001, p. 77)

Partisans of this view believed that public education capacities and resources should be deployed so as to support private enterprise and a competitive state (Cerny, 1997). Phrases such as *borderless workforce*, *international trade*, *realities of globalization*, *competition with companies worldwide*, and *interconnected nature of the world* spoke to the sort of problems with which, in their view, the government should be preoccupied in restructuring education in British Columbia. These stakeholders used political and especially economic reasoning to legitimize their policy claims for an education system tightly woven into the global marketplace, focused on employability skills, and acting more like a business enterprise competing globally than a public service agency. This redefinition of the purpose of public schooling envisaged transforming public education from focus on the public good to focus on private good. This transformation was to be realized through market mechanisms of parent choice and competition among a widely differentiated array of school-districts and schools across the province.

Other participants in the public hearings, however, conceptualized public education as a system that should promote equal opportunity, reduce inequality, and prepare the young for citizenship. They defined public education in terms of common values, public governance, equality of access and opportunity, equity, adherence to democratic due process, and a role as a key guarantor of the public or common good. These participants insisted on the crucial role of education in strengthening the social and institutional fabric of a society and warned against the temptation to reduce education and civic participation to narrow instruments of citizen/consumer sovereignty and market forces (Mintrom, 2003; Morrow, 2000). The comments of Anita Zaenker, the representative of the Canadian Federation of Students, reflected this perspective:

> As stakeholders in the public education system in British Columbia we believe that public education prepares students to be active participants in a democratic society. First, students learn to read, write, think critically, analyze, work with numbers and use technology. In high schools, colleges and universities they study subjects in greater depth and learn skills that will serve them throughout their lifetimes. Throughout the public education system students learn to communicate, to understand, to respect different points of view and to cooperate with people from different social, ethnic and economic backgrounds (the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 1, 2001, p. 275).

These quotations reject the view that public education exists only to enable the province to become more responsive to changing economic conditions within the global marketplace (Hindess, 2001). By challenging public schools to live up to democratic and equity purposes, these voices called for more emphasis on community and equity and less on personal advancement and the need to satisfy parents-consumers.

Taken together, these two competing views of the primary mandate and of desirable organizational principles for public education pitted individual education needs against their constitutive relationship to private interests. They suggested conflicting answers to the questions of what needs public education should meet, and by what means.

Stakeholder perceptions of choice and the distribution of educational opportunities

The data show a central tension between a universalistic and a particularistic conception of public education (Loxley, 2001). Part of this tension was expressed in policy narratives that called for dismantling of a universalistic conception of public education and the substitution of particularism (Ellison, 1999) as the new organizing principle for public education. The particularist view holds that public schooling is best organized according to the principle of consumer sovereignty, whereby each individual parent is the best judge of his or her child's needs, wants, and best interests. (Gordon & Whitty, 1997). Consumer sovereignty leads to emphasis on parental choice, competition among school-districts, and schools fighting for market position by offering diversified and specialized educational programs. Following directly the logic critiqued by Loxley (2001a) and Robertson (2000), some presenters regarded choice—with its appeal to competition, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and accountability—as a panacea for the deficiencies of the government-run public system. These comments conveyed this particular version of choice:

> It is time to give parents and students a choice in their education. They need to play a vital role in deciding what form their education should take. We need to trust consumers to make wise choices. Education can be responsive to the needs of the market if we are willing to remove the unnecessary constraints. (Brian Malchow, School District 91). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 23, 2001, p. 665)

> In terms of choice, by allowing the schools to make choices around programming, you allow them to be more responsive to their community. Specialty schools could form around the arts or perhaps around a local industry. At the same time, this would open the door to parents, allowing them greater choice on which school has the best program for that child (Andrew Wynn-Williams and John Winter, BC Chamber of Commerce,). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 20, 2001, p. 533)

The dynamics of choice and competition were presented in the data as means of fostering better achievement, more options for parents and students, and new and more relevant ways of educating children as well as of engaging children and communities marginalized by the *one-size-fits-all* uniformity associated with the *status quo* (Bosetti, 2001;

Lubienski, 2001). Furthermore, the narrative of choice reflected in these quotations seems to be based on the assumption that most families will choose equally wisely—or at least tolerably so—in an open education market. However, as Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1994) indicated in their research, some groups of parents are better skilled in exploiting market mechanisms in education because they have the requisite knowledge to decode and manipulate to their advantage what can be a complex and deregulated system of choices and recruitment. Kenway and Bullen (2001) suggested that those with few financial, social, and cultural resources tend to make choices of necessity. Those who fail to exercise that choice, moreover, or who choose less valued educational programs, might be pathologized as failing to care for their children (Robertson, 2000).

Other stakeholders also advocated choice, but not in market terms. They framed the policy option of choice within the ideal of equity in the distribution of educational opportunities. At the heart of their vision of educational choice was the idea that the educational fate of children should be shaped by the choices and decisions they and their parents make about how to journey through the education system, not by circumstances in which they happen to find themselves because of decisions of others. Distribution of educational opportunities, in their view, should be *choice sensitive* but *circumstances-insensitive*—it should rectify inequities caused by parents' natural endowment or social and economic circumstances. While agreeing that contemporary education policy should encompass a greater plurality of provision, these stakeholders worried those groups already disadvantaged by low socio-economic status and lack of cultural capital would fail to attract appropriate attention to their lack of capacity to make the system work in their favour. They feared that too much responsiveness to choice would undermine efforts to remedy exclusion and balkanization of the student population and to offer equitable access to all programs within the public system. These issues stood out in these submissions:

> Real choice must involve living and working together in a neighbourhood school that is rich in programs and open and accessible to all students, regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation or income. If we are to survive as a multicultural nation, anything less will further stratify our society — as a failed experiment in Boulder, Colorado, has proven (Pat Fedak & Mary Cooper, Surrey Teachers' Association). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 1, 2001, p. 282)

> Enhancing choice in the system should support student achievement without balkanizing the student body. Diversity in British Columbia provides the platform on which the strength of our public school system is built. Unfortunately, it can also be used as a force that fragments a student body along cultural, economic or other lines. We need to ensure that the democratic principles upon which the public schools are built — the ones that bring students and communities together — are the ones we pursue, not the ones that would allow us to become balkanized (Gordon Comeau, BCSTA). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, October 26, 2001, p. 251)

What stands out in these submissions is a plea for greater equality of opportunity and equivalent value in outcomes and for fair and equitable allocation of education services and programs to foster social cohesion and active citizenship within a democratic society. While choice is recognized as desirable, it should not be at the expense of equal opportunity.

Stakeholders' perceptions of accountability

Choice and competition narratives in the data brought with them discussions on enhanced forms of accountability as policy options. The multiplicity of policy narratives on accountability gravitated around three key questions: Accountability for what?; For the benefit of whom?; and, On whose terms? We found three main conceptualizations of accountability, differing in scope and focus.

One way of thinking about accountability in the public system rested on the assumption that student learning and performance depend greatly on the capacity of the school and the surrounding community to integrate resources in devising collective solutions to learners' social, cultural, and emotional, as well as academic, needs. The representative of the First Nations Education Council Advisory of Peace River North School-District defined the issue of accountability along these conceptual lines:

> We'd bring other people down that are just as passionate about it, and we could get the ministry to agree that there are four goals. Three of them are not even to measure academic success. Let's measure how the emotional needs of kids are, how the belonging needs of kids are and how our cultural programs are. Are they just a little Mickey Mouse thing? Are they solid and healthy? Those are the types of things. If the ministry starts designing benchmarks around that, watch the change happen. Academics is the wrong place to start in measuring the success of aboriginal students. You're too far down the totem pole already (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 5, 2001, p. 356).

This way of conceptualizing accountability in the system requires participants to think more in system and capacity terms and assess and account for their contribution and those of others in much broader, more interconnected ways (Jones, 2004; Morgan, 2002). This view requires that accountability indicators should not be based solely on the conventional "input-output-outcomes-impacts" typology. They would also focus on process and individual/institutional behavioural change. Such a community-based view of accountability enhances the possibility of collective action to improve the overall quality of education in terms of its relevancy, content, and provision (Whitty, 1998).

The second view of accountability emerging from the data involves assessing the quality of provision, taking "into account multiple performance measures and the contextual environment in which learning is taking place" (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 1, 2001, p. 282) as well as government capacity to provide a level of resources that would enable districts to be responsive to students' learning needs:

> With respect to accountability, true accountability finds effective expression in circumstances in which boards are truly accountable for setting and achieving reasonable and appropriate goals. In order for goals to be reasonable and achievable, schools and school-districts must have the support, resources and direction to know where they're going and how to get there (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 1, 2001, p. 288).

This view of accountability holds both the government and the school districts responsible for seeking to remedy the visible shortcomings of the public system by revising, to the extent needed, the goals of public school reform (Neave, 1988).

The third competing narrative on accountability viewed it as a process of gauging the effectiveness of school districts in allocating finite resources to optimize students' learning performance. These submissions to the SSCE were reflective of this narrative:

> What we need to be concerned about is not just how many children take exams; we need to be concerned about what the results are at the end of their exams. We shouldn't be concerned about exactly where every school-district spends its money. We should be concerned about what they achieve as a result of the way they choose to spend their money (Hon. C. Clark, Minister of Education). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, October 16, 2001, p. 28)

> I believe that accountability is the gathering, dissemination, and use of information and data in a goal-setting and evaluation cycle. It is critical that we gauge the impact on student achievement of dollars spent so that we can allocate finite resources effectively. It isn't enough that we share information and data. That knowledge must be put into context, shared and acted upon to be meaningful. I support accountability contracts, or performance plans, as many refer to them, as a good move in this direction—first, put responsibility and accountability in the same place. Accountability for student learning must be in place at every level of the education system, from the classroom teacher all the way up to the superintendent and board. (Katherine Wagner, Maple-Ridge – Pitt Meadows School-District). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, December 10, 2001, p. 706)

Here, what matters is not process but output. Concern with provision for and equity of access and opportunity gives way to measures of output quality. In essence, what seems to be presented as an accountability approach to assessing quality of learning is gravitating to an evaluation of efficiency instead. It is a contractual, compliance-oriented type of accountability model (Jones, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 2005; Witte, 1990) which calls for a culture of performativity through a monitoring mechanism (Lyotard, 1984).

Stakeholders' perceptions of governance and management

Choice and public accountability are often accompanied by devolution and decentralization of administrative powers from government to school districts, school councils, and schools themselves (Hache, 1999). In line with this association, changes in governance and management were central to the policy narratives of several stakeholders. Some wanted the government to take steps to move more authority to individual school-districts and to

strengthen the role of parents in governing public schools. Thus, devolution of power through mechanisms such as school-based management and school-governing bodies with a dominant representation of parents was presented as key to improving performance of public schools:

> We had a number of discussions and meetings around […] the role parents [played], like how would parents like to be part of the decision-making? The parents, at the time, were saying "We wanted it mandated". We didn't want to give a choice to schools that, you know, [where] you could ask a number of people. We wanted it in legislation because we felt that with your parent advisory councils**,** there was a duty to get advice and it wasn't being taken or even the advice [that] was being asked. The advice that was asked for was on silly things like "Should we have the fair on Monday or Tuesday?" And very often we heard, it's kind of a collective voice, because that's what we as an organization, are trying to do is to collect the voices. So, this wasn't just a minor agenda, it's an overall commonality throughout the province. There was a paternalistic attitude towards parents. (Interview with a former elected official of the British Columbia Confederation of Parents Advisory Councils - BCCPAC)

Some SSCE participants articulated the notion of devolution of power as decentralizing school control through mechanisms of increased autonomy and financial flexibility at the school-district level (self-managing institutions); others saw devolution as shared decision-making within schools (deliberative decision-making); and still others viewed it as a method of increasing the influence of parent-consumers in school decision-making (stronger role of parents on school governing bodies). However, as Gordon (1993) and Bagley (1996) demonstrated in their work, parent empowerment within a school governance structure has severe limitations because parents are far from equally endowed with the material and cultural resources for self-management of their schools. Their conclusions reinforces Bourdieu's (1992) cultural-capital thesis that suggests that parents with cultural capital will be able to maximize the personal benefits of schooling, to the disadvantage of those who cannot.

Autonomy, flexibility, funding, and entrepreneurialism

The four policy issues of autonomy, flexibility, funding, and entrepreneurialism were almost impossible to treat separately. They were too closely intertwined to be addressed in isolation from one another. They needed to be viewed within the context of narratives on

choice, parents as consumers, enhanced parental voice, and competition. Within the data, autonomy and administrative flexibility were discussed as dimensions of local institutional self-management (Peters, 2000) driven by a performativity type of public accountability (Lyotard, 1984), a funding structure based on open-enrolment, and a quasi-competitive approach to public education (Robertson, 2000):

> We want to encourage the innovation and encourage them [school-districts] to get out there and be innovative with their people. We want to set the standards and find a funding mechanism that sets it for the district and allows that district to be as entrepreneurial and as innovative as possible in order to meet the needs of the diverse community that they're charged with meeting. (Deputy Minister). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, October 16, 2001, p. 55)

However, some stakeholders were concerned that, while the operational functions of the education system were, in theory, to be devolved to the local level, the government was seen as maintaining close control of the overall framing and output functions (curriculum, policy, audit, and assessment). For some stakeholders, such continued central control undermined local autonomy and administrative flexibility:

> In terms of flexibility, however, we feel that there are a lot of restrictions on how we're able to spend our money. There are all kinds of restrictions on what we do generally. There are standards established through provincial curricula. There's a whole range of provincial policies, procedures, and legislation requirements. There's a funding allocation system which sets out service levels and cost factors for us; a budget instruction scheme which sets out expenditure rules; a framework of accountability based on the broad goals of education in the province; the kindergarten-to-grade 12 education plan by which we must abide; and the provincial collective agreement (Barb MacLellan, North Vancouver School- District). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 1, 2001, p. 286)

These stakeholders saw this division of powers between the centre (the government) and the periphery (the school-districts) as potentially shifting the fallout from political struggles (such as program cuts) away from the government to local school-districts, or even to individual schools or parents.

Closely linked with the policy option of choice, autonomy, and administrative flexibility in education, entrepreneurialism emerged in the policy narratives of several stakeholders as a vital

asset for the organizational survival and growth of school-districts and individuals schools. Several stakeholders mentioned that the increase in uncertainty, competitiveness, and the scarcity of resources, together with the need for continuous change and innovation, made entrepreneurial activities a potential part of the funding mechanisms of public school-districts:

> We believe the BC curriculum is world-class. Let it become one of BC's chief exports. We can make friends and contacts throughout the world if we are willing to share what has been developed right in our own backyard. If you let us, we can deliver choice in education, quality standards, access and flexibility, leadership and economies of scale to the rest of the province and the world. (Brian Malchow, Nechako School-District). (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 23, 2001, p. 665)

Under discussion here was a policy change encouraging school districts to engage actively in entrepreneurial activities, to market their intellectual capital as a commodity, provincially and internationally. Combined with a per-capita funding formula and introduction of a consumer-driven system around the notion of choices, this policy change reconceptualized school-districts as a new breed of public institutions acting like private enterprise in an open market for consumers.

Salient Policy Narrative Features of the Select Standing Committee on Education Report 2002

As mandated by the Legislature, the SSCE produced a report containing a series of policy recommendations for the government. In the policy-making process, this report was used to guide policy-makers in deciding which policy changes to undertake, or in choosing among policy alternatives (Howlett, 2003). The SSCE Report promoted the politics of diversity of needs and invoked the lack of responsiveness and flexibility of public schools towards their clientele to justify devolution of power, a performativity form of accountability, and choice based on free-market principles (see Table 5).

Table 5

Synthesis of the features of the Select Standing Committee on Education Report 2002

Key Policy Issues	Proposed Policy Options
Meaning of public education Public education is the key to a healthy and a prosperous economy. Its value is framed by the need for a highly educated workforce in order to stay competitive in the knowledge-based global economy. The report reflects societal belief that an educated population has social and economic value for the individual and for society	o To link work opportunities and schooling o To improve access to further training and education for workers and students by increasing the degree of choice and flexibility within the current system o To offer alternative non-academic post-secondary courses and programs o To develop specialty or magnet schools that offer skills courses and programs

Current initiatives Attention should be given to social equity programs to enable children to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them.	o To make these non-education programs an integral part of the public education system
Local involvement The report underlines the value and relevance of local initiatives and choices and the advantage of making educational decisions close to and in consultation with those who are affected by the decisions.	o To allow institutions to make decisions reflecting local priorities and needs o To provide opportunities for parental input into decisions affecting their children
Access, choice and flexibility Students should have access to greater choice and variety in schooling in terms of relevant education and training opportunities.	o To increase alternative secondary school programs leading to non-university degree programs o To increase support for independent private institutions o To develop more alternative public schools including funded charter schools o
Quality and accountability The scope and kind of current measurements of achievement do not provide an accurate measurement of the quality of the public education system.	o To set more specific goals and standards to provide clear direction to the public system o To implement accountability measures that reward achievement and provide for intervention where effectiveness is not evident o

The SSCE Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) represented the outcome of this struggle over meaning, determining whose voices were heard and whose values were recognized in authoritative allocation of power, discretion, and resources and thus translated into particular conceptions of what public education ought to be (Ball, 1990; Foucault, 1976).

The conceptualization of the mandate of public schooling in the SSCE Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) was located squarely within the parameters of a narrative that linked its role to the notion of the competitive state project (Robertson, 2000). Schools were urged to become commit themselves to creation of appropriately skilled, self-managing, and entrepreneurial individuals, and to enhancing the socio-economic competitiveness of the province on the national and international scenes. The report rejected the narrative of public schools as public spheres dedicated to self- and social empowerment where students learn the necessary knowledge and skills for sustaining and living in a vibrant democratic society (Nordgreen, 2002).

Policy options dealing with school choice were situated within a narrative that rationalized the choice option by portraying public schools as bound by bureaucratic regulations, unresponsive to local needs, and preoccupied by their own self-interest. The authors of the report assumed that establishing a choice-driven public school system would revitalize schools in terms of responsiveness, accountability, and productivity. Issues of equity and equality were absent in the narrative of choice and competition, the latter being presented in the SSCE Report as unproblematic and value-neutral. No importance was assigned to the position that an educational market is not a neutral allocative device but rather a system for creating and measuring educational value in the eyes of the consumers (Peters, 2000) and for producing and ordering consumer preferences (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1994).

The vision of accountability that dominated the SSCE Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) centred on performativity (Boxley, 2003; Levin, 1998; Lyotard, 1984; Whitty, 1998) as the preferred process for controlling public schools and categorizing them along the spectrum of performance exclusively in terms of output. Official *sanctioning* of this discourse in the Report was, in itself, an important element in the introduction of competition among schools within the public system in BC.

Autonomy and flexibility were at the heart of the SSCE Report's narrative of decentralization. The authors of the Report recommended devolution of powers to lower level units: schools, school-districts, communities, and parents. This narrative of decentralization was linked with the proposal of a market-oriented approach to restructuring public education through the empowerment of parents and students as choosers and consumers.

Absent from the SSCE Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002), however, was any mention of entrepreneurial activities as means of enhancing financial flexibility of school-districts and their capacity to increase the diversity of programs and services to their community and parents.

The Enactment of *School Amendment Act 2002* (*Bill 34*)

Extensive amendments to the statute governing the public schools in British Columbia were introduced and enacted during the 2001–2002 school year following publication of the SSCE Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) on education on March 28, 2002. These amendments established a new policy direction for public education in the province. The *School Amendment Act, 2002* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) supported the changes to the K-12 public-education system initiated by the government since taking office in the summer of 2001. In an April 16, 2002 backgrounder released by the BC Ministry of Education (BC Ministry of Education, 2002) at the time of the introduction of *Bill 34* (2002), the specific purposes of the amendments were identified as follows:

- Recognize the importance of parental involvement in how schools operate;
- Provide students and parents with more choice about the school they attend and the educational programs they follow;
- Provide school boards with greater financial flexibility and enable boards to be more entrepreneurial;
- Ensure the system is accountable at every level for improving student performance;

- Lay the basis for the new accountability cycle of the Ministry of Education.

This shift in policy direction reflected closely commitments that were outlined in the Liberals' *New Era* document (BC Liberals, 2001), notably to:

- Establish specific goals and outcomes to measure the success of educators in public schooling;
- Support more flexibility and choice in public schooling;
- Give local school boards more autonomy and control over the delivery of education services, subject to provincial curriculum and testing standards;
- Devote more of each education dollar to improving the quality of education, and less to bureaucracy;
- Give school boards multi-year funding envelopes.

The changes in education policy in BC made through *Bill 34* (2002) were linked to a reworking by the Campbell Government of the relationship between government and public school districts. These policies of choice, accountability, autonomy, and entrepreneurial activities fostered the idea that responsibility for education, beyond the minimum required for public safety and the functioning of the provincial economy, are increasingly defined by boards, families, and individuals. Policy directions promoted in *Bill 34* (2002) embrace a marketized version of public education in which parents' and students' rights and responsibilities are defined within the notion of consumers trying to secure status and distinction as a means of obtaining material and social privileges (Whitty,1998). The role of government in the provision of public education has changed as its main business has become setting educational standards based on the outcomes students need to achieve, monitoring student performance and reporting the results to the public, working with schools and communities to improve student and school performance, funding schools, and overseeing the governance of the system as a whole.

Conclusion

The policy process that led to the enactment of *Bill 34* (2002) did not reflect collaborative inquiry within a sub-system of policy networks and policy communities (McCool, 1995; Pal, 1997). The findings of this study on the dynamics of the policy process behind this legislation support the view that the Liberal government framed its public consultation process by promoting its ideas and proposals in a way that was sympathetic to broadly held public views about the provision of public services such as education and by employing policy narratives or discourses that treat the government's positions as self-evident. From the start, the government put forward prevailing political views about the need to restructure education. This action obliged the government to translate certain issues into policy priorities before they could enter the debate, and acted to freeze alternative perspectives out the emerging policy debate more or less completely. The government highlighted policy issues favoured by its leadership and, as a result, narrowed the space for alternative views. In defining such alternatives, it wielded what Schattschneider has aptly labelled "the supreme instrument of political power" (1975, p.66). By doing so, the government also perpetuated certain political views of education by mobilizing bias in favour of them and thus, in Schattschneider's terms, organizing these views, and only these views, into the ensuing debate: "Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out" (1975, p.69). The debate and responses that preceded and followed enactment of *Bill 34* (2002) reflected a sophisticated management of policy narratives by all involved stakeholders as they tried to affect who determines the substance of the curriculum, how public education ought to be delivered, who has access to public education and to how much and what kind, and how what happens in public schools is relevant to the lives and experiences of those being educated. For some stakeholders, the public consultation process was seen as "empty theatrics where interest groups rant predictably while decision-makers watch the clock, waiting for it all to be over so that they can go and make the decisions they

were going to make anyway" (Pal, 1997, p. 217). This policy process, directed and controlled by government and supplemented by representations from the public and interest groups in education, was used as means to legitimize policy ideas outlined in the original BC Liberal election platform in 2001.

Educational policy changes embodied in *Bill 34* (2002) occurred in BC in the context of criticism of the responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of public schools and in relation to a perceived need to prepare a flexible workforce required to enhance the competitiveness of the province within the global market. Policy directions embedded in *Bill 34* (2002) allocated value to policy narratives that took the view that the public school system in BC had failed to deliver what was required to meet the diversity of needs of students and communities. Some groups presented public education as being run in the interest of the providers (school-districts) rather than of students or the community. This perception of *provider capture* was the main justification for introducing choice and competition as a policy solution to make school districts more responsive to the preferences of the community of consumers they sought to serve locally and internationally. Armed with charges of rampant provider capture and arguments for greater parental participation and efficiency through autonomous and flexible local-level management of resources, the government modified the governance structure of public education and significantly altered its mandate. In terms of governance, the government has maintained control of the overall framing and output functions (policy, curriculum, assessment, audit) while decentralizing responsibility for implementation and management functions to school-districts. At the level of local organizations, profound policy changes were introduced and resulted in a form of regulation and control based on a combination of managerial expertise and productivity-based output registered through student performance, accountability contracts, and the value of each public school's output in the quasi-marketplace.

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