Accountability synopticism: How a think tank and the media developed a quasi-market for school choice in British Columbia

Michael Simmonds
University of British Columbia

P. Taylor Webb
University of British Columbia

This paper describes how a locally developed school ranking system affected student enrolment patterns in British Columbia over time. In developing an annual school 'report card' that was published in newspapers and online, the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute created a marketplace for school choice by devising an accountability scheme that highlighted and concealed visibility asymmetries between schools. Against the backdrop of a shifting political landscape, report cards helped focus the public's attention on school achievement scores that identified low-, mid-, and high-performing schools. A quasi-market for education emerged in the non-place of language and discourse when school ranking results became the basis by which parents made decisions about where to send their children to school. When student achievement data is used to identify British Columbia's 'best' and 'worst' performing secondary schools in this way, standardized assessment practices may be considered high-stakes.

Keywords: school rankings, discourse, accountability, Foucault, surveillance

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SEEING

The emergence of school rankings and their impact on shaping educational discourse spans at least three continents—North America, Europe, and Australia—and has been ongoing for at least three decades (Cowley & Easton, 2006; Dwyer, 2006; Goldstein & Spiegelhalter, 1996; Rowe, 2000; Tight, 2000; West & Pennell, 2000). Despite the geographic expanse over which ranking debates occur, they have at their core the expression of common concerns about the impact school rankings have on teacher

morale, teacher effectiveness, selective admission procedures, and the erosion of professionalism in an educational system that values standardized testing and market driven reforms (Ball, 1997; Gaskell & Vogel, 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2002; Masleck, 2000; Rist, 2000; Shaker, 2007; Webb, 2005, 2006, 2007). Fewer studies have looked at how school rankings operate discursively to exert disciplinary power.

In devising a school ranking rubric that established which key performance indicators (KPIs) were relevant and which ones were not, the Fraser Institute in Vancouver, British Columbia devised a statistical régime of truth that exerted a particular kind of disciplinary power that changed how schools were perceived by the public. It did so by developing an annual school 'report card' that highlighted and concealed differences between schools. Once published by the media, the 'report card' operated as a kind of organizing text that used surveillance as its primary technique to manufacture a quasi-market for school choice.

From the time secondary school ranking reports were first published in 1998, the public could 'see' how groups of students within schools performed on compulsory, standardized, government examinations. Published school rankings, therefore, provided parents with an instrument that distinguished high-ranking '*good*' schools from low-ranking '*bad*' ones. Over time, this manufactured distinction influenced the choices parents made about where to send their children to school. When surveillance is used to shape how the public perceives and judges schools in this way then power extends beyond state-imposed limits. It also makes the standardized assessment practices (from which school rankings are derived) '*high-stakes*' because they can be used by non-elected agents to create a marketplace for privatization and school choice where there had not been one previously. Moreover, in sorting schools according to how well students performed on compulsory standardized provincial examinations, the Fraser Institute developed an accounting tool that exacted an "extraordinary impact on the life world of educators [by] establishing what is normal and what is not [and] what is necessary and what is peripheral" in the operation and accountability of schools (Pignatelli, 2002, p. 172). In this regard, we agree that the Fraser Institute's published school rankings reconfigure what, Brighenti (2007), described as "the epistemology of seeing" (p. 323). According to Brighenti (2007) the epistemology of seeing defines fields of visibility on which human activity is perceived and judged—contextually. For many people it is through school rankings that they come to know, evaluate, and recognize what 'good' schools are according to a particular epistemology of seeing—an epistemology presented by the Fraser Institute through its school ranking discourse.

Within, we illustrate how disciplinary power operates on the fields of accountability and judgment through the Fraser Institute's manufactured school-ranking rubric by drawing principally on the theoretical testimony of Michel Foucault (1977, 1980, 1994), as well as the related work of other scholars. Next, we outline the methodological approach used in this study with a particular emphasis on critical discourse analysis (CDA). We note how semiotic ranking discourses have operated within the school ranking 'report card' with a particular emphasis on how the rubric changed over time. Here we

cite the specific example of gender- and exam-based KPIs to illustrate how statistical categories were created by the Fraser Institute to highlight and conceal differences between schools. Our focus here is *not* in critiquing the myriad of complex statistical equations the Fraser Institute developed to measure the overall quality of secondary schools as a statistician might; but rather, we examine how the language and categories of statistical rankings have been used by the Fraser Institute as a discursive strategy to tell particular kinds of stories about schools. Finally, we note that the 'report card' is evidence that private organizations (like the Fraser Institute)—when assembled with the media—can influence public educational policy in British Columbia and within the broader field of political power in at least two ways: (1) when language is used to mediate relationships of disciplinary power through published school report cards, and (2) when technologies of representation inform, shape, and manage the field of visibility through surveillance.

THE FRASER INSTITUTE AS A NEO-LIBERAL THINK TANK

Advocacy think tanks were born out of the policy institute movement of the mid-1970s and 1980s and marketed their ideas to target audiences (Abelson, 2002). They sought to accomplish specific political agendas and worked hard to see their socio-political visions realized.

> Founders of advocacy think tanks understood the importance of immersing themselves in the political arena. Ideas in hand, they began to think strategically about how to most effectively influence policy makers, the public, and the media. It also stressed the importance of marketing its ideas to the media (Abelson, 2002, p. 31).

It was during this era that the Fraser Institute was founded. Increasingly concerned by the federal government's economic policies, Patrick Boyle, a senior industrial executive, began considering how best to inform Canadians about the crucial role markets and deregulation could play in promoting economic development (Abelson, 2002). Boyle's goal was to counter the left-leaning politic of then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who once told the nation in his annual Christmas message, "the marketplace was not a reliable economic institution and would increasingly have to be replaced by government action in order to sustain the economic well-being of Canadians" (Abelson, 2002, p. 44). Boyle's vision was realized on October 21, 1974, when the federal government granted the Fraser Institute a charter. In so doing, the seeds for a new political alliance were planted and the crop yielded a potent hybrid of political action that pushed "education and social policy in conservative directions" (Apple, 2004, p. 174). Right-leaning alliances were formed between seemingly disparate groups united in their goal to shift "the educational debate onto their own terrain—the terrain of traditionalism, standardization, productivity, marketization and industrial needs" (Apple, 1998, p. 5). Apple (2004) identifies four distinct groups that have emerged as 21st century forces that he feels profoundly shape the educational policy landscape. They are: neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists (fundamentalists), and "experts for hire" (Apple, 2004, p. 176). Each group exerts

power on the educational field to varying degrees, but according to Apple (1998), two dominant groups have emerged in this period of modern conservative restoration: neoliberals and neoconservatives. While both groups promote educational reform agendas that are geared at improving the overall quality of schools, they approach the issue from different ideological perspectives.

Neoliberals are characterized as being "economic modernizers who want educational policy to be centered around (sic) the economy [and] around (sic) performance objectives" (Apple, 2004, p. 174). Economic modernizers "see schools themselves as in need of being transformed and made more competitive by placing them into marketplaces through voucher plans, tax credits, and other similar marketizing strategies" (Apple, 2004, p. 175). By comparison, neoconservatives are "deeply committed to establishing tighter mechanisms of control over knowledge…through national or state curricula and national or state-mandated…testing" (Apple, 2004, p. 175). Both groups promote socially conservative beliefs that "saturate our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the tout court, the only world" (Apple, 2004, p. 4).

Although neoconservatives and neoliberals make different assumptions about schools and how best to improve them, they are similar in that both ideologies promote their respective agendas through discursive techniques that intersect at the nexus of educational reform. The economic deregulation agenda of neoliberals (like the Fraser Institute) shapes every policy reform initiative proposed by that particular advocacy think tank (not only in education) but in health care, taxation, and immigration. Consider the Institute's published mission:

> Our vision is a free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets, and personal responsibility. Our mission is to measure, study, and communicate the impact of competitive markets and government interventions on the welfare of individuals (The Fraser Institute, 2010).

The social regulation agenda of neoconservatives (like British Columbia's Ministry of Education) shapes educational reform initiatives by prescribing curriculum and setting compulsory, standardized tests and examinations.

While the Ministry of Education's assessment policy has changed over time, it presently makes compulsory skills-based assessments at Grades 4 and 7 in literacy, numeracy, and reading (for elementary students) and standardized subject examinations in Grades 10-12 (for secondary students). Each school's achievement results are used by the Fraser Institute to construct an annual school ranking report card that identifies low-, mid-, and high-ranked schools. Five different iterations of the (secondary) *'School Report Card'* were developed during the period from 1998 to 2010 (Simmonds, 2012). They had in common the inclusion of KPIs that were derived from data collected by the British Columbia Ministry of Education on public and private schools alike.

This garnered a degree of legitimacy for published school report cards from the beginning because the data was considered to be reliable and valid. As well, school rankings derived from government-generated data sources effectively distanced the Fraser Institute from the schools it reported on in ways the Fraser Institute could not lay claim to if it had collected the data itself. How different schools are represented on the report card, therefore, is at the core of the school ranking phenomenon but these representations are made possible because of the state-sanctioned assessment regulations instituted by neoconservative forces. These separate but interdependent neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideological forces serve as the backdrop against which the school ranking phenomenon first emerged in British Columbia in 1998. Moreover, they continue to shape the school accountability landscape to this day.

FOUCAULT AND SCHOOL RANKINGS

Foucault's understanding that régimes of truth were manufactured in the social realm to promote political agendas—and that not every citizen was equally served in the process—is an insight that still resonates. He understood that power extended beyond state imposed limits when he said, "for all [its] omnipotence [the state's] apparatuses is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations…because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already-existing power relations" (Foucault, 1994, p. 77). Foucault noted that non-state agents can—and do—operate within the broader field of power to exert influence. This implies that power is not a matter of consent, and that power is exercised in relation to existing power dynamics and enmeshed networks of connectivity. It also implies that disciplinary power (power that disciplines) is everywhere and operates in relation to human fields of activity.

In writing about the 17th century Panopticon developed by Jeremy Bentham, Foucault noted that its essential architectural function allowed a few "overseers" to effectively monitor and scrutinize the behaviour of many prisoners (Foucault, 1980, p. 155). Foucault (1977) described the effect panoptic architecture had on human behaviour.

> Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. That this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

We argue that modern school rankings act like 17th century Panoptic prison towers because they operationalize power in similar ways. Both constructs serve as instruments of disciplinary power that have been manufactured to monitor and scrutinize human activity, albeit it different kinds of human activity. In its 21st century extension Haggerty and Ericson (2006) argued that *panoptic* power ought to be augmented by *synoptic* surveillance mechanisms. "Synopticism involves the ability of a large group of people to scrutinize the actions of a few individuals" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2006, p. 28). Synopticism, therefore, functions as an aggregate of panoptic power through

contemporary mass media because the detailed actions of groups are made public through newspapers, television, and online accounts in the new politic of visibility. Here, we would note that synopticism, as we are using it, is related to ideas of network governance (Ball, 2009) through the mediatization of education policy (Lingard and Rawolle, 2004); and synopticism is related to what Webb (2011) discussed as "governmentality constellations" and to what Deleuze (1990) discussed as "societies of control." However, Foucault's central argument that panopticism was an essential component of disciplinary power because it contributed significantly to its production as a mechanism (or instrument) of power, is something that we feel is operating within published school rankings—synoptically. For instance, consider what Haggerty and Ericson (2006) observed about synoptic data-gathering in the new politic of visibility:

> [s]urveillance technologies…operate through processes of disassembling and reassembling. People are broken down into a series of discrete informational flows, which are stabilized and captured according to a pre-established classification criteria. They are then transported to centralized locations to be reassembled and combined in ways that serve institutional agendas (Haggerty & Ericson, 2006, p. 4).

We argue that this understanding of surveillance theory is fundamentally no different from how data is gathered about students in British Columbia. The Ministry discloses individual student results to parents and school administrators (disassembling data) while the Fraser Institute repackages (reassembles) the collective experience of entire groups of students for publication in provincial newspapers and online, within the broader field of power.

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) OF SECONDARY SCHOOL RANKINGS

Given the fourteen-year monopoly the Fraser Institute has on ranking schools in British Columbia a central question becomes: *What is the Fraser Institute ranking of schools phenomenon a case of?*

> Case study research is particularly appropriate for situations in which the examination and understanding of context is important. Multiple sources of evidence are used and the data collections techniques include document and text analysis" (Darke & Shanks, 2002, p. 113).

Yin (2003) described the important need for case study researchers to use different sources of information as a way to ensure the investigation is valid. Multiple sources of evidence develop "*converging lines of inquiry,* a process of triangulation" (Yin, 2003, p. 98). "When you have really triangulated the data, the events or facts of the case study have been supported by more than a single source of evidence" (Yin, 2003, p. 99). Using both qualitative and quantitative evidence derived from primary, secondary, and tertiary source documents helps establish the validity of the findings presented here.

Table 1 lists the documents that were analyzed in this study. Each document may be considered a discursive event that has three dimensions: (1) it is a spoken or written text; (2) it is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of texts; and (3) it is a part of a broader socio-political context (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O'Garro Joseph, 2005). Taken collectively, these documents may be considered, what Smith (2001), called "organizing texts" (Smith, 2001, p. 174).

Table 1. Documents and Reports Analyzed in CDA (1998-2010)

Primary	Fraser Institute produced:
	Report Cards on British Columbia's Secondary Schools
	Annual Reports
	Fraser Forum magazine articles
	Media produced:
	Local, provincial, and national newspaper articles
	National magazine articles
	Local, regional, and provincial newsletters
Secondary	British Columbia Ministry of Education produced:
	School and District Reports
	Federation of Independent School Association (FISA) generated data
Teritary	Interviews
	Radio and print interviews
	Webcasts
	Online debates

At its core a CDA not only examines "the nature of social power and dominance" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254), but it also "focuses on how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers, et al., 2005). van Dijk (1993) argues that power and dominance can be institutionalized to enhance their effectiveness and can be sustained and reproduced by the media. This is an important insight because it highlights a principal argument we make through a CDA of the Fraser Institute's published ranking of secondary schools—that dominant discourses shape public opinion and "facilitate the formation of social representations" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 259). In other words, a CDA reveals how agents "enact, or otherwise 'exhibit' their power in discourse" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 259).

Published school rankings served as a primary source of data for this project and were relevant because they exemplified what Smith (2001) calls "the textual mediation of

people's (sic) activities through standardized and standardizing genres" (Smith, 2001, p. 173). *Textual mediation*, therefore, creates artefacts that stem from "the coordinating machinery of organization and institution" (Smith, 2001, p. 174). For the purpose of this study *textual mediation* principally takes the form of published (secondary) school report cards that utilize KPIs. We draw extensively on Fraser Institute produced school reports that describe in detail how ranking iterations were manufactured over time. As well, the analysis of other policy documents and annual reports published by the Fraser Institute established prevailing ideological stances this particular advocacy think tank promoted. Finally, in exploring how rankings changed over time, a CDA made possible an examination of how published school rankings overexerted their authority on the accountability field by promoting neo-liberal ideologies that privilege certain kinds of schools. Here we illustrate how subsequent alterations of KPIs—to specifically include gender and citizenship—reconfigured the field of accountability for co-educational schools by focusing on two questions: (1) how have the statistical components of the Fraser Institute's secondary school ranking in British Columbia changed over time? and, (2) how do manufactured school rankings shape the field of visibility through which secondary schools are viewed?

MANUFACTURING STATISTICAL REGIMES OF TRUTH

Initially, the Fraser Institute devised a secondary school report card because there was "no uniform system for evaluating the performance of schools in the province" of British Columbia (Cowley, et al., 1998, p. 4). Moreover, the Institute noted that no evaluative procedure was contemplated by the Ministry of Education to determine how well the school system worked. "The only way to find out whether our schools are doing their job satisfactorily", the authors of the first school report card noted was, "to measure results in an objective and quantifiable way" (Cowley, et al., 1998, p. 4). As well, the data-driven initiative of a school-ranking rubric resonated with the Fraser Institute's emphasis on measurability given its institutional motto, "If it matters, measure it" (Levant, 2005, p. A19).

In the thirteen years of data that inform this analysis, five key iterations of the Fraser Institute's published secondary school ranking report were identified. In his doctoral study Simmonds (2012) documented the changes associated with each successive school ranking iteration devised by the Fraser Institute to say something *'objective'* about schools from 1998-2010. He noted that five of the original KPIs used by the Fraser Institute to construct its inaugural school-ranking rubric in 1998 have remained constant throughout. They are: (1) average exam mark, (2) percentage of exams failed, (3) school vs. exam mark difference, (4) exams taken per student, and (5) graduation rate. These KPIs were uniformly applied to every secondary school included in the ranking. However, when data presented in one of the Fraser Institute's own studies deemed that "it was boys who were getting short-changed" in British Columbia's classrooms (Cowley & Easton, 1999, p. 3) a gender gap KPI was included in the second (and each successive) ranking iteration beginning in 2001. The introduction of gender-related-data by the Fraser Institute alluding to gender-biased-teaching in

secondary schools effectively expanded the field of visibility on which the school wide accountability game was played. Henceforward, boys and girls could be seen as separate populations where they were otherwise blended together as a single student population in the first iteration of the report card. This was strategically important because in pointing to discrepant educational experiences boys and girls seemed to be having in British Columbia's high schools, the Fraser Institute introduced a new visual asymmetry to the greater field of school wide accountability. This is an important development in the school ranking's evolution given that fields are, by definition, socially constructed areas of activity where struggles take place between agents in a supply and demand market. Brighenti (2007) reminds us of this point:

> [W]hen something becomes more visible or less visible than before, we should ask ourselves who is acting on and reacting to the properties of the field, and which specific relationships are being shaped. Shaping and managing visibility is huge work that human beings do tirelessly. As communication technologies enlarge the field of the socially visible, visibility becomes a supply and demand market. At any enlargement of the field, the question arises of what is worth being seen at which price—along with the normative question of what should and what should not be seen. These questions are never simply a technical matter: they are inherently practical and political (Brighenti, 2007, p. 327).

Whereas the first school ranking report reflected and highlighted what local critics noted were social class distinctions that existed between schools (Proctor, 1998; Steffenhagen, 2002; Steffenhagen 2003), the introduction of gender data into the school wide accountability issue reflected and highlighted gender-based distinctions the Fraser Institute wanted the general public to see was operating in secondary schools (Cowley 2003; Cowley & Easton, 1999). Expanding the field of visibility to include gender-related data in this way effectively marked—what was previously an unmarked—social category. This was an important strategy because as Brighenti (2007) noted, "[o]nce a way of marking and dividing people is set up…the resulting classification is a tool that can be applied to every case" (Brighenti, 2007, p. 334). Therefore, the effect of the Fraser Institute reconfiguring entire school populations into gender-constructed, sub-populations was to cast a wider statistical net that captured public-private school distinctions, which otherwise remained hidden from public view. In this way, the Fraser Institute effectively amplified its power of surveillance on the field of visibility by widening its scope of vision. Whereas the first ranking iteration made possible between-school comparisons, the second iteration made possible within-school (gender-based) comparisons that pitted boys against girls— and by implication, public schools against private schools because all of the single sex schools ranked by the Fraser Institute were de facto private/independent schools.
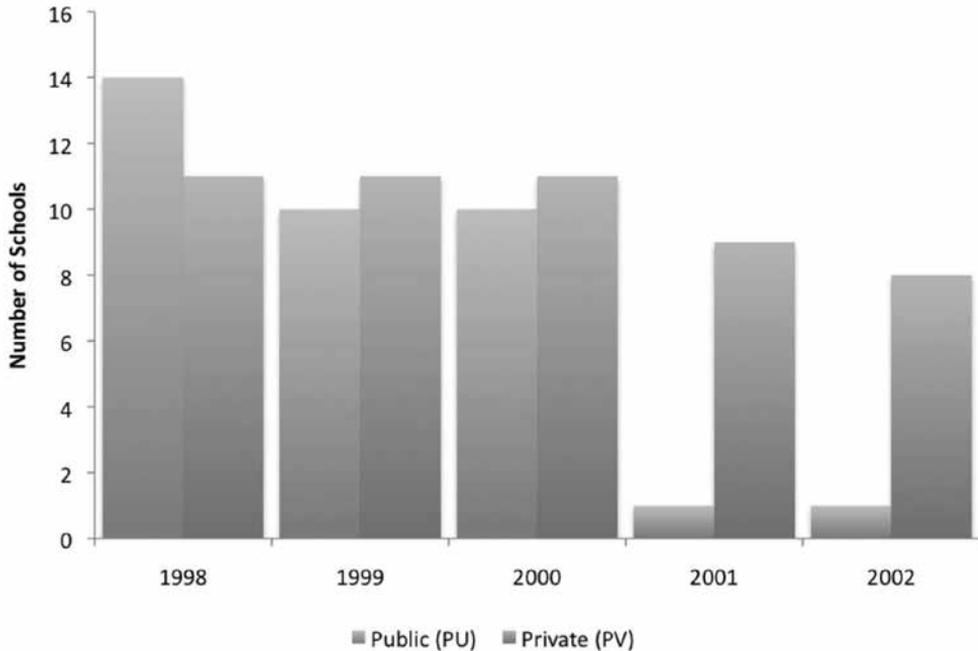
Figure 1. Distribution of public (PU) and private/independent (PV) schools for iterations #1 and #2 achieveing 'top' decile ranking scores.

Source: The Fraser Institute's Report Card on British Columbia's Secondary Schools (1998-2002).

What is important to note here is the relative percentage of public schools that occupied the *'top'* decile range in the Fraser Institute's ranking during the first iteration (1998-2000) compared to the relative percentage of public schools that occupied the same *'top'* decile range during the second iteration. The graph shows that before gender gap indices were included in the ranking rubric approximately 5% of *all* the public schools then ranked by the Fraser Institute achieved 'top' scores. After gender gap indices were introduced by the Fraser Institute in 2001, the percentage of 'top' ranked public schools occupying the same decile range dropped to 0.4%. This represents a 92% decline in the number of potential public schools that achieved scores within the 9.0-10.0 range. By way of comparison, before gender gap indices were included in the ranking rubric approximately 31% of all private/independent schools then ranked by the Fraser Institute achieved 'top' scores. After gender gap indices were introduced, the percentage of 'top' ranked private/independent schools occupying the same 'top' decile range dropped to approximately 21%. This decline represents a 34% decline in the number of 'top' ranked private/independent schools. So while public and private school systems were both adversely affected by the introduction of a new ranking rubric that included gender gap indices during iteration #2, public schools fared significantly worse as a result.

Another way the school ranking rubric in British Columbia exerted disciplinary power was how it statistically concealed an entire population of students. The international expansion of British Columbia's high school graduation program into Pacific-Rim countries was perceived by many to be a lucrative business venture by the Ministry of Education that would subsidize the high cost of public education (Kuehn, 2002, p. 1). And while schools, and school districts, may have benefited from the added revenue foreign English Second Language (ESL) students brought into the public school system, their overall impact on resulting school rankings did not. This problematic situation was resolved when the Fraser Institute established a third iteration of its school report card in 2003—one that would statistically negate the impact foreign ESL students had on a school's English 12 examination results. All that was required for the Fraser Institute was to recast its statistical net by "refining the student cohort" on which school rankings would be based (Cowley & Easton, 2003, p. 4). The rationale of incorporating this statistical refinement into the school ranking rubric was noted by the authors of the school 'report card':

> Administrators were also concerned that while they were being encouraged by the ministry to recruit international students as a means by which to earn revenue for the operation of their schools, these transient students' academic results were not necessarily reflective of the quality of teaching at the school. Administrators encouraged us to explore ways to rate the schools only on the basis of students normally resident in British Columbia. We believe that this is a reasonable refinement of our approach and, using revised data provided by the ministry, have excluded these students' results from the calculation (Cowley & Easton, 2003, p. 4).

Embedded within a model for schooling that seeks to increase revenue streams in this way is an alignment of public policy initiatives with the Fraser Institute's mission of privatizing public education through choice-based reforms. The offshore interest of foreign students choosing British Columbian schools can be seen through a business lens as a lucrative niche market to be developed by the government. However, an unintended consequence of attracting the same population of foreign ESL students to British Columbian secondary schools is that their collective school-wide presence adversely affected a school's overall ranking. The Fraser Institute effectively managed the situation by removing the statistical impact foreign students had on a school's ranking position thereby rendering an entire population of students invisible.

THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN CIRCULATING KNOWLEDGE DISCOURSES: SYNOPTICISM AND SCHOOL MARKETS

In an editorial that appeared on the front page of a provincial newspaper, the Fraser Institute's rationale for publishing the first school ranking 'report card' the previous spring was clearly articulated and positioned within a discursive strategy that privileged a parent's right to know. *The Province* newspaper made clear its position about where it stood in the ranking debate in an "exclusive report" when it said:

> By referring to the report card, which was prepared by the prestigious Vancouver-based Fraser Institute, parents will have information they need to decide if their school's doing a good job. And they can do something about it (Editorial, 1999, p. A1).

Establishing a partnership with a provincial newspaper was critical in order for the Fraser Institute to gain a stronghold on shaping the discourse on educational matters because it provided the partisan think tank with direct access to a significant population within British Columbia who were already loyal *Province* readers. The newspaper publication also provided its readership with an artefact of the ranking itself because the tables generated by the school ranking report could be saved. In a statement published in the Fraser Institute's 2000 Annual Report, then Board Chair, Mr. Ray Addington, further qualified the importance of establishing a relationship between the Fraser Institute and the media when he noted:

> The distribution of the report card has been a critical factor, since we want to ensure that every educator, parent, and child in the province has access to the results. Accordingly, in each province we have chosen to partner with a widely distributed newspaper or magazine. In British Columbia, we chose *The Province*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in BC, and a demographic appropriate to our goal (The Fraser Institute, 2002, p. 2).

In mobilizing the media in this way, the Fraser Institute effectively managed to direct parents' attention on what mattered most to the Fraser Institute—measuring specific aspects of school performance. That regional newspapers throughout the province re-published the rankings of their regional schools underscores the in-roads the Fraser Institute made into the public's collective consciousness about why the school ranking mattered. For by the spring of 2000, school rankings clearly mattered in the province of British Columbia. They mattered enough that Fraser Institute ranking data (originally published in a provincial newspaper some ten to fourteen days earlier) was re-published in local papers with comments from local and regional school authorities discussing alternatives to the media's coverage.

SCHOOL MARKETS AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE

In the September 2003 issue of the Fraser Forum entitled, *'Who owns your education?'*, Peter Cowley published an article called, *'An End to Catchment Area Feudalism'*. In it Cowley described a "recent amendment" to British Columbia's School Act (Cowley, 2003, p. 10). At its core, the amendment empowered parents to enrol their children in any public school they chose. Cowley supported the amendment wholeheartedly because it marked a significant step by the then Liberal government of British Columbia toward reforming public education in ways the Fraser Institute had always promoted and supported; that is to say, the amendment helped create a market-driven educational system that allowed parents to choose between public schools, in part, because the Fraser Institute provided a ranking mechanism which made between-school comparisons possible. Cowley's endorsement of the School Act amendment was obvious:

School boards may no longer enact policies that require students to enroll (sic) in a specific school based solely on their place of residence. Neither may the boards vest in their superintendents the authority to direct student placement based on their judgment of program suitability…This amendment assures that parents, not school boards or superintendents, decide which school is best for their children…British Columbia joins only two other provinces, Quebec and Alberta, in providing statutory support for parental choice within the public school system (Cowley, 2003, p. 10).

This statement is relevant because it shifts the school-wide accountability framework away from discursive practices anchored in a *parent's right to know* toward discursive practices that were more concretely anchored in a *parent's right to choose* and that these discursive practices corresponded to greater shifts in the field of political power. Evidence for the public's perception that private school education was preferable to public school education can be found in an article that appeared in the December issue of *The Vancouver Sun* (December 15, 2004). It was noted that "despite a steady decline in the school-aged population, independent school enrolments climbed by 8.8% during the past five years while public school numbers have fallen by 3.4%" (Steffenhagen, 2004, p. B1). This claim is supported by data obtained from the Ministry of Education of British Columbia Annual Reports (1998-2003) as published on the Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA) website.

Figure 2 depicts the annual percentage growth in private/independent school student enrolment data from 1997-2010. It shows positive growth in student populations attending private/independent schools in every year except in 2000/01 where there was no change. It also shows that since 1997 private/independent school student enrolment within British Columbia has increased by 24.6 percentage points—an average growth rate of +1.76%.

By comparison, Figure 3 depicts the annual percentage growth in public school student enrolment during the same period. It shows positive growth in student populations attending public schools for 1996/97 and 1997/98, but an overall negative growth in student enrolment of -6.1% thereafter. The average student population growth rate for the same sample of schools was -0.43% between 1997 and 2010. These student enrolment trends occur—not only in relation to British Columbia's documented average population growth of +1.07% for the same time period (BC Stats, 2013)—but in relation to an overall 10.8% average increase in the percentage of persons living in British Columbia who earned $100,000 and more from 2001-2010 (Statistics Canada, 2013).
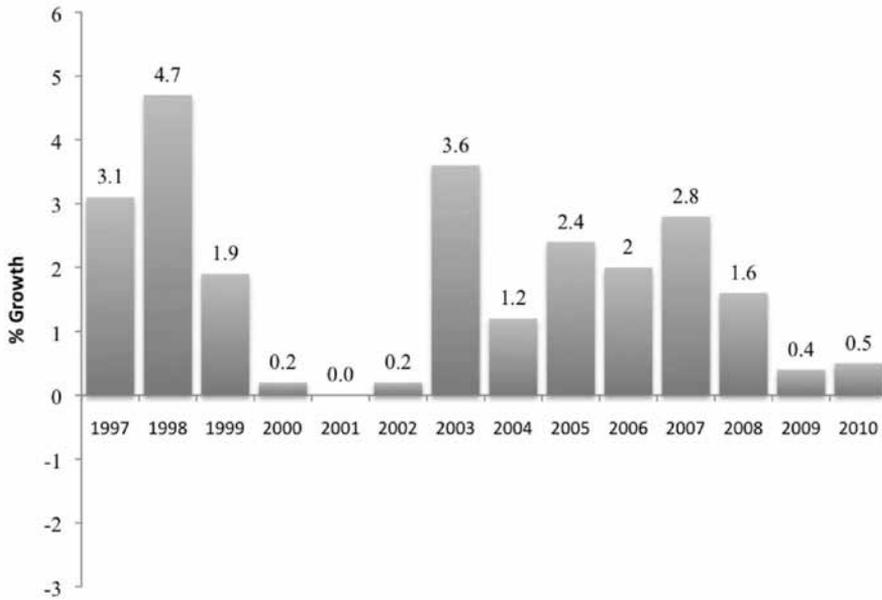
Figure 2: Percentage annual growth in student enrolment for private/independent schools (1997-2010)

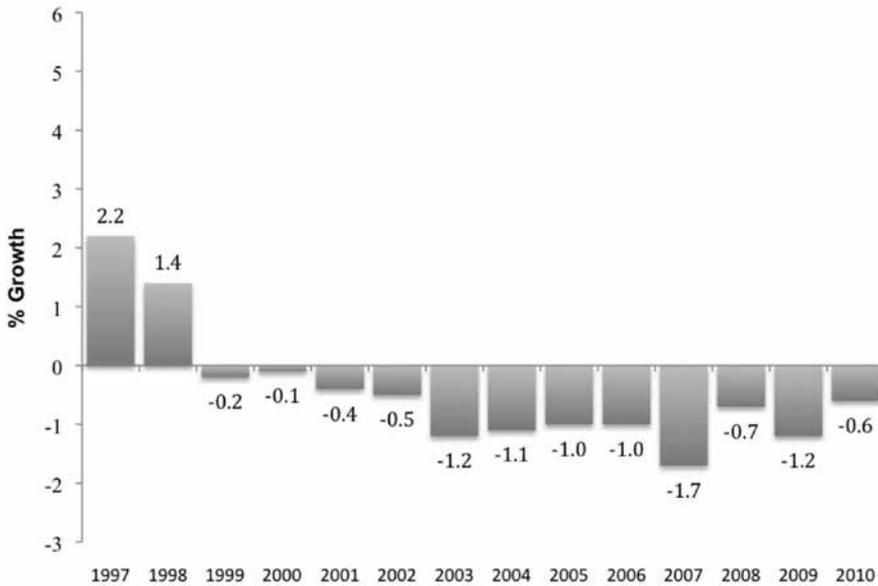Source: (The Federation of Independent Schools, 2010).

Figure 3: Percentage annual growth in student enrolment for public schools (1997-2010)

Source: (The Federation of Independent Schools, 2010).

Moreover, student enrolment patterns in private/independent and public schools have grown and decreased respectively at average greater rates since the School Act was amended in 2003 to allow for cross-boundary enrolment. These trends suggest that a correlation link exists between the manufacturing and publication of league tables since 1998 and student enrolment patterns. For one school principal the impact school choice had on school enrolment patterns was clear when he said:

> Changes to Section 74 of the School Act [in 2003] now permit students to enrol in the school of their choice. As families exercise choice, what were once firm boundaries are now considerably blurred. As a result of student choice and declining enrolment, we now have under-enrolment in some elementary schools and capacity pressures in others (McMartin, 2010, p. A4).

In the next section we revisit the theoretical commitments of the study and discuss them in relation to the local context.

DISCIPLINARY POWER IS EXERCISED THROUGH PUBLISHED SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

Statistical régimes of truth exercise disciplinary power on the field of accountability because they have been manufactured in ways that highlight, amplify, and hide visibility asymmetries between schools. When the Fraser Institute began to treat single sex schools differently from co-educational schools, its report card operationalized power in ways that reconfigured the field of politics for co-educational schools. This finding highlights an inherent limitation embedded within the Fraser Institute's school ranking rubric—namely that different kinds of schools are treated in different kinds of ways by an imposed statistical régime of truth that is promoted as being objective. In this case the logic of the ranking is bifurcated by gender. Co-educational schools are *'rewarded'* when boys and girls achieve similar school- and exam-based results, but they are *'penalized'* if this statistical expectation is not achieved. Single sex schools could not be *'rewarded'* or *'penalized'* in the same way because gender-related KPIs were not applicable to those kinds of schools. Treating single sex and co-educational schools differently in this way had a profound effect on the distribution of *'top'* ranked public and private schools in British Columbia.

This finding has received very little attention in public debates or in the mainstream press, but it is an important one because it illustrates how school rankings fragment the field of education on which schools are now 'seen' as competing. This fragmentation disrupts (what could have been previously been called) a level playing field because (for the first time) gender differences begin to account for some of the statistical variation that exists between schools. Without exception, every single sex school in British Columbia is a de facto private school. With the introduction of gender gap achievement indices into the school ranking rubric came with it a perception that private schools were overall 'better' than their public school counterparts because there were more of them occupying 'top' ranked spots in the Fraser Institute's school report card.

The report card was also designed to conceal the impact some groups of students had on a school's overall ranking. When ranking results began to slip for some public British Columbian schools because they had recruited fee-paying, foreign ESL students into their populations, the Fraser Institute recast its statistical net by "refining the student cohort" on which school rankings themselves were based (Cowley & Easton, 2003, p. 4). The Fraser Institute's school report card policy of including the compulsory English 12 provincial examination results of *all Grade 12* students changed to accommodate a foreign student recruitment policy initiated by the Ministry. Including KPIs that *statistically* account for the impact of gender gap differences and government-initiated foreign student recruitment policies while (at the same time) choosing *not* to include KPIs that statistically account for *contextual* influences in students like, socioeconomic disparities, is problematic. In casting, and recasting, the school ranking rubric that makes visible (and conceals) entire groups of students within secondary schools, the Fraser Institute focuses the public's gaze on what *it* wants the public to see. In so doing, the Fraser Institute exercises a kind of disciplinary power that may be viewed by some as being discretionary and discriminatory at its core.

AGENTS DEPLOY LANGUAGE IN WAYS THAT MEDIATE AND REPOSITION RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER

The Fraser Institute depicted market-driven reform initiatives as the best way to improve schools (The Fraser Institute, 2010). Initially, the school-wide accountability framework was positioned within a broader *knowledge discourse* that not only provided information to consumers of education, but it was devised to make uniform comparisons between public and private high schools. With one broad-sweeping accountability stroke, published secondary school report cards rendered judgment on public and private schools alike. In creating a report whereby schools were pitted against schools under the guise of a *parent's right to know*, neighbourhood, district, regional, and socio-economic boundaries were obliterated in a ranking that focused on provincial exam results.

Over time, the Fraser Institute shifted the locus of attention away from recurring KPI debates toward school improvement debates. The public's eye was focused on reading newspaper accounts of schools that had significantly improved their overall ranking. Coded discourses of institutional competence played an important role in changing the contours of the educational landscape when the School Act was amended in 2003 (Simmonds, 2012). With the amendment came the possibility that—for the first time in British Columbia—students could apply for admission to public schools beyond the limits imposed by state-designated catchment areas called school districts. The state-sanctioned deregulation of school catchment areas in this way changed school enrolment patterns. This finding is supported by historical data provided by the Ministry of Education and the Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA), as well as from anecdotal evidence provided by principals who recognize, acknowledge, and attribute declining student enrolment patterns in their low-ranked schools to the impact the Fraser Institute ranking has on parental choice-making (McMartin, 2010). At issue

was the perception that higher-ranked schools are overall 'better' schools and parents want their children attending them. School rankings, however, do not account for conditions that exist for students outside the classroom that positively (and negatively) impact individual student performance and achievement patterns. This essential point has been raised repeatedly by a chorus of agents that are personally invested in developing a quality educational experience for different kinds of students attending different kinds of schools at every grade. But with the alignment of state-sanctioned educational policy reforms that paralleled the Fraser Institute's long-standing position that parental choice and market-based reform initiatives work best to improve schools, the perceived relevance of published school rankings to parents increased. Although many British Columbian parents looked to the report to see how their neighbourhood school compared to others when it was first published in the spring of 1998, by 2003 they were in a position to act on whatever conclusions they gleaned from the Fraser Institute's school report card.

CONCLUSION

We see in the Fraser Institute's strategy to avail itself of Ministry-acquired data the exercise of disciplinary power. We have shown that a ranking instrument that is promoted by the Fraser Institute as being objective does not serve all schools in the same way. At issue is the collision of two competing epistemic approaches about how best to determine an overall 'good' school: one anchored in a particular kind of instrumental rationality, whereby schools (and the students attending them) are reduced to a set of measurable KPIs; the other anchored in a belief that schools are complex organizations that provide opportunities that serve the diverse educational needs of all students—an understanding that transcends measurement on KPIs. What's at stake is the erosion of school cultures that value and serve different kinds of students in different kinds of ways. The success of the Fraser Institute to promote the former approach cannot be overstated. The only place where over 200 different kinds of public and private/ independent secondary schools could possibly co-exist at the same time on the broader field of judgment is in the *'non-place'* of language and discourse. In devising a school-ranking rubric that made possible the annual comparison of schools on the pages of provincial newspapers, the Fraser Institute effectively created a marketplace for school choice where there had not been one previously. This achievement occurred gradually over time and was made possible (in part) because the Fraser Institute used language in strategic and deliberate ways to mediate relationships of power. The Fraser Institute understood that if the general public could not interpret published school rankings from the beginning then the general public could not make judgments about schools from the beginning. By assigning scores to schools the Fraser Institute provided readers not only with an index, but as importantly with a method by which school comparisons could be easily made. Reducing complex social institutions to a single measure in this way had a tremendous impact on how parents not only viewed public and private schools, but how they talked about them.

We have characterized the kinds of discourses generated by the first ranking iteration as *knowledge discourses*—parents were learning about the Fraser Institute's school report card, and educators were learning how their professional practice was being impacted as a result. Knowledge discourses were political at their core because they served to manufacture a crisis about the state of secondary schools in British Columbia. Embedded within each school ranking score was a narrative that told the story of a school's relative success or failure according to KPIs imposed on the general public by the Fraser Institute. Through media depictions that consistently portrayed private/independent schools as being 'top' ranked schools, a reality effect was created in the public's mind over time that private/independent schools were better than their public school counterparts. This impression was formed against a backdrop of discord from parents, teachers, and school administrators that objected to the way public schools were characterized and stood in marked contrast to how the Fraser Institute focused the public's attention on what mattered to the Fraser Institute—the important role school choice initiatives could play in improving British Columbia's high schools. It also focused the public's gaze on low-ranked schools, most of which were public schools. The synoptic surveillance mechanisms made possible by differentiated KPIs embedded within school ranking rubrics made visible and concealed entire populations of students. When the kinds of stories that are told about schools become narrated through school ranking reports they negate capital disparities that exist between schools and the populations they serve. At stake in storytelling of this kind is the emancipatory belief that different kinds of schools operate to serve the diverse educational needs of secondary students in different kinds of ways.

REFERENCES

Abelson, D. E. (2002). *Do think tanks matter?* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Apple, M. (1998). How conservative restoration is justified: leadership and subordination in educational policy. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 1*(1), 4-17.

Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (Third ed.). New York and London: Routledge Falmer.

BC Stats. (2013). Population estimates. In *BCStats*. Retrieved on 4th March 2013 from http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Demography/PopulationEstimates.aspx

Ball, S. J. (1997). Good school/bad school: paradox and fabrication. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *18*(3), 317-336.

Ball, S. J. (2009). Privatizing education, privatizing education policy, privatizing educational research: Network governance and the "competition state". *Journal of Education Policy, 24*(1), 83-89.

Brighenti, A. (2007). Visibility - a category for the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology, 55*(3), 323-342.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1996). *Ministry of Education School Act - Revised statutes of British Columbia.* Retrieved on 20th July 2010 from

http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/legislation/schoollaw/revisedstatutescontents.pdf

Cowley, P., Easton, S., & Walker, M. (1998). *A secondary schools report card for British Columbia*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Cowley, P., & Easton, S. T. (1999). *Boys, girls, and grades academic gender balance in British Columbia's secondary schools*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Cowley, P., & Easton, S. T. (2000). *Third annual report card on British Columbia's secondary schools*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Cowley, P., & Easton, S. (2001). *report card on British Columbia's secondary schools: 2001 edition*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Cowley, P., & Easton, S. (2002). *Report card on British Columbia's secondary schools: 2002 edition*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Cowley, P. (2003). Who owns your education? An end to catchment area feudalism? *Fraser Forum*, 10-11.

Cowley, P., & Easton, S. T. (2006). *Report card on secondary schools in British Columbia and Yukon: 2006 Edition*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

Darke, P., & Shanks, G. (2002). Case study research. In P. Whitten & R. Salmond (Eds.), *Research methods for students, academics, and professionals* (2nd ed., Vol. 20, pp. 111-123). Wagga Wagga: Quick Print.

Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October, 59*, 3-7.

Dwyer, M. (2006). Our 16th annual rankings. *Maclean's, 119*(45), 74-79.

Editorial. (1999, March 24). High schools under the microscope: How B.C.'s high schools stack up. An exclusive report every parent will want to read. *The Province,* p. A1.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. In C. Gordon (Ed.). Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd.

Foucault, M. (1994). *Power* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: The New Press.

The Fraser Institute. (2010). Retrieved on 20th July 2010 from http://www.fraserinstitute. org/about-us/who-we-are/mission.aspx

Gaskell, J., & Vogel, D. (2000). Fraser Institute ranking fails as a measure of school quality. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. Retrieved on 10th January 2009 from http://www.policyalternatives.ca/editorials/2000/03/ editorial756/?pa=A5671525

Goldstein, H., & Spiegelhalter, D. J. (1996). League tables and their limitations: Statistical issues in comparisons of institutional performance. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A (Statistics in Society), 159*(3), 385-443.

Haggerty, K. D., & Ericson, R. V. (Eds.). (2006). *The new politics of surveillance and visibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc.

Kuehn, L. (2002, Nov./Dec.). B.C. Liberals push boards to market education. *Teacher: Newsmagazine of the BCTF, 15*.

Levant, E. (2005, October 24). 'If it matters, measure it': Beautiful minds series. *National Post,* p. A19.

Lingard, B., & Rawolle, S. (2004). Mediatizing educational policy: The journalistic field, science policy, and cross-field effects. *Journal of Education Policy, 19*(3), 361-380.

Lucey, H., & Reay, D. (2002). A market in waste: Psychic and structural dimensions of school-choice policy in the UK and children's narratives on 'demonized' schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 23*(3), 253-266.

Masleck, R. (2000, March 13). Rankings useful but miss the whole picture: School superintendent. *Trail Times,* p. 1.

McMartin, P. (2010, November 9). A public school system going private; A choice of venue leads to decreasing enrolment east of Main Street. *Vancouver Sun*, p. A.4. Retrieved on 12th March 2013 from: http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=21865 20941&sid=17&Fmt=3&clientId=6993&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Pignatelli, F. (2002). Mapping the terrain of a Foucauldian ethics: A response to the surveillance of schooling. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 21*, 157-180.

Proctor, J. (1998, March 8). Figures don't account for ESL, poverty. *The Province,* p. A22.

Rist, R. C. (2000). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review, 70*(3), 257-265.

Rogers, R., Malancharuvil-Berkes, E., Mosley, M., Hui, D., & O'Garro Joseph, G. (2005). Critical discourse analysis in education: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 75*(3), 365-416.

Rowe, K. J. (2000). Assessment, league tables, and school effectiveness: Consider the issues and 'Let's get real'! *Journal of Educational Enquiry, 1*(1), 73-98.

Shaker, P. (2007, April 16). Looking past the hype of the quick and easy way. The Vancouver Sun, p. A.11.Retrieved on 12th March 2013 from: http://proquest.umi. com/pqdweb?index=89&did=1256761491&SrchMode=3&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst =PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1179371881&clientId=6 993&aid=1

Simmonds, M. (2012). *Interpreting the Fraser Institute ranking of secondary schools in British Columbia: A critical discourse analysis of how the mechanics of symbolic capital mobilization shapes, manages, and amplifies visibility asymmetries between schools and school systems.* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2012). Retrieved on 12th March 2013 from https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/40926

Smith, D. (2001). Texts and the ontology of organizations and institutions. *Culture and Organization, 7*(2), 159-198.

Statistics Canada. (2013). Neighbourhood income and demographics, summary table (Percentage Change (year-to-year)). Retrieved on 12th March 2013 from http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a47

Steffenhagen, J. (2002, March 4). Report card on schools 'predictable': the Fraser Institute's annual assessment of B.C. schools places rich at top, poor at the bottom, say critics. *The Vancouver Sun,* p. B3.

Steffenhagen, J. (2003, June 2). East pupils meet west schools: more students are making the trip across town to study. *The Vancouver Sun,* p. B1.

Steffenhagen, J. (2004, December 15). Private schools gaining students. *The Vancouver Sun,* p. B1.

The Federation of Independent Schools. (2010). Resources: Statistics. Retrieved on 24th August 2012 from http://www.fisabc.ca/Resource-Library/

The Fraser Institute. (2010). *Mission*. Retrieved on 20th July 2010 from http://www.fraserinstitute.org/about-us/who-we-are/mission.aspx

The Fraser Institute (2000). *Annual Report*. Retrieved on 3rd December 2007 from http://www.fraserinstitute.org/uploadedFiles/fraser-ca/Content/About_Us/Who_We_Are/2000-annual-report.pdf

Tight, M. (2000). Do league tables contribute to the development of a quality culture? Football and higher education compared. *Higher Education Quarterly, 54*(1), 22-42.

van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society, 4*(2), 249-293.

Webb, P. T. (2005). The anatomy of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy, 20*(2), 189-208.

Webb, P. T. (2006). The choreography of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy, 21*(2), 201-214.

Webb, P. T. (2007). Accounting for teacher knowledge: Reterritorializations as epistemic suicide. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 28*(2), 279-295.

Webb, P. T. (2011). The evolution of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy, 26*(6), 735-756.

West, A., & Pennell, H. (2000). Publishing school examination results in England: Incentives and consequences. *Educational Studies, 26*(4), 423-436.

Yin, R. (2003). *Case study research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE publications.

Michael Simmonds has over 25 years of professional experience to draw from as an teacher and educational leader. He has worked in both the K-12 and post-secondary educational systems. Michael taught middle and secondary school science and math before becoming the Head of an IB-MYP school. He completed his doctoral studies in Educational Policy and Leadership at UBC in February 2012. Dr. Simmonds is currently the Head of Upper School at an all-girls school in Toronto, Canada. mjs106@telus.net

P. Taylor Webb is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. His work examines and critiques how education policy and schooling rationalize and produce 'governable subjects' within liberal and neo-liberal normative architectures. His book *Teacher Assemblage* was awarded the 'Outstanding Book Award' of the Qualitative Research SIG (AERA) in 2010. taylor.webb@ubc.ca