

Ending the Reign of the Fraser Institute's School Rankings

Helen Raptis

University of Victoria

Abstract

The Fraser Institute *Report Card* of school rankings has won the hearts of parents and the press. For over a decade, the rankings have been particularly burdensome for low-ranking (usually low socio-economic status, high-poverty) schools when parents of high-achieving children move them to higher-ranking schools. In February 2010, after defending parents' rights to access the rankings, Victoria's *Times-Colonist* newspaper decided not to publish them. Using critical discourse analysis, this article explores the rankings' long media reign and the *Times-Colonist's* abrupt decision to stop publishing them. Discourse about the rankings is shaped by multiple factors including the relationship between the press and educators, as well as the nature of societal discourse—in particular, how powerful institutions create what Foucault calls “regimes of truth.”

Résumé

Le classement des écoles de l'institut Fraser a gagné le cœur des parents et de la presse. Depuis plus d'une décennie ces classements ont été particulièrement pénalisant pour les écoles mal classées (généralement faible SSE et haute pauvreté) quand les parents d'enfants avec une forte réussite scolaire décident de les changer d'école pour une mieux classée. En Février 2010, après avoir défendu les droits des parents d'avoir accès au classement, un des journaux de Victoria, le *Times-Colonist*, a décidé de ne plus les publier. En utilisant une analyse critique du discours cet article explore le long règne de ces classements dans les médias et la décision soudaine du *Times-Colonist* de cesser leur publication. Le discours sur les classements est déterminé par de multiples facteurs comme la relation entre la presse et les éducateurs ainsi que la nature du discours sociétal, en particulier comment les institutions puissantes créent ce que Foucault appelle les «régimes de vérité.»

Ending the Reign of the Fraser Institute's School Rankings

In 1998, the Fraser Institute published its first *Report Card* of high school rankings in British Columbia. Grounded in provincial accountability initiatives, the rankings have negatively affected low-ranking (usually low-SES, high-poverty) schools when parents of high-achieving children move them to higher-ranking schools¹ (cf. “Chinese-Speaking Parents,” 2010). In spite of such consequences, by 2009, the Institute was publishing rankings for elementary and high schools in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Washington; secondary schools in Quebec; and middle schools in Washington. In 2011, the Institute also began ranking secondary schools in the Yukon. Interestingly, in February 2010, after 12 years of defending parents’ rights to access the rankings, Victoria’s *Times-Colonist* newspaper (a member of the Postmedia Network, formerly Canwest) decided not to publish them. What factors have permitted the rankings’ long reign in the Canadian media? Equally important, why did the *Times-Colonist* abruptly change its policy and stop publishing the rankings in 2010? Using critical discourse analysis, this paper explores the multiple factors contributing to the Fraser Institute’s long media reign and the *Times-Colonist*’s 2010 decision not to publish the rankings.

Background

Ranking and publishing school performance have become commonplace in recent years as western nations have witnessed growing public concern for accountability in all social service sectors. During the past few decades, education systems around the world have experienced unprecedented reform initiatives (Calderhead, 2002; Holt, 2001; Massell, 1998). Whereas school choice has been touted as the mechanism necessary to free public schools from bureaucratic constraints that allegedly stifle innovation (Byfield, 2002; Chubb & Moe, 1990), testing has served as the “vehicle of choice” for promoting accountability (Earl & Torrance, 2000, p. 114; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006; Volante, 2004). Provincial, national, and international test scores provide data that fuel parental choice as well as curricular reform (Plomp & Loxley, 1994).

Established in 1974, the Fraser Institute is a “research and educational institution” with offices in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. The Institute’s vision entails: “a free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets, and personal responsibility.” Its mission “is to measure, study, and communicate the impact of competitive markets and government interventions on the welfare of individuals” (Fraser Institute, *Mission*, n.d.). Education, taxation, government spending, health care, and trade are but some of the social domains it researches

The first Fraser Institute *School Report Card* ranking secondary schools in British Columbia appeared in 1998.² According to the Institute’s website, their report cards

¹ Not only do low-ranking schools lose valuable human resources when high-achieving children transfer schools, but they lose the financial resources that come along with each individual child.

² The Institute began publishing rankings for high schools in Alberta in 1999, Quebec in 2000, and Ontario in 2007. Elementary school rankings were made public in Alberta in 2002, in British Columbia in 2002, and in Ontario in 2003. In 2011, rankings were also calculated for Yukon secondary schools.

offer detailed tables showing how well schools performed in academics over a number of years. By combining a variety of relevant, objective indicators of school performance into one easily accessible public web site, the school report cards allow teachers, parents, school administrators, students, and taxpayers to analyze and compare the academic performance of individual schools in an attempt to answer the question, “How are our schools doing?” (Fraser Institute, *Report Card - Overview*, n.d.)

The Institute has supplemented its report cards of rankings with in-house research studies examining such questions as what factors attract parents to private schools in Ontario (Van Pelt, 2007) and what factors characterize low-income schools that exhibit high standards (Hepburn with Douris, 2008).

Although the Fraser Institute insists that its rankings are “based on academic achievement,” a school’s rank does not only reflect its test scores. This is because the Fraser Institute generates overall ratings on a scale of one to ten by combining and weighting multiple indicators, including some that are unrelated to academic achievement. Indicators used to compile elementary ranks include: large-scale, provincially-administered test scores (such as Foundations Skills Assessments administered in British Columbia at Grades 4 and 7); the difference between male and female students’ scores on assessments such as literacy and numeracy; the percentage of outcomes on such tests that were deemed to fall below provincially acceptable norms; and the percentage of tests that were not written by those who were eligible to write or who did not respond “meaningfully” (Cowley, Easton, & Thomas, 2011, p. 6). At the secondary level, an overall rank out of ten is comprised of a school’s average mark in Grade 10-12 courses which include a mandatory provincial exam, the percentage of Grade 10-12 mandatory provincial exams that were failed, the average difference between exam and course marks, the average test score difference between male and female students on exam scores for courses such as English 10 and Mathematics 10, graduation rates, and delayed yearly advancement rates (cf. Cowley, Easton & Thomas, 2011, p. 5). To address criticisms that the rankings do not reflect the impacts of socio-economic status (cf. “Institutes at Odds,” 2007, p. C1), special needs learners, or students for whom English is a second language, the Institute reports these statistics for each school – although these do not constitute part of a school’s overall rating.³

Method

This study used critical discourse analysis to examine the discourse that has been generated pertaining to the Fraser Institute school rankings. Data were initially collected by entering the search terms “Fraser Institute” and “School Rankings” into various search engines, the first being World Cat. This generated several reports published by the Fraser Institute that are available on its website. The second database, Canadian Newsstand (Proquest) generated 806 media articles. After subtracting media coverage not dealing

³ Critics have found fault with the Fraser Institute’s reporting of socio-economic status because it relies solely on household income and ignores the impact of other variables, such as the number of single-parent families. See, for example, Dunsmuir, D., & Krider, R.E. (Spring, 2010), “Assessing the Socioeconomic Correction in the Fraser Institute Report Cards,” *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 56(1), 95-98.

with schooling, 732 remained in the corpus for analysis. A search of the ERIC (EbscoHost) database generated one peer-reviewed article (Dunsmuir & Krider, 2010) and one book review (Rogers & Kilinger, 2005). An additional search of “Google scholar” yielded two non-peer reviewed articles (Byfield, 2002; Waber, 2006), one magazine article (Christopher, 2004), and one non-peer reviewed special report (Winne, Nesbit, & Gress, 2006), generating a total of 738 “texts” for analysis.

To determine the factors that have secured the Fraser Institute school rankings’ longevity in Canadian media, each document was read carefully using a critical discourse approach. Critical discourse analysis is an approach to inquiry that posits not only that language is a kind of social practice, but that it is also the handmaiden of social and political power. Critical discourse researchers seek to determine hegemonic enactment and/or reproduction by examining textual devices, textual production, and the social conditions under which the text(s) have been produced (Fairclough, 2001). Following Fairclough’s three-tiered classification, I first examined the word-level discourse about the Fraser Institute rankings to determine what messages were being communicated. Next, I studied the ways in which the texts were produced, paying specific attention to whose voices had spoken. Finally, I examined the prevailing social thought and policies that set the social context in which the rankings have taken root. Data analysis was also shaped by philosopher Michel Foucault’s theoretical framework on language and power. Foucault suggests that each society accepts—and permits to circulate as true—certain discourses, which he refers to as “regimes of truth.” Consciously or not, each society sanctions the mechanisms by which people distinguish true claims from false claims, as well as who can make them (Foucault, 1980). Discourse achieves this level of social control by what it includes, excludes, and validates as acceptable knowledge (Strega, 2005).

Foucault (1982) also notes that power does not depend on consent, but instead is imposed on people, thereby subjugating them to those who wield control. This suggests that rather than mirroring reality, language “creates” reality through prevailing social discourses (Strega, 2005). Power is established and maintained “through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church,” whose discourses derive specific ideological messages that soon circulate as mundane “truths” throughout the everyday world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 284).

Critical discourse analysis offers a powerful lens through which to examine the social texts pertaining to the Fraser Institute’s school rankings. The following section of this paper describes the dominant discursive elements that appeared throughout the data and posits how these discourses have served to construct and sustain the rankings’ long media reign.

Analyses

This study examined 738 texts discussing the Fraser Institute’s school rankings. The majority of texts were produced by the media, whereas fewer than 10% were published independently or in journals or magazines. Support for the rankings was expressed mainly by the Fraser Institute, newspaper editors, and parents. What is striking about these discourses is the extent to which they rested on assertions unsupported by evidence, such as the controversial notion that greater parental choice will *de facto* improve student achievement (Byfield, 2002). Such claims were often paired with

rhetoric about upholding democracy and individual freedoms. For example, one Ontario parent described the report as “a democratic breeze blowing through what has been a very anti-democratic [school] system” (“‘First Step’,” 2001, p. A8). Personal opinion also characterized the rhetoric more often than not. Despite evidence to the contrary, a political candidate asserted that “the report cards help identify students who are failing and need extra help,” adding that although his view deviated from his own party’s anti-ranking stance, “As a person, I have my beliefs” (“Political Parties Divided,” 2009, p. A9).

Articles favoring the rankings were largely penned by the Fraser Institute itself. In a 2007 editorial, Peter Cowley, one of the *Report Card*’s authors, stated that the reports were used by “thousands of parents and educators” in British Columbia because “they provide accurate, objective, understandable information about the performance of individual schools,” permitting parents to make comparisons with nearby schools that have “more effective programs” (“Ranking the Schools,” 2007, p. A11). He further asserted that the report cards served as an “audit” on how each school “is doing,” the overall goal being to better the province’s education system through “lasting improvement.” Although Cowley took ownership for “[g]etting the truth out into the open,” the “truth” that he professed remained murky. Cowley steered clear of precisely defining “performance” and “improvement.” Instead, he repeatedly asserted that the rankings were “based on academic performance” data as measured by large-scale, provincial assessments (“Parents Need a Report Card,” 2005, A20; “Fraser Institute Releases,” 2010).

Cowley’s assertion is only partially accurate, given that 50% or less of a school’s rating is derived directly from test scores. In British Columbia, for example, provincial tests account for merely 45% of an elementary school’s overall rank; high school tests account for a scant 25% (Cowley, Easton, & Thomas, 2011). The remainder of a school’s rank is made up of other indicators, the majority of which do not have a research base from which to merit their association with achievement. One such indicator includes the difference between the number of students eligible to write the test and those who did, despite there being no research evidence to substantiate student absence as a gauge of academic achievement. Indeed, aside from test scores, none of the Institute’s indicators are accurate proxies for academic achievement. Another case in point is graduation rate. Research indicates that student drop-out is dependent on many factors, not just student ability (Price Waterhouse, 1990). Therefore, it is simply inaccurate to consider it an indicator of academic achievement.

Nevertheless, the Canadian media have given little coverage to the Institute’s unorthodox methodology that combines multiple indicators into one overall rating. That test scores actually play a significantly diminished role in a school’s overall ranking also seems to have eluded the media that reported regularly—across the nation—that the Fraser Institute rankings were “based on” large-scale province-wide tests, such as British Columbia’s Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs), administered annually in Grades 4 and 7 (“Tests Help,” 2007, p. A10; “School Rankings Accurate,” 2010, p. A4). The words “rankings” and “test scores” were soon being used interchangeably (cf. “St. Michael’s Ranks,” 2011, p. 1). One newspaper editor typified the erroneous usage of “school ranks” to mean “test scores” by asking why the task of ranking schools should be shouldered by a “private think-tank” when “[a]ll the data upon which the rankings are

based are Ministry of Education data and publicly available” (“Steering Children,” 2003, p. A10).

Educators did not help to dispel the myth that the tests and the rankings were synonymous. A teacher from Quebec commented in an editorial that the Institute’s report card simply analyzed “some Secondary 4 and 5 final-exam results” (“There Are a Lot,” 2010, p. A17). A superintendent in British Columbia stated that the rankings were a “horrible use of that particular assessment [the FSA]” (“SD 52 Deny Relevance,” 2010, p. 3), whereas another administrator lamented, “One indicator does not a school make ... We use the FSA results as [only] one measure” (“Fraser Institute Results,” 2010, p. A1).

Not everyone was satisfied with the Fraser Institute’s methodology. Some people argued, for instance, that it was unfair to compare schools across different regions, different levels of socio-economic advantage, and different language abilities—such as native English speakers versus learners for whom English is a second language (“Should We Grade,” 2003, p. D1). Yet less than 1% of the hundreds of articles published between 1998 and 2011 charged the Fraser Institute with using unacceptable measurement practices. In one of the few direct critiques of the Institute’s methodology—an article in the *Cowichan Valley Citizen* from Duncan British Columbia—pointed out that a school’s ranking was not always based on the test scores from children attending that particular school. Elementary schools in British Columbia can span from Grades 1-7 or 1-5. The article rightly pointed out that in order to compare the two different kinds of elementary schools, “[t]he Fraser Institute [took] the performances of Grade 7 students in middle schools [usually comprised of Grades 6-8] and [reported] them as if the students [were] still in their old elementary schools” (“Fraser Institute Admits,” 2005, p. 1). Despite the concerns expressed in this article, the Institute continues the unorthodox practice of rating some elementary schools using data from children who no longer attend them.

In 2010, an article appeared in the press outlining *all* aspects of the Fraser Institute’s methodology (“The Case,” 2010, p. C10). This article pointed out that the Fraser Institute, the press, and much of the public had been erroneously conflating provincial test scores with school rankings. It clarified that in British Columbia, merely 45% of an elementary school’s rank and 25% of a high school rank were derived from standardized provincial assessments. This revealed that the majority of a school’s rank was not based on test scores but rather on multiple disparate measures that had not been fully elaborated in the media.

The letter to the *Times-Colonist* was careful to appear balanced, and stated that although parental choice was, in theory, defensible, parents needed to know that their choices hinged largely on factors other than academic achievement, despite assertions to the contrary. More importantly, the letter illustrated how many of the Institute’s indicators discriminated against low socio-economic status (SES) schools. For example, one of the indicators wrapped into a school’s overall rank is “the percentage of the tests that could have been written by students who were absent, exempted from writing the test or, for any other reason, did not provide a meaningful response to the test” (Cowley, Easton, & Thomas, 2011, p. 6). Since absenteeism is known to be higher in low-SES schools because of various factors, such as poverty (Hallam, 1996; Zhang, 2004), this indicator artificially deflates the academic standing of low-SES schools.

The *Times-Colonist* letter also argued that other indicators used by the Fraser Institute artificially depressed low-SES schools’ academic achievement. For instance, part of a school’s overall rank is assigned by calculating “the percentage of ... tests written by

the school's students that were judged to reflect performance below expectations" (Cowley, Easton, & Thomas, 2011, p. 6). This indicator penalizes low-performing schools by essentially counting low test scores twice. Equally problematic is that an overall rank is partly based on the difference between male and female students' test scores in reading and numeracy at the elementary level and for English and math at the secondary level. For reasons that researchers still do not fully understand, the impact of gender on student achievement is more pronounced among low-SES than high-SES populations (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Younger, Warrington, & McLellan, 2005). By calculating the gender gap in a school's overall rank, the Fraser Institute's rankings again artificially depressed the standing of low-SES dual gender schools while bolstering the rank of (often high-SES) single-gender independent schools where this indicator cannot be applied.

The letter to the *Times-Colonist* illustrated how graduation rates and delayed advancement rates also tended to deflate the test scores obtained by low-SES students. Graduation and advancement rates tend to be lower in low-SES schools. However, graduation and advancement are not entirely within the control of schools as out-of-school—as well as in-school—factors often contribute to students dropping out (Price Waterhouse, 1990). In addition, the letter reiterated the point made by *The Cowichan Daily* in 2005 that calculating rankings for one school using data for children who attended another is not considered to be conventional measurement practice.

Finally, the letter illustrated how the Fraser Institute's composite rankings distorted schools' "true" test scores using real school examples. In 2009, Torquay (public) Elementary ranked 131st in British Columbia. Yet, the province's Ministry of Education website revealed that the percentages of Torquay's Grade 4's meeting or exceeding expectations on the FSAs were 97% (reading), 85% (writing), and 87% (numeracy). Although these figures were, on average, 15% higher than those of Pacific Christian (private) school [at 82% (reading); 69% (writing); and 76% (numeracy)], Pacific Christian ranked 108th. This example indicates clearly that the composite indicators used by the Fraser Institute served to artificially deplete the ranks of lower-SES public schools in favor of those (usually private) schools with higher SES.

Sadly, the one letter from the *Cowichan Daily* and the other to the *Times-Colonist* demonstrating the methodological dilemmas of the Fraser Institute rankings constituted the minority of media texts produced between 1998 and 2011. Furthermore, of the few texts that criticized the Institute's statistics, arguments were more often than not founded on red herrings, such as one person's claim that standardized testing allegedly stunts students' creativity ("Standardized Testing," 2008, p. 12). Another criticized the rankings for not reporting on such variables as "safety, tone and climate of the school" ("DPAC Officially Opposed," 2010, p. A4), to which the Fraser Institute rebutted that it has no access to such data since the government does not collect them. In response to the finding that the top-ranked schools were generally fee-charging private institutions, some people simply retorted with the well-worn excuse that the playing field was "uneven." Further perpetuating the erroneous notion that rankings were synonymous with test scores was one letter-writer's argument that "school rankings tell us the obvious: affluent parents have the resources to help their kids learn" ("Fraser Rankings," 2008, p. A13).

University educators rarely weighed in on the matter. Any challenges that they might have had to the Institute's methodology were not reported in the media. Though insightful in many ways, quotes by faculty members tended to draw attention to

information that was tangential to the issue of the Institute's use of composite indicators. One professor, for example, rightly claimed, "The institute's scores clearly indicate ... that nearly 40 per cent of the differences among schools can be attributed to household income" ("Income is Key," 2009, p. A8). Another explained that the Fraser Institute's methodology created the impression that large differences exist between schools when "most of the variation is within rather than between them" ("Lots of Flaws," 2003, p. 11). Another professor was quoted as saying, "[H]ow much a student grows can be more important than where he ends up." Yet another spoke of the importance of student "persistence," that is, "the ability to keep kids in class against the odds" ("What Fraser Institute," 2005, p. A3). Professors at one university also attempted to educate the public by issuing a special report that outlined the dangers of rating systems and explained the concept of measurement error (Winne, Nesbit, & Gress, 2006). Few media outlets carried coverage of the report. Not surprisingly, the only full-length article analyzing the methodological problems of the Fraser Institute rankings appeared in a non-peer-reviewed journal (Waber, 2006).

Frustrated with the media's insistence on publishing methodologically problematic rankings, teachers began attacking the provincially-administered exams, thus further conflating test scores with rankings. At its 2004 annual general meeting, the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) "encouraged members to boycott all aspects [of the Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs)] other than test administration" ("Teachers Urged," 2005, p. A19). By 2008, the BCTF had voted to boycott administering the FSAs as well ("Vote to Boycott," 2008, p. A4). This decision was abandoned in February 2009 when the British Columbia Labour Relations Board ruled that it was part of teachers' jobs to administer the FSAs ("Teachers Told," 2009; "B.C. Teachers," 2009). This ruling did not serve to tone down the political rhetoric that has increasingly engulfed the rankings and the tests.

Discussion

Analyses of the rhetoric surrounding the Fraser Institute's school rankings are revealing for various reasons. First and foremost, this critical discourse analysis reveals the extent to which the Fraser Institute succeeded in creating what Foucault has dubbed a "regime of truth," thereby ensuring the rankings' long media reign despite methodological concerns. The Institute seems to have won over the public and the press by stressing three key—but not entirely accurate—arguments: that the rankings were based on academic achievement as measured by large-scale provincial government assessments; that parents had a democratic right to access such information, and that the rankings offered parents choice in schools that would *de facto* result in better achievement and better schools. An accountability-focused socio-political context provided fertile ground for these three simplistic but seemingly logical arguments to take root and thrive.

To understand how these three simple—but debatable—"truths" could carry so much power, it is helpful to turn to an argument that social critic and philosopher John Raltson Saul made in *The Unconscious Civilization*. Saul (1995) reminds us that, as a society, "we suffer from an addictive weakness for large illusions. A weakness for ideology. Power in our civilization is repeatedly tied to the pursuit of all-inclusive truths and utopias" (p. 19). In response to the question of why we need to believe in simple

answers to complex questions, Saul turns to history, invoking Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's edict that knowledge is unimportant to the masses, as faith is sufficient. Mussolini allegedly stated, "The crowd doesn't have to know. It must believe... If only we can give them faith that mountains can be moved, they will accept the illusion that mountains are moveable, and thus an illusion may become reality" (Saul, 1995, p. 65). In the case of the Fraser Institute rankings, the crowd didn't have to know. It simply believed that the rankings were based entirely on academic achievement, reminding us that language does not only reflect reality, but creates it as well (Strega, 2005).

As Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) have noted, cultural institutions are particularly powerful in establishing ideological messages that eventually "circulate as mundane 'truths' throughout the everyday world" (p. 284). This is particularly evident in the media's willingness to use "test scores" and "rankings" interchangeably when the words were loosely related but not synonymous. A "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980) was further reinforced by the imprecision of terms such as 'academic achievement,' 'performance,' and 'improvement.' Coupled with concepts such as 'democracy,' 'free choice,' and 'truth' but lacking precise definitions, these terms enabled the rankings to be promoted as handmaidens of individual liberty and universal truth. Ironically, in response to critics of the Institute's rankings, Cowley once insisted, "The truth can certainly hurt sometimes" ("Parents Need," 2005, p. A20).

Critical theorists remind us that knowingly or not, social institutions also determine whose claims are validated and whose are dismissed (Foucault, 1980, p. 131; Strega, 2005). This helps to explain why the suggestion in the *Cowichan Daily* that the Fraser Institute was "fiddling" its data received so little media coverage. No other media outlet picked up on the revelation that school rankings for British Columbia's Kindergarten to Grade 5 elementary schools were calculated using data generated from children who had moved on to middle schools.

Another factor contributing to the rankings' long reign is the long-standing troubled relationship between the media and the field of education. It is generally recognized that the "education beat lacks prestige" (Fiske & Stuart Wells, 1992, p. 38), prompting "bright aggressive reporters [to] flee at first chance" (Savage, 1992, p. 5). According to Juan Williams of the *Washington Post*, reporters, editors, and readers "are interested in education only as a function of political power"; therefore, the media serve, quite simply, as "watchdogs," safeguarding the public from being "cheated out of their money... If test scores show that local children cannot compete with children from other schools, then the taxpayers are being cheated. And that is news" (Williams, 1992, p. 179-80). Within this narrow mandate of the media as "taxpayer watchdog," it is simple to see how the Fraser Institute's report cards make for good press. A 1988 study revealed that news reporters adhere to four criteria when selecting which social science research to report: topicality, novelty, comprehensiveness of findings, and prestige of the sources. Apparently, "research quality" seldom shapes reporters' decisions (cited in Fiske & Wells, 1992).

Why then, after a decade of publicly supporting and publishing the Fraser Institute school rankings, did the *Victoria Times-Colonist* abruptly change its stance in 2010? The answer to this question can be found in one letter sent to the editor in February 2010 ("The Case," 2010, p. C10). By 2010, no media outlet had published or explained the full range of indicators used by the Institute to derive its ratings, even though the indicators were posted on the Fraser Institute's website. As a result, much of the press

and the public at large had accepted the notion that the “rankings” and the “test scores” were synonymous. The letter—sent directly to the *Times-Colonist* editor—pointed out that, contrary to common perception, less than half of an elementary school’s rank and only one quarter of a high school’s rank was based on test scores. The letter then discussed every one of the Fraser Institute’s indicators and revealed how they distorted the original test scores upon which the rankings were allegedly based. Thus, the letter adhered to the criteria for publishing social science research in that it presented “topical” and “novel” information.

In addition, given the importance of human interest stories to the press (Williams, 1992), the letter to the *Times-Colonist* highlighted the human costs of the rankings: low-scoring (usually low-SES) schools lose important assets when parents of high-scoring students move them to higher ranking schools (“Chinese-Speaking Parents,” 2010, p. A4). In light of the media’s professed adherence to the journalistic norm of “balanced” coverage (cf. Bennett, 1996; Dearing, 1995), the *Times-Colonist* letter also noted that there is nothing inherently wrong with ranking organizations. Methodologically solid rankings are important sources of information to help people make decisions. The letter supported the use of standardized testing, arguing that such assessments were critical tools for any education professional. Focusing on evidence-based facts versus perceptions, ensuring journalistic balance, and illustrating the human impact of the faceless statistical rankings, the letter prevailed upon the editor to reconsider the *Times-Colonist* policy of supporting and publishing the Fraser Institute rankings. As a result, the editor admitted that the Institute’s report cards were “less balanced” than they purported to be and decided to run the letter as an opinion editorial (“The Case,” 2010, p. C10; L. Chodan, personal communication, January 17, 2010). At the same time, the newspaper announced that it would not publish the school rankings and has now adhered to this decision for two years.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, a growing chorus of reformers have attacked the alleged abuses of “big government” and promoted the “free market” as a possible savior (Giroux, 2009). This societal context gave birth to the Fraser Institute’s report cards of school rankings while media coverage enabled it to flourish. But as this study has shown, the discourse surrounding the rankings built a “reality” void of reason or evidence. When one considers the way in which societies construct “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1982), it may not be entirely surprising that the rhetoric pertaining to the rankings has been imprecise, is based more on opinion than fact, and has erroneously conflated “test scores” with “school rankings.”

Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell’s classic novel, portrayed a dystopia under constant surveillance where terms such as honour, justice, morality, and democracy had ceased to exist in standard English (dubbed “Oldspeak”). With the development of “Newspeak,” “all words grouping themselves round the concepts of objectivity and rationalism” (p. 246) were replaced by the notion of “bellyfeel,” meaning a “blind, enthusiastic acceptance” (p. 245). I would argue that much of the rhetoric framing the Fraser Institute rankings could certainly be described as “bellyfelt” and not evidence-based or rational for, at best, merely a handful of media articles dealt with substantiated facts.

For over a decade, the Fraser Institute's rankings have deflated certain schools' academic achievement by using indicators that appear to favor independent, single-gender schools. This outcome is not entirely remarkable in that the Institute's mission is to ensure choice and the survival of competitive markets. Yet in pursuing this mission, the Fraser Institute's methodology has penalized countless low-ranking, low-SES schools whose high-scoring students flee, reminding us that "knowledge is more effectively used today to justify wrong being done than to prevent it" (Saul, 1995, p. 46).

Yet, the *Times-Colonist's* 2010 editorial decision not to publish the rankings offers us a glimmer of hope that we might still halt society's march into this "brave new world"⁴ where simplistic mechanisms (such as school rankings) distort reality (actual test scores) in order to promote particular ideologies (the virtue of competitive markets). The newspaper shifted its policy after receiving comprehensive information with evidence to suggest that the rankings were not "balanced," and, most importantly, were detrimental to low-SES schools. The newspaper's decision raises the possibility that more light may be shed on the murky rhetoric that has swirled about the Fraser Institute's rankings. Furthermore, if educators and social critics can better understand the nature of the media, as well as our own roles in perpetuating illusory "regimes of truth," perhaps evidence and reason might prevail over contemporary "bellyfeel."

⁴ This phrase is borrowed from Aldous Huxley's novel portraying a dystopian society mired in irrelevance where social control is maintained through the infliction of unending pleasure. See Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave New World*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins).

References

- BC teachers will obey order to give provincial tests. (2009, February 5). *Times-Colonist*, p. A19.
- Bennett, W.L. (1996). An introduction to journalism norms and representations of politics. *Political Communication*, 13, 373-384.
- Byfield, J. (April 1, 2002). The 'choice' imperative. *The Report*, 48.
- Calderhead, J. (2002). International experiences of teaching reform. In V. Richardson, *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 777-800). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Chinese-speaking parents more likely to take their kids out of low-ranked schools. (2010, January 13). *Vancouver Sun*, p. A4.
- Christopher, James R. (Fall 2004). Moving from school rankings to accountability. *Independent School*, 64(1), 68-72.
- Chubb, J.E., & Moe, T.M., (Summer 1990). America's public schools: Choice is a panacea. *The Brookings Review*, 8(3), 4-12.
- Cowley, P., Easton, S., & Thomas, M. (2011). *Report card on British Columbia's elementary schools*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.
- Cowley, P., Easton, S., & Thomas, M. (2011). *Report card on secondary schools in British Columbia and Yukon*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.
- DPAC officially opposed to school rankings. (June 12, 2010). *Kamloops Daily News*, p. A4.
- Dearing, J. W. (1995). Newspaper coverage of maverick science: Creating controversy through balancing. *Public Understanding of Science*, 4, 341-361.
- Dunsmuir, D., & Krider, R.E. (Spring 2010). Assessing the socioeconomic correction in the Fraser Institute report cards. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 56(1), 95-98.
- Earl, L., & Torrance, N. (2000). Embedding accountability and improvement into large-scale assessment: What difference does it make?" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75, 114-141.
- Educators cautious about school report. (2003, June 10), *Times-Colonist*, p. D1.
- 'First step' in making schools accountable. (2001, April 19). *National Post*, p. A8.
- Fiske, Edward B., & Stuart Wells, A. (1992). A synthesis of the literature on education reporting: How to improve the coverage of educational research. In Robert F. McNergney (Ed.), *Education research, policy and the press: Research as news* (pp. 33-49). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4): 777-795.
- Fraser Institute admits fiddling numbers. (2005, May 4). *Cowichan Valley Citizen*, p. 1.

- Fraser Institute. *Mission*. Retrieved from www.fraserinstitute.org/about-us/who-we-are/mission.aspx
- Fraser Institute. *Report cards: Overview*. Retrieved from www.fraserinstitute.org/report-cards/school-performance/overview.aspx
- Fraser Institute releases new Quebec school rankings. (2010, October 22). *Marketwire*. Retrieved from www.marketwire.com
- Fraser Institute results questioned. (2010, February 8). *Dawson Creek Daily News*, p. A1.
- Fraser Rankings out of context. (2008, December 18). *Times-Colonist*, p. A13.
- Gillborn D., & Mirza H. (2000). *Educational inequality: Mapping race, class and gender*. London, UK: OfSTED.
- Giroux, H. (2009). Beyond bailouts: On the politics of education after neoliberalism. *Policy Futures in Education*, 7(1): 1-4.
- Price Waterhouse (1990). *Qualitative research on school leavers*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada, Ministry of State for Youth.
- Hallam, S. (1996). *Improving school attendance*. Oxford, Heinemann.
- Hepburn, C., with Douris, A. (June 2008). Low incomes, high standards: Can private schools make a difference for low income families? *Studies in Education Policy*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.
- Holt, M. (2001). Performance pay for teachers: The standards movement's last stand? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 312- 317.
- Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave new world*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Income is key to schools' performance. (2009, June 22). *Vancouver Sun*, p. A8.
- Institutes at odds over methodology. (2007, March 1). *Ottawa Citizen*, p. C1.
- Kincheloe, J., & McLaren, P. (2000). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (2nd ed., pp. 279-309). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lots of flaws in Fraser Institute grading system. (2003, March 12). *Vancouver Courier*, p. 11.
- MacDonald, M.H. (1989). *Early school leavers: Current issues and concerns*. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Development and Research Unit.
- Massell, D. (July 1998). State strategies for building local capacity: Addressing the needs of standards-based reform. *CPRE Policy Briefs*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
- Nichols, S.L., Glass, G.V., & Berliner, D.C. (January 4, 2006). High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability pressure increase student learning? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(1). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n1/>
- Orwell, G. (1954). *Nineteen eighty-four*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

- Parents need a report card. (2005, June 10). *National Post*, p. A20.
- Plomp, T., & Loxley, W. (1994). The contribution of international comparative assessment to curriculum reform. In OECD (Ed.) *The Curriculum Redefined: Schooling for the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 173-186). Paris, FR: OECD.
- Political parties divided over FSA and school rankings. (2009, April 24). *Vancouver Sun*, A9.
- Ranking the schools: Pro and con. (2007, April 16). *Vancouver Sun*, p. A11.
- Rogers, W. T., & Klinger, D.A. (2005). Review of David Johnson [Review of *Signposts of success: Interpreting Ontario's elementary test scores*, by David Johnson]. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 28(3), 535-548.
- Saul, J.R. (1995). *The unconscious civilization*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi.
- Savage, D. (1992). The press and education research: Why one ignores the other. In Robert F. McNergney (Ed.), *Education research, policy and the press: Research as News* (pp. 5-30). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- School rankings accurate, insists Institute. (2007, May 8). *Nanaimo Daily News*, p. A10.
- SD 52 deny relevance of FSAs. (2010, June 18). *Daily News*, p. 3.
- Should we grade schools?: Spurious grading system is unfair. (1998, March 8). *The Province*, p. A37.
- St. Michael's ranks highest locally in tests: Controversial FSA report card released by Fraser Institute. (2011, February 8). *Trail Times*, 1.
- Standardized testing can put a limit on the students' creative thinking. (2008, December 30). *Harbour City Star*, p. 12.
- Steering children to a better school. (2003, March 13). *Times-Colonist*, p. A10.
- Strega, S. (2005). The view from the post-structural margins: Epistemology and methodology reconsidered. In Leslie Brown & Susan Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*. Toronto: ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Teachers told they must administer FSA tests. (2009, February 2). *CBC News*. Retrieved from www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/02/02/bc-teachers-fsa-bctf-labour.html?ref=rss
- Teachers urged to do minimum in FSA tests. (2005, December 29). *The Province*, p. A19.
- Tests help make schools stronger. (2007, May 8). *Times-Colonist*, p. A10.
- The case against the Fraser Institute's school rankings. (2010, February 7). *Times-Colonist*, p. C10.
- There are a lot better ways to choose a school. (2010, November 2). *The Gazette*, p. A17.
- Van Pelt, D., Allison, P.A., & Allison, D.J. (May 2007). Ontario's private schools: Who chooses them and why? *Studies in Education Policy*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.

- Volante, L. (September 24, 2004). Teaching to the test: What every educator and policy-maker should know. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 35. Retrieved from <http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/volante.html>
- Vote to boycott tests upsets some parents. (2008, December 15). *Vancouver Sun*, p. A4.
- Waber, D. (Summer 2006). Examining the examiners: Reflections on non-partisanship, the Fraser Institute and the report card on schools. *Education Canada*, 46(3): 4-8.
- What Fraser Institute rankings really mean. (2005, April 12). *Times-Colonist*, p. A3.
- Williams, J. (1992). The politics of education news. In Robert F. McNergney (Ed.), *Education Research, Policy and the Press: Research as News* (pp. 179-194). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Winne, P., Nesbit, J.C., & Gress, C.L.Z. (August 6, 2006). *Cautions about rating BC's schools*. Vancouver, BC: Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Education.
- Younger, M., Warrington, M., & McLellan, R. (2005). *Raising boys' achievement*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Zhang, M. (2004). Time to change the truancy laws? Compulsory education, its origin and modern dilemma. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 22(2), 27-33.