

TOWARDS CUSTOMIZED PRIVATIZATION
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA:
THE PROVINCIAL EDUCATION PLAN AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING*

[Vicheth Sen](#), *University of British Columbia*

Corporate school reform is a global movement that is gaining a growing momentum. Central to this reform agenda is *personalized learning*, presented by its advocates as a better alternative to the traditional model of schooling. In spite of its appealing possibilities for education and society, scholars in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have criticized personalized learning for its reductive conceptualization of education. Focusing critically on the new Education Plan of British Columbia, which places personalized learning at its core, this paper examines the genealogy of the Education Plan and discusses its implications for public education in the province. Through construction of a network of actors and content analysis of key documents produced by the public and private sectors, the paper shows that the vision of the Education Plan is largely influenced by a broader neoliberalism-oriented social imagination reinforced by a network of political, social, and economic actors. The analysis shows that this vision for education promotes a perception of education primarily conceptualized in narrow economic terms. The discourse and practice employed to promote personalized learning contribute to turning education into a customizable consumer product, reduce the notion of “learning” to a list of skills and attributes, disregard the significant importance of socio-cultural contexts in teaching and learning, and minimize the crucial role of the teacher. The article concludes that the Education Plan has created a conducive environment for the emergence of *customized privatization* in public education in the province.

Introduction

An increasing body of literature has examined the growth of the corporate school reform movement—an interlinking network of economic, social, and political actors, including well-funded right-wing think tanks, advocacy and research groups, educational entrepreneurs, venture

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philanthropies, high net-worth individuals like Bill Gates and their foundations, management organizations, real estate development groups, media corporations, opportunistic politicians from across the political establishment, and transnational corporations such as Walmart and Pearson (Au & Ferrare, 2014, 2015; Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2011; Bulkley & Burch, 2011; Burch, 2009; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Robertson, 2005; Saltman, 2010, 2012; Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). The actors in this emerging community have influence in every aspect of society. Through advocacy of these powerful interests, corporate influence on and participation in school reform has come to dominate every aspect of public education in the United States from curriculum and pedagogy to organizational governance of the education system, “blurring the once fairly clear lines between public and private, as private corporations assume ever more control over publicly funded endeavors” (Roberts-Mahoney, Means, & Garrison, 2016, pp. 2–3).

This private participation in public education has resulted in changes in the governance of public education and the emergence of new actors with new discourses and ideas about how public education should be governed and financed (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2011; Verger et al., 2016). Through these new actors, “new voices are given space within policy talk,” “[n]ew narratives about what counts as a ‘good’ policy are articulated and validated” (Ball, 2012, p. 6), and “new forms of policy influence and enactment” are enabled (Ball, 2008, p. 748). These networks of actors possess the power “to shape policy outcomes” (Goodwin, 2009, p. 680). Because of the ways in which these networks of actors operate, Ball (2008) argues, they are a “policy device, a way of trying things out, getting things done, changing things and avoiding established public sector lobbies and interests” (p. 760). They are thus capable of maneuvering

the policy landscape and pushing and pulling policy direction in ways that allow them to inject new sensibilities and “interests” into the policy in an ostensibly legitimate manner.

Neoliberal economic policy and ideology underpins this corporate school reform movement (Saltman, 2012). In this perspective, individual persons are treated as economic entities—consumers or entrepreneurs; the market creates efficiency and effectiveness (p. 15). In the field of education, knowledge is treated as a commodity to be produced by experts, delivered by teachers, and consumed by students (p. 15). The curriculum, pedagogy, and the organization of schools are conceptualized and structured in ways that frame the field of public education as a marketplace (p. 3). One of the main objectives being pursued by the corporate school reform movement is the promotion of technology-oriented personalized learning. Positioning the policy, organizational structure, and pedagogical approaches of traditional models of public schools as “irrelevant in a digital age” (Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016), corporate school reformers argue for a paradigm shift toward a 21st century education system with personalized learning technology as “a cutting edge alternative” (p. 3). Technology-based personalized learning is presented as “a more efficient, cost-effective, and dynamic learning experience” (p. 3) because it can be structured to meet the developmental needs of individual learners in terms of the pace, the level of difficulty, the content, and the environment of their learning. In support of such a technology-centric approach, advocates often argue that personalized learning is able to address such issues as efficacy and equity in public education—a narrative that has appealing possibilities for education and society in the new century from the reformers’ perspective. This is because, as Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016) argue, the goal of personalized learning is to “break down the older inefficient bureaucratic hierarchies associated with a ‘public monopoly’ and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ formula in order to ‘reinvent education for the twenty-first century’” (p. 3).

However, critics of personalized learning have pointed out that this approach actually exacerbates existing disadvantages and inequalities in educational provision and achievement (Campbell, Robinson, Neelands, Hewston, & Mazzoli, 2007; Pykett, 2009). It ignores the persistence of residential socio-economic inequalities and geographies of educational disadvantage and leaves no room for place-based learners who learn through their gender, class, and ethnic social locations (Pykett, 2009). Personalized learning, as Hartley (2008) argues, “privilege[s] even more those whose cultural repertoire arises from those middle-class families” (p. 378). It favours students whose parents are from professional, middle-class backgrounds with more cultural, intellectual, and financial capital (Campbell et al., 2007) to offer their children. Personalized learning is essentially a process of social and cultural reproduction (Beach & Dovemark, 2009).

Personalized learning has a conceptual alliance with the child-centred ethos of the 1960s, congregating around the ideas of “the autonomy of natural, personalized learners, an emancipatory role for education, the freedom of schools from state bureaucracy, and opportunities for parental control and family involvement to promote authentic learning outside the school” (Pykett, 2009, p. 384). A similarity between personalized learning and child-centred education is a focus on individual needs: “personalization speaks of ‘tailoring’ pedagogy to the pupil’s needs; child-centred education is concerned to start with the needs of the child” (Hartley, 2009, p. 429). Personalized learning is rooted in a dubious combination of consumerism-oriented marketing theory and the child-centred education from the 1960s (Hartley, 2007, 2008, 2009). It has little to do with pedagogical or curricula innovation and, instead, intensifies a “market logic of strategic consumption for able consumers,” reframing education as a product to be consumed by only some groups that “operate on self-interest and informed private choice” (Praina et al.,

2013, p. 657). Similarly, Beach and Dovemark (2009) state that personalized learning “mobilizes material and social resources in schools that support new forms of individualistic, selfish and private accumulations of education goods from public provision and a valorization of self-interest and private value as the common basis for educational culture” (p. 689). While personalized learning “assumes a causal association among voice, choice and equity,” it is of significant importance that the “voice of personalization is a would-be consumer’s voice, not that of a citizen-in-the-making” (Hartley, 2009, p. 430).

Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016) argue, in their recent study in the United States, that “in their current form, personalized learning technologies reflect narrow corporate-driven educational policies and priorities such as privatization, standardization, high-stakes assessment, and systems of corporate management and accountability” (p. 2). Similarly, in the UK, critics have pointed out that personalized learning is less about promoting real learning than improving standardized test scores (Cutler, Waine, & Brehony, 2007; Kohn, 2015). Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016) claim that “the explicit aim of personalized learning technology is to increasingly move curricular, pedagogical, and assessment decisions away from public school settings to private providers of commercial technology and digital learning platforms” (p. 12). In other words, this reconfiguration of decision-making authority decontextualizes and ignores the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning, resulting in a reductionist perspective on learning; it redefines the purpose of education, minimizes the role of the teacher, and customizes education as if it were a consumer product (Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016). Personalized learning is a form of customized privatization (p. 12).

In the province of British Columbia, the launch of the Education Plan in 2011 took place within the current provincial education policy framework, introduced in the School Amendment

Act of 2002 (or Bill 36), that encourages and enables market-oriented thinking and practices in the provision and funding of K–12 education programs and services (Fallon & Pancucci, 2003; Fallon & Poole, 2014; Poole & Fallon, 2015). Although the Education Plan is organized around five key elements—(1) personalized learning for every student, (2) quality teaching and learning, (3) flexibility and choice, (4) high standards, and (5) learning empowered by technology (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015)—at its core is technology-based personalized learning. The launch of this new Education Plan has attracted much concern from both scholars (e.g., Gutstein, 2012) and practitioner organizations such as the BC Teachers’ Federation (see Ehrcke, 2012, 2013; Hyslop, 2012; Komljenovic, 2012). The primary concerns are increasing promotion of program and school choice, and increasing reliance on corporate educational technology and publishing companies for educational programs and services. The plan is viewed as a potential blueprint for increasing privatization of public education in the province (Ehrcke, 2012, 2013; Gutstein, 2012). In contrast, scholars such as Boyer and Crippen (2014) contend that the Education Plan is a welcome response to emerging socio-economic realities in educational thinking in the new century. This paper aims to contribute to this debate. Specifically, the objectives of the paper are to (a) determine the network of actors that have contributed to engineering the blueprint of the Education Plan; and (b), through critical content analysis, examine the ways in which the purpose of education, the meaning of teaching and learning, and the role of the teacher and the student are (re)conceptualized in the Education Plan.

While the works of Gutstein (2012) and Ehrcke (2012, 2013) have cast some light on the market elements in the new Education Plan, their analysis makes use of the *BC’s Education Plan* as the main document for analysis. This analytical approach provides useful understanding of the plan, but it does not provide a broader context that may have had influence on its direction.

Meanwhile, the work of Boyer and Crippen (2014) paints a positive image of the Education Plan and does not approach the matter with a critical lens. Drawing on the analytical framework of recent work by Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016), this paper aims to shed light on a broader context that may have shaped the content of the Education Plan and the direction it is heading. By constructing a network of actors who have been involved in conceiving the plan, and then conducting a content analysis of a leading technology corporation's white paper (Cisco Systems), the advocacy paper of the BC Premier's Technology Council, and *BC's Education Plan* itself, this paper develops a genealogy of the Education Plan, displays the key actors involved in its conception, and highlights critically the "shared" vision for education in the province. This paper sheds light on the corporate origins that have shaped the content of the plan and the risks corporate involvement in education policy pose to quality education. It reminds all stakeholders about the political nature of curriculum policy and stimulates them to take a more critical look at personalized learning and technology-driven education in relation to their potential significant impacts on younger generations. The critical approach of the paper represents an important contribution of this research and provides a more in-depth understanding of the most recent education reform initiative and of educational policy-making in BC, and it offers potential comparative lessons for other policy contexts.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I present the research methodology, which focuses on identifying a network of actors that was involved in the genesis of *BC's Education Plan* and then explaining the focus of the content analysis of the documents for this study. Next, I present the findings of the analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the new Education Plan for public education in BC.

Methodology

Network of Actors

To map the complex web of social relations among actors involved in the process of educational policy-making and in the policy ideas and discourses that they bring along, I undertook a form of network analysis involving analysis of documents and tracing of connections between key individuals and groups (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2011). This methodological choice is informed by Ball's conceptualization of "network governance" (see Ball, 2008, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2011) as an orientation for examining the emerging network of new actors constituting a form of policy community that plays a key role in creating new policy discourse. Mapping the networks of these actors allows one to identify key actors, their relationships, and policy ideas and discourses they bring to the policy communities in which they are engaged.

The point of departure for construction of the network of actors (see the Figure) was a summary note of the Global Education Leaders' Partnership (GELP), illustrating the interrelationships between political, social, and economic actors that have contributed to conceptualizing a new vision for BC education. Entitled *Case Study: Developing an Education System for the 21st Century—British Columbia, Canada* (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2012a), this six-page document describes the context of the relationship between representatives from the BC Ministry of Education and members of GELP, and, in particular, explains the genesis of the vision for public education in BC fostered by that relationship. Further web searches of key individuals involved in a series of high-level meetings prior to the launch of *BC's Education Plan* reveal how connections among different political, social, and economic actors were established.

Content Analysis

To illustrate the flow of ideas within this network of actors, I conducted a critical content analysis (Berg, 2009) of three key documents. Drawing on the analytical approach of Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016), the analysis focuses on three thematic questions: How do personalized learning narratives conceptualize (1) the purpose of education, (2) teaching and learning, and (3) the role of the teacher and the student? The first document, *Equipping Every Learner for the 21st Century* (Cisco Systems, 2008), is a white paper of Cisco Systems. (Cisco's white paper). It was selected because some key actors linked to Cisco Systems were involved in the birth of *BC's Education Plan*. The second document, *A Vision for 21st Century Education* (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010), is an advocacy paper published in 2010 by the Technology Council of the BC Premier (Premier's advocacy paper). The paper was selected because it was the only document that represents the position of then BC Premier Gordon Campbell on the vision for public education in BC. The third document, *BC's Education Plan* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015), is the new education plan for British Columbia which was launched in 2011 and last updated in 2015 (the Education Plan). Drawing on the analytical approach of Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016), the content analysis of the three documents used here focuses on the following three themes: How the new vision for education is conceptualized and the ways in which personalized learning narratives in these documents conceptualize (1) the purpose of education, (2) teaching and learning, and (3) the role of the teacher and the student.

To zoom in on the institutional adjustments aimed to advance the new vision for the education system, I also examined Bill 36 or the School Amendment Act of 2012 (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2012) to identify explicit and important changes to the rules, procedures, and norms associated with public education in the province. The focus of my

analysis of this document is on timing of the changes and ways in which they converge in contributing to advancing a new vision for public education in BC, a vision conceptualized by an identifiable network of actors from the public and private sectors.

Findings and Discussion

Network of Actors: A Rendezvous Between BC Ministry of Education and the Global Education Leaders' Partnership (GELP) of Cisco Systems

The relationship between the BC Ministry of Education and the Global Education Leaders' Partnership of Cisco Systems was forged in 2009 when they met at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in Vancouver, BC (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2012a). At the conference, partly initiated by a BC government interested in personalized learning (Naylor, 2013), a paper presented by Valerie Hannon, then director of the Innovation Unit and a consultant for GELP, struck a chord with the Ministry of Education. Entitled *Only Connect*, Hannon's paper, which later was published by the Centre for Strategic Education, focuses on the rationale and vision for redesigning future education systems for the 21st century. Her argument revolves around the idea of "connection" between and among individual learners by means of new technologies that are readily available and can transform students' learning (Hannon, 2009). The months following the conference saw a series of high-level meetings between a team from the Ministry of Education and a team from GELP led by Valerie Hannon. The result of the meetings, as noted in a summary note, was "a radical vision for transforming education in British Columbia" (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2012a, p. 1).

The Figure reveals that a network of actors, representing both private and public sectors, is linked to Valerie Hannon and GELP. Directly or indirectly, these network actors have played a role in the genesis of *BC's Education Plan*. The actors in the network and their interrelationships are described below.

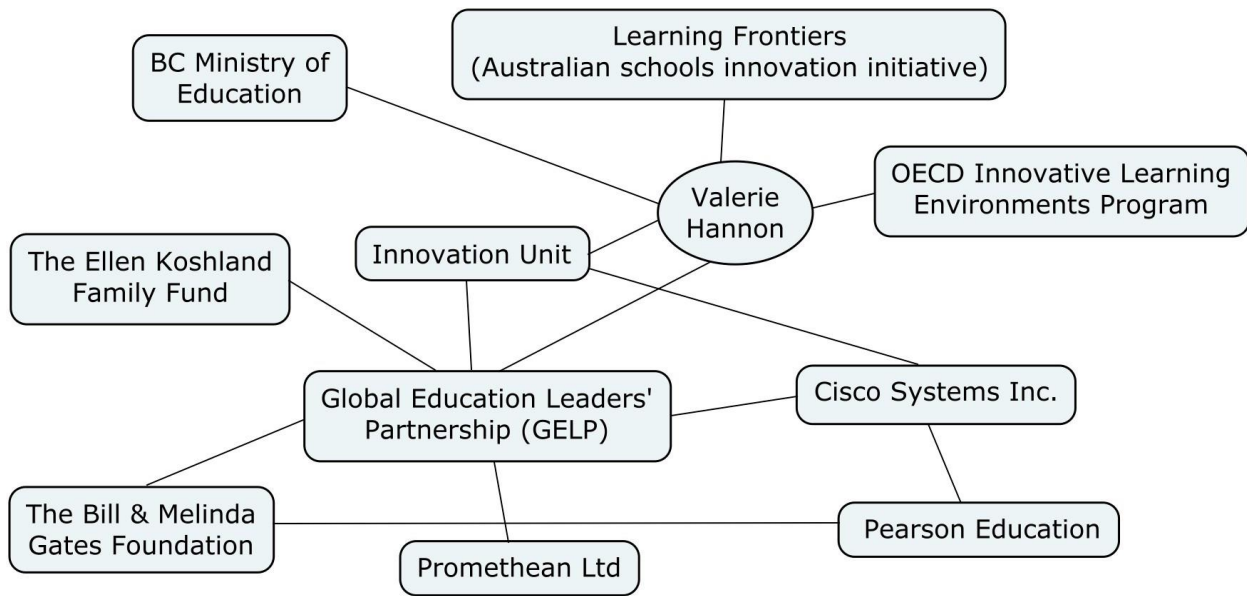


Figure: Interrelationships between BC Ministry of Education and the Global Education Leaders' Partnership and its core partners.

Valerie Hannon, a founding member and current director of GELP, is an influential individual with track records of leading innovative learning initiatives in different parts of the world, such as the OECD Innovative Learning Environments Program and the Learning Frontiers, an Australian schools innovation initiative (Innovation Unit, 2012a). These are initiatives that aimed to reform traditional systems of education and promote personalized learning and learning environments for the 21st century (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2012). Cisco

Systems launched GELP in 2009. As a partnership of “thought leaders and consultants from world-class organizations,” GELP “sets out to transform education, effectively and sustainably, at local, national and global levels. It envisages education systems that equip every learner with the skills, expertise and knowledge to survive and thrive in the 21st century” (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2016a, para. 4). As a “network of networks,” GELP includes participation from education system leaders from across the world, including Finland, South Korea, Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, South Africa, USA, Canada, Spain, United Kingdom, China, India and New Zealand (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2016b, para. 4). As listed on its previous website, which is no longer available, GELP was funded by dominant actors from mostly technology and edu-business corporations known for promoting market-oriented models of schooling and technology-based and digital education programs and services. These included technology corporations such as Cisco Systems and Promethean, and private foundations like the Ellen Koshland Family Fund and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These are individuals and organizations widely known as strong supporters of charter schools in the United States. Presently, GELP is supported by the Innovation Unit and a private foundation, the Ellen Koshland Family Fund (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2016b).

In July 2011, the ownership and management of GELP was transitioned to the Innovation Unit. Established in 2002 by the UK Department for Education and Skills, Innovation Unit is now an independent social enterprise whose mission is to “develop radically different, better, lower cost public services” such as education and health care (Innovation Unit, 2012d, para. 1). Innovation Unit strongly advocates for such ideas as radical efficiency, focusing on cost savings and improved outcomes for public services, and 21st-century learning based on radical change in education systems and personalized learning (Innovation Unit, 2012b). It offers a wide range of

services, including service design, organizational change, scaling innovation for large impact, system transformation of public service systems, leadership coaching to implement radical change, and “thought leadership” to stimulate people to adopt radical change (Innovation Unit, 2012c). It offers its services to a wide range of clients worldwide, such as New York City Department of Education, Canadian Education Association, and Cisco Systems. With Valerie Hannon as the director of its board, Innovation Unit is well connected to GELP and advocates for radical transformation of public services such as education and health.

In this web of actors, Cisco Systems plays a critical role. GELP itself was initiated and launched by Cisco Systems in 2009 in order to implement the ideas and vision outlined in its 2008 white paper (Global Education Leaders' Partnership, 2012a, 2012b). As elaborated in the next section, the white paper focuses on holistic transformation of the education system to equip learners with skills and competencies for the 21st century (Cisco Systems, 2008). At the core of this education-system transformation is technology-centric personalized learning. As a global leading corporation whose networking solutions are the foundation of the Internet and of most corporate, education, and government networks around the world (Cisco Systems, 2015), Cisco Systems stands to profit tremendously from a broader adoption of this system transformation. It creates leading products and key technologies that make the Internet more useful and dynamic, such as content networking, which are very important for online learning platforms (Cisco Systems, 2015). A personalized learning approach that requires the employment of online learning platforms and technologies will contribute to the expansion of its businesses.

In the 2014 fiscal year alone, Cisco Systems reported revenue of U.S. \$47.1 billion, in which U.S. \$36.2 billion was product revenue and U.S. \$11.0 billion service revenue (Cisco Systems, 2014). As a corporate publishing alliance of Pearson Technology Group, Cisco

Systems is tightly linked to Pearson Education, the world's largest educational publisher (Cisco Systems, 2015). Involvement in the network of these two global leading corporations with a strong commercial interest in promoting technology-based and online learning platforms strengthens significantly an influential force in driving public education towards increasing reliance on these private companies for their education products and services. Such companies will benefit tremendously from transforming public education systems towards technology-based personalized learning.

In formulating a new vision for BC's public education, the Ministry of Education linked itself to a network of actors, most of whose members have a keen interest in promoting digital learning platforms and other technology-centric personalized learning programs and services in different parts of the world. The corporations and individuals participating in the network stand to benefit from a paradigm shift towards a 21st century education system that is based on digital platforms and technologies because they are the producer of these education programs and services—and the infrastructure to run them. For many of these actors, expanding this vision for education into Canada is part of a global business strategy. Their new and strong relationship with the Ministry provided an excellent opportunity for them to get closer to traditional policy-makers to exchange their ideas and influence the direction of education policy. This kind of network provides opportunities for non-state actors such as businesses and individuals to get closer to state actors, discuss issues, and exchange ideas about solutions and social outcomes (Goodwin, 2009). Power and influence flows within these exchanges because these kinds of networks, as Ball (2008) argues, are “both routes of influence and access for business organizations and businesspeople and new ways of realizing, disseminating and enacting policy” (p. 758). The content analysis in the section that follows sheds light on how influential these

actors are in relation to shaping the current direction of education policy in BC, in particular in the genesis of the Education Plan.

Towards a “Shared” Vision for Education in the 21st Century

The kind of network of actors discussed above introduces change into the domain of public education policy-making. This change suggests that traditional direct control by the state of public education in areas such as policy-making and funding is being replaced by a control mechanism driven by a network of state and non-state actors who aspire to a supposedly “shared” understanding of societal problems and preferred solutions. What is of particular interest in this change in relation to policy-making is that these kinds of networks not only “blur the boundaries between state and society but they also expose the policy-making process to particularistic power games” (Ball, 2012, p. 8). And what can be deduced from this expanding space of policy-making is the potential “increase in the opacity of policy making,” as “it is unclear what may have been said to whom, where, with what effect and in exchange for what” (Ball, 2012, p. 8). Such “expansion” of public policy-making raises critical issues about the complexity and inter-related, multi-layered aspects of policy networks and how this change might shape the policy landscape of public education. In addition, this kind of policy networks presents negative implications for democratic governance and policy-making in education, because it excludes important members such as local communities, school boards, teacher organizations, and parent groups.

Analysis of the white paper of the technology corporation Cisco Systems, the advocacy paper of the BC Premier’s Technology Council, and the new education plan of British Columbia reveals a “shared” vision for education in the new century, in which technology-centric

personalized learning is its core. This common vision seems to have been conceptualized on the grounds that the traditional models of schooling, organization, and policy-making are no longer relevant or effective for 21st-century socio-economic contexts. For instance, Cisco's white paper claims that

The future growth and stability of our global economy depends on the ability of education systems around the world to prepare all students for career opportunities and help them attain higher levels of achievement. However, despite numerous efforts to improve educational standards, school systems around the world are struggling to meet the demands of 21st century learners and employers. . . . With few exceptions, *school systems have yet to revise the way they operate to reflect current trends and technologies.* (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. iii, emphasis added)

Meanwhile, the BC Premier's Technology Council makes a similar statement in its advocacy paper, arguing that

We have already identified the aspects of a knowledge-based society that impact upon education: the ease of access to content through technology, the pace of change of knowledge and the need for multiple career options. To address these changes, 21st century education must encourage education as a lifelong pursuit and *the highly structured nature of the current system cannot achieve that. . . . This means moving away from the traditional education model of the previous century.* (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 14, emphasis added)

Both the Premier's advocacy paper and Cisco's white paper emphasize that the traditional model of education organization, governance, and pedagogy is not able to produce the kind of workforce demanded in the current knowledge-based economy where technological advance is transforming every aspect of people's lives. To address these issues and challenges, the two papers argue that education systems must move away from a traditional model of schooling and embrace the emerging technology-based personalized learning system. The purpose of the education system articulated in both documents is that of producing an appropriate labour force that can promote economic growth and stability. The emphasis here is largely on meeting the

needs of employers and global economic development. Similarly, the vision statement of the new Education Plan argues for transformation of the current education system, while failing to provide an articulate critique of the traditional model of schooling. As its vision statement posits,

To achieve this [vision: Capable young people thriving in a rapidly changing world], we need an education system that better engages students in their own learning and that fosters the skills and competencies they will need to succeed. *The focus for this transformation is the movement to increasingly personalized learning.* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4, emphasis added)

In short, the current education system is not able to serve the needs of young people in the new century, and technology-based personalized learning is the future for BC's public education. Further, the vision itself is narrowly defined. Enabling capable young people to thrive in a rapidly changing world is conceptualized largely in terms of individual young people's employment outcomes and their contribution to economic growth.

The vision for education set forth in each of the three documents claims to represent a "shared" understanding with respect to the direction of public education. Given the interrelationships of the actors that conceptualized this vision, as illustrated in the Figure, it is not a surprise how "common" (among them!) this vision is. In addition, the release date of each document (Cisco's white paper in 2008, Premier's advocacy paper in 2010, and the Education Plan in 2011) suggests the thinking and conceptualization of this vision for education flows from actors in the private sector to those in the public sector. The three documents endorse the same model of learning: personalized learning. What does such a model look like? How does it frame the purpose of education? What does teaching and learning mean in this model?

Purpose of Education Redefined

The purpose of education defined in the three documents analyzed is conceptualized around ideas of equipping learners with 21st-century skills and meeting the needs of employers. Cisco's white paper argues that personalized learning will generate "the skills employers seek: expertise, creativity, interdisciplinary thinking, and team-based problem solving; resulting in a more innovative workforce and thereby stimulating economic development" (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. 8). The purpose of education is thus conceptualized in terms of and delimited by *meeting the demand of employers and economic development*. It also notes that employers need a workforce with "cross-cultural knowledge and understanding, such as multilingualism and upholding the values of tolerance, understanding, and respect" (p. 7) in addition to core competencies such as mathematics and literacy. However, this purpose of education is framed largely in terms of promoting private goods for personal economic outcomes: that is, increasing individuals' chances of employment in the 21st century.

The Premier's advocacy paper defines the purpose of education in terms of both personal and public goods. It states that "BC must have an education system that is structured so all students, regardless of background or community, have the opportunity, not only to reach their own goals but to contribute to our knowledge-based society. . . . Education is about more than just individual prosperity, it also serves a public good" (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 5). The Premier's advocacy paper argues that for individual learners to be able to fulfill personal and societal goals they "must also understand they are part of a complex society and that they have a responsibility to that society" (p. 12). For this reason, the paper continues, they must also learn "common ethics about the way we treat others, the way we treat our environment, . . . about obeying the law . . . [about] a civic responsibility and . . . the importance

of civilized discourse on issues and their role in a democratic society” (p. 12). The paper emphasizes both foundational skills such as numeracy and literacy and other competencies such as personal organization, ethics, civic responsibility, and cross-cultural awareness. However, the essence is in what learning all these skills and competencies is for. The Premier’s advocacy paper stresses that learners must equip themselves with these skills and attributes for the 21st-century socio-economic realities because they are what the “employers are looking for” (p. 12). Education is thus conceptualized in terms of serving mainly, if not exclusively, the individual good of attaining employment and economic outcomes.

Similarly, the Education Plan notes that individual learners need to acquire 21st-century skills and competencies, including mathematics, literacy, critical thinking, collaboration, personal and social responsibility, creativity and innovation, and global and cultural understanding. It emphasizes that these are the skills and competencies that “employers are increasingly looking for” (p. 3). Individuals need these skills to “succeed in the 21st century” (p. 9) and to “further skills training and in-demand careers” (p. 12). Once again, as framed in this document, education is primarily about achieving individual prosperity, although the kinds of skills and competencies identified may resonate with the notion of education being for the public good as well. The three documents analyzed consistently present their conceptualization of the purpose of education in similar terms: education for economic purposes—that is, education for individual employment, career advancement, personal prosperity, and economic growth. What is absent in this conceptualization of the purpose of education is a role for education in promoting public goods and democratic citizenship, which is not different from what is happening in the United States (Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016).

Technology-Centric Personalized Learning as a Customized Education Product/Service

At the heart of the Education Plan is personalized learning. It is “learning that is focused on the needs, strengths and aspirations of each individual young person . . . [and] students play an increasingly active role in designing their own education path” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 5). An education system that adopts personalized learning is one that, according to the Premier’s advocacy paper, “individualizes learning so students engage in issues important to them” (BC Premier’s Technology Council, 2010, p. 27). Placing the learner at the centre, Cisco’s white paper argues that this approach to learning “caters to multiple learning styles and adapts education to reflect the learning needs of each individual” (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. 11). Like their predecessors in the 1960s, these advocates of radical educational individualization claim that child-centred education (repackaged as technology-driven personalized learning) presents appealing potential for meeting the needs of students with different interests, aspirations, and future goals. At the same time, however, personalized learning as an approach to teaching and learning in the new century presents some major concerns in its application, because it tends to conceptualize education as mainly if not solely a consumer product.

The three documents analyzed insist upon the significant role of technologies in this reform. As the Cisco’s white paper notes, “This new paradigm requires a broader reform agenda; one that responds to socioeconomic realities and enhances learning opportunities through collaborative technologies” (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. 8). It also emphasizes that “a crucial enabler of both the new pedagogy and skills, is technology” (p. 9), so “every school child will be assessed and receive tailored and dedicated support for attaining performance goals” (p. 11) and teachers are able to provide “personalized feedback” (p. 13). This technologically-driven

reinvention of “child-centred education” is grounded in the claim that technology is indispensable for individualized/personalized teaching, learning, and assessment to take place. Similarly, the Premier’s advocacy paper argues that a 21st-century education that adopts a personalized learning approach is necessarily one that “uses technology” pervasively (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 16). It further stresses that, “those students who are not familiar with the technology will need to learn to be in order to fully participate in a knowledge-based society” (p. 24). This means that students will need to become familiar with technology to function fully in 21st-century society. The Education Plan resonates with this perspective, stating that learning must be “empowered by technology” in order to “ensure students are able to thrive in an increasingly digital world” (p. 8). Technology, therefore, is central in this new approach to learning as advocated in the three documents, perhaps so much so that it reflects the touching naiveté of a panacea.

This discourse and practice squarely positions personalized learning as a customizable consumer product (Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016). When schools, teachers, and students use these adaptive learning technologies, they become consumers of these products. As education technology companies produce different educational programs and services to meet the diverse needs of individual students, the practice becomes a way to customize education as products and services, much like business companies customizing their consumer products and services to meet the needs of their customers.

Added to this discourse and practice is emphasis on promoting *flexibility* and *choice* in education provision. The Premier’s advocacy paper argues that in the present environment with technologies available at everyone’s fingertips, “options and flexibility to customize experiences” are what the general public, including students, expect and our “education systems

should acknowledge this” by making such a radical individualization available to students through the use of technology (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 16). For this reason, the Premier’s advocacy paper proposes that some of the key components of an education for the 21st century be a “flexible educational path” and a “blended system” (a combination of online and classroom-based courses) to provide learners with different choices of education programs and services that they need for their own individual needs (p. 19). Similarly, one of the core elements of the Education Plan is flexibility and choice. As it argues, such flexibility and choice will allow teachers, students, and their families to meet their different needs in terms of “how, when and where learning takes place” (p. 8). The BC government previously amended the School Act in 2012 (to be discussed in detail below) to make choices of education programs and services available to all K–12 students (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2012), thus enabling and encouraging customized digital education programs and services. This emphasis on *flexibility* and *choice* to enable personalized learning, as evidenced in the documents analyzed, further orientates personalized learning according to the logic and practice inherent in the market and corporate frame of reference and thought of those with the greatest vested interest in a dominant role for technology in the education of the future.

In addition, technology-based personalized learning removes learning from its real socio-cultural context. Although personalized learning as defined in the three documents associates learning with collaboration, teamwork, communication, and leadership through project-based instruction, the real socio-cultural context of learning is largely removed because learning mostly takes place on virtual digital learning platforms. “What is considered ‘social’ in learning,” as Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016) argue, “is simply interaction with and through technology” (p. 11). Moreover, because personalized learning places “a greater emphasis on the learning of skills

over the learning of content” (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 15), the whole notion of learning is basically reduced to a set of skills and competencies listed in the three documents. It is a process that is reductionist in meaning and value and contributes to exacerbating the narrowly-defined purpose of education as the pursuit of individual goods, as discussed above. It is also a redefinition of the “educated person” as someone with a lot of technological know-how and savvy—or some plausible semblance to a claim of possessing them. All this fits painfully well with further “dumbing down” of education in general. Personalized learning as a practice promotes patterns of thinking and logics that emphasize individualistic and self-interest private choice and consumption of education. This could contribute to shaping the public’s perception of education as a consumer product that may be customized and packaged with a list of skills and competencies desired by individual learners. While some might prefer this customized, à la carte approach to education, it is important to note that learning itself is a complex social process beyond merely acquiring a set of ideal, pre-packaged skills and attributes that a learner wants or needs. Learning is a process of “coming into presence” (Biesta, 2006, p. 34), “of becoming a person” (Pykett, 2009, p. 392). It is, in fact, a process of becoming “an educated person”!

Shifting Roles of the Teacher

The vision for a 21st-century education system underpinning personalized learning approach requires reconceptualization of teaching and the role of the teacher. The three documents analyzed consistently refer to the teacher as a guide, a coach, or a coordinator in a personalized learning system. In this frame of thinking, teaching is not necessarily a professional endeavor and may not require the kind of education associated with faculties of education worthy of the name. As the Premier’s advocacy paper notes,

The technological capability needed to implement such a transformation . . . is becoming ever more advanced. As a result, teachers have much better tools at their disposal to bring information to their students and equally importantly, to *guide* their progress in a new model . . . as a *learning coach* or *coordinator*. (BC Premier's Technology Council, 2010, p. 26, emphasis added)

Such a system demands, the paper continues, “a shift in the role of the teacher from one of lecturer to one of guide” (p. 27). Cisco’s white paper argues along the same line that this new education system “requires a teacher who can instruct, facilitate, guide, and support as needed” (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. 11). Similarly, the Education Plan posits that, as “a guide, coach and mentor,” the teacher will be “focusing more on helping students learn how to learn—and away from being the primary source of content and information” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 8). In addition, this shift requires new forms of teacher training and professional development (Cisco Systems, 2008, p. 15). After all, who would need “teacher education” as opposed to “teacher training” in such a technology-driven brave new world of education?

This reconceptualization of the role of the teacher in technology-based personalized learning stands in contrast to what is expected of the teacher in order to foster *deep* personalized learning in which the learners co-produce knowledge with the teacher. In the model of deep personalized learning, the teacher has a high level of subject expertise and acts more than just coordinating or facilitating the learning process (Campbell et al., 2007; Deed et al., 2014; Praina et al., 2013). This is the form of learning that is face-to-face and is *not* based on information technologies (Campbell et al., 2007). The teacher responds authoritatively (but not necessarily with the authority of deep knowledge and wisdom) to the students’ ideas and helps take them further to enable the students to co-construct knowledge with him or her. Conceptualizing the role of the teacher as a coach or a guide to help the students to learn places personalized learning

in the *shallow* model. This form of personalized learning merely increases “system efficiency” but does not promote deep learning (Campbell et al., 2007, p. 153). The role of the teacher as conceptualized in the technology-centric personalized learning in the three documents analyzed promotes shallow, “dumbed-down” learning for a meaningless “empirical” efficiency in “education systems.”

Bill 36 or the School Amendment Act, 2012: An “Institutional Adjustment” to Pave the Way for Technology-Centric Personalized Learning

The new vision for public education in BC that is based on personalized learning technology is further backed up by an “institutional adjustment” to smooth this transformation. Less than one year after the launch of *BC’s Education Plan*, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (2012) passed Bill 36, also known as the School Amendment Act, 2012, largely aimed to increase the number of students for distributed learning (technology-based online courses) by amending the eligibility criteria.

There are two important amendments in Bill 36 that are geared toward eliminating barriers to personalized learning and promoting more online learning. First is the elimination of a standard school calendar to be replaced by a school calendar established by each respective school board. This board-level calendaring allows school boards more flexibility to offer scheduling options that meet the needs of students in their school districts. Second is the expansion of the student population that is eligible for a mix of online and traditional courses. While previously this option is only for students from Grades 10 to 12, the amendment expands this option to students from kindergarten to Grade 9. According to its news release, British Columbia Ministry of Education (2012) announced that the amendments aim to “support BC’s

Education Plan by removing barriers to personalized learning and allowing greater flexibility and choice in terms of where, when and how students learn.” Bill 36 thus promotes more flexibility and choice for students to choose education programs, courses, and schools that meet their individual needs. This institutional adjustment not only smooths the way for the implementation of the Education Plan that promotes technology-centric personalized learning; it also encourages greater use of online courses and technologies-based programs and services. It is a change that promotes increasing reliance on and participation of private technology and digital learning corporations in providing education programs and services.

Conclusion

Construction of a network of actors and content analysis of the three documents examined above present compelling evidence of the flow of influence and ideas between the public and private sectors. Analysis of the documents shows that the new vision for education in BC, as articulated in *BC's Education Plan*, is influenced by the one conceptualized in the corporate sector with unwavering interests in marketing to “public education.” Although this network of actors seems to have existed for a brief period of time, the ideas flowing within the network have had a substantive impact. With the launch of the Education Plan, it is a network that makes a policy idea materialize—at least at the legislative and policy levels. This outcome aligns well with Ball’s (2008) argument that these networks “enable the circulation of ideas and give ‘institutional force’ to policy utterances” (p. 753). In other words, these kinds of networks can both legitimate and enact certain policy ideas and discourses and constrain others that may not serve the interests of those in the networks.

The new vision for education in BC potentially contributes to transforming public education into a marketplace in which education is primarily meant to serve individuals' needs (and wants!), one that largely defines education in terms of economic outcomes. Thus conceptualized, the proposed technology-centric personalized learning for the 21st century introduces to the general public discourses and practices that contribute to turning education into a customizable consumer product for the different needs of individual learners. It is a process that reduces the notion of "learning" to a list of skills and disregards the significant importance of socio-cultural contexts in teaching and learning. It also minimizes the crucial role of the teacher from that of an educated professional as a source of social and moral values to that of merely a coach or facilitator of the learning process, and nothing else.

Both politicians and bureaucrats of the BC Liberal government who have been trying to find ways to cut costs and expenditure on public education since it was first elected in 2001 seem to have been attracted to the notion of personalized learning because it is presented as a lower cost approach to education provision compared to existing and traditional forms of schooling (Ehrcke, 2013). However, what may not be immediately apparent to the general public are the implications of the change. These include the high initial cost of new infrastructure installations; ongoing maintenance and future upgrades; the potential private control of public education content and curriculum as materials are developed by private corporations; the continuous flow of public funds to private enterprises that keep these systems and infrastructures up and running (Ehrcke, 2013); and, perhaps most ominously, an opportunity for government to extricate itself from the expensive encumbrance of allegiance to any meaningful type or degree of universality in public education. This covert privatization and abandonment of any semblance of a "common curriculum" grounded in some coherent vision of the "educated person" fosters increased

privatization of public education in BC but is couched in a discourse that masks this process and outcome.

Although personalized learning or the 21st century education is not presented as privatization of public education provision, it is proposed in a way that promotes increasing reliance on digital learning platforms and other education technologies that can only be provided by leading technology and learning resource corporations such as Cisco Systems, Pearson, Microsoft, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Nelson Education, to name but a few. This process reflects movement towards privatizing—and potentially deregulating in every meaningful sense—education provision. The worrisome trend is that this movement seems to be led by the private sector whose commercial interests in the education sector are growing rapidly if not exponentially.

There is an unquestioned assumption that “computers are the latest expression of social ‘progress’” (Bowers, 1998, p. 111), but this proposed technology-centric personalized learning in public education is anything but a new phenomenon. It strikingly resonates with past failed technological solutions that were presented as cures for public education. Similar promises from purveyors of educational technology innovations were made in the past. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the use of technology in classrooms was presented as a “panacea” for problems in public education (Rassool, 1993), yet there was no convincing evidence that it contributed to improving student achievement (Cuban, 2001; Fielding as cited in Robertson, 2003; Roszak, 1986). The use of educational technologies in schools continues to “appropriate and redefine educational goals and problems” (Robertson, 2003, p. 280). However, the social justice concerns regarding access to and use of technology remain unaddressed, as do questions of educational

reductionism of some technology-based approaches to teaching and learning (Bigum & Kenway, 2005; Bowers, 1998).

This movement towards technology-centric personalized learning in BC's public education system is not an isolated phenomenon. The lack of public outcry regarding increasing marketization and privatization (Fallon & Poole, 2014) is not a surprise given that this process has been influenced by a taken-for-granted market-oriented mindset. Neoliberal ideology, discourse, and practice have spread and been embraced by the general public in almost every aspect of life around prioritizing and making choices on a day-to-day basis largely for the sake of personal good. It seems, therefore, that constructive criticism of the vision and direction of the new education plan is left for the minority of scholars, educational practitioners, and parents who have concerns about where BC's public education is heading. Through research and advocacy, they should assume an ethical and moral responsibility for shedding light on unfavourable aspects of the Education Plan, so the general public is better informed of potential negative consequences.

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