

## “GET THEM YOUNG AND TRAIN THEM RIGHT”: NEGOTIATIONS IN A VET PARTNERSHIP

**Bonnie Watt-Malcolm and Alison Taylor**

University of Alberta

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores a high school apprenticeship program in Alberta, Canada, as an example of a market approach to vocational education and training (VET) through social partnership. While this program is seen as a win-win for students and employers, interviews with different partners suggest that there are continuing negotiations over who is responsible for training, who has access to formal training, who pays for it, what kind of knowledge is seen as necessary, how training is delivered, and how it is rewarded by employers. Power relations among the partners are indicated by the outcomes of negotiations and the lack of negotiation in certain areas relevant to effective training. Further, the lack of government incentives for partnership work appears to make programs that involve college training, however beneficial for students, difficult to sustain even in booming economic times.*

### **Résumé**

*Cet article étudie un programme d'apprenti ayant cours en Alberta, Canada, qui se veut une façon de faire de l'insertion professionnelle et des stages en milieu de travail impliquant un partenariat social. Même si ce programme est perçu comme une situation gagnant-gagnant par l'employeur et l'étudiant, des entrevues avec différents partenaires laissent croire qu'il y a constamment des négociations à faire afin de savoir qui est responsable de la formation, qui a accès à la formation formelle, qui paie pour la formation, quelles connaissances sont considérées comme nécessaires, quel est le format de la formation et comment elle est reconnue par l'employeur. Des relations de pouvoir entre les partenaires transparaissent de la négociation et du manque de négociation dans certains domaines liés aux programmes de formation. En outre, le manque d'incitatifs gouvernementaux visant à développer le travail coopératif rend difficile la mise en place de programmes associés à une formation collégiale dans un contexte de prospérité économique, même s'ils sont bénéfiques pour les étudiants.*

### **Introduction**

Instead of the tradition of social partnership characteristic of vocational education and training (VET) in many European countries, a market-based model is evident in Canada (Heinz, 2003; Krahn, 1996). Within this context, the idea of education-industry partnerships as a way of facilitating young people's transitions from school to work has become an important element of policy discourse in Canada and other OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000). While writers in Australia have explored social partnerships related to VET (Billett & Seddon, 2004; Seddon & Billett, 2004), little has been written about how such partnerships operate in the Canadian context (exceptions are Bridgman, 2003, and Taylor, 2006).

In educational policy, a related theme concerns the idea of easing students' transitions to post-secondary education (PSE) and training through increased articulation and collaboration between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions. School-business and "K to 14" partnerships are, therefore, gaining popularity. For example, Ontario and British Columbia have introduced dual credit initiatives that allow students to earn introductory level credits toward a college program or apprenticeship training while in high school (Taylor, 2007). Given the increasing policy interest in school-to-work partnerships, the purpose of this paper is to explore an employer-driven initiative that allows high school students to access apprenticeship training provided by a local college.

### **Conceptual Influences**

Our research is rooted in theories about the relationship between learning activities and paid work requirements in the new economy. Livingstone (1999) suggests that most theories of this relationship can be identified in terms of supply-side, demand-side, or supply-demand interactive theories. Supply-side theories reflect the human capital idea that investment in education brings individual rewards in terms of higher earnings and societal rewards in terms of higher levels of economic growth. However, they fail to account for the growing gap between people's increasing learning efforts and the diminishing number of commensurate jobs for people to apply their knowledge. In other words, these theories fail to account for the scarcity of "positional goods" (Marginson, 1997).

One variant of demand-side theory assumes that modern production systems require knowledge workers while an opposing view assumes that inherent tendencies within production systems lead to deskilling or widespread automation. In both cases, workers and employers tend to be regarded as reactive rather than as agents who influence trends through their activities. Supply-demand theories, on the other hand, emphasize the relational character of education and job connections in terms of the bargaining processes between employers, current or prospective employees, and state agencies. These theories seem better able to explain current patterns of education-employment relations.

The market approach to VET that is evident in Canada encourages certain behaviours. First, investment in training tends to reflect market cycles, with higher investment in boom times when employers are faced with labour shortages. The resulting just-in-time training leads to tensions between training providers, employers, and organized labour. Second, employers generally want the highest return on this investment and demand the best trainees; therefore, access to training becomes contentious. Third, trainees are also

likely to be conscious of their own investments in training. Trainees' ongoing negotiations with employers seem likely, as both seek to maximize their return on training. Markets are likely to produce "hard-headed consumers and efficient and entrepreneurial producers" (Marginson, 1997, p. 30).

Theories that emphasize struggle amongst players with diverse interests are helpful for understanding VET partnerships. Such partnerships reflect new management approaches adopted by Canadian policy-makers as provincial and federal governments encourage the involvement of non-governmental actors as primary partners in the delivery of public services (Pal, 1997). One way of understanding social partnerships is as new forms of governance.

Academic literature about VET partnerships tends to emphasize either their limitations or opportunities. Robertson and Dale (2002) argue that partnerships represent a "strategy to manage the contradictions generated by neo-liberal governance while continuing to realize the social functions of the capitalist state" (p. 572). On the other hand, Seddon, Billett, and Clemans (2005) focus on possibilities for effective social partnership; however, they agree that social partnerships are often based in neoliberal contractualism and are forged "at the contested interface between localized networks and central agencies" (p. 582). The observation that effective partnerships require social cooperation and institutionalized linkages between schools, colleges, trainers, unions, and employers (Fuller & Unwin, 1999; Schuetze, 2003) often contradicts the reality of the challenges in establishing and maintaining workable relationships in the absence of government regulations and/or incentives. Social partnerships, therefore, tend to be precarious endeavours because they require a great deal of work to establish and maintain (Seddon & Billett, 2004).

We propose that VET partnerships are likely to involve bargaining processes between employers, trainees, high schools, and post-secondary educators related to who provides training, who has access to it, who pays for it, what kind of knowledge is seen as necessary, how training is delivered, and how it is rewarded in the workplace. Writers in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom have expressed concern that a market approach to VET potentially places the workforce learning agenda in the hands of employers whose interests are not always consistent with those of workers (Ashton, 2004; Evans et al., 1997; Spencer, 2001). Others add that it is difficult to develop and sustain work-based learning in a deregulated voluntaristic system (Keep & Payne, 2002). This paper assumes that a key part of partnership work involves negotiations among players and aims to explore this contested terrain.

### **High School Apprenticeship in Alberta**

In Alberta, high school students as young as 15 years of age are eligible to enrol in the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) (Alberta Advanced Education, n.d.). Like adult apprentices, RAP students are usually required to find employers willing to enter into apprenticeship contracts. There must also be a journey person qualified in one of the 50 designated trades who is available to work with the apprentice. RAP students earn high school credits for their diploma requirements while earning hours toward their apprenticeship programs. The partnership that we examine in this paper is a steamfitter-pipefitter RAP that was established in 2001 in an urban centre in Alberta. This program is

unique in Alberta in that upon completing high school, students will achieve their first year of apprenticeship training, including the first level of technical training and up to 1,000 hours of on-the-job experience. The vast majority of other RAP programs allow only on-the-job training (Alberta Learning, 2003).

A contractor purchases apprenticeship seats at the local college for approximately eight high school students each year. The employer purchases "training goods" (Marginson, 1997) to satisfy the need for skilled tradespersons. The number of RAP apprentices hired depends on student interest and contractor and owner monies allocated for this purpose. Interested Grade 11 students apply to be part of the cohort and are interviewed by a representative from a careers foundation ("partnership broker") who makes recommendations to the contractor. The number of applicants depends on awareness of this program and student and parent interest. The foundation representative mentioned that in 2005, "we had two more [students] than we got in, in terms of applications. So we actually had to turn a couple [of students] away" (I-1). The number of students who are admitted into this steamfitter-pipefitter RAP also depends on employer and owner involvement. One of the contractor representatives explained his attempts:

to bring in some of the other large employers in the area that also draw from the steamfitter resource here. I tried to get [the company's] interest. [The company] has hired some of our former students. And sometimes right from under our nose a little bit, it's a little raw but . . . there's another outfit here . . . fairly big employer, big shop, draws on the steamfitter resource here . . . they don't see, possibly don't see the value in that [RAP training] right out of the gate. They want to judge who the person is before they give them that kind of training. (I-25)

Hence, there is some tension amongst employers related to who trains apprentices and who benefits from that training.

Upon acceptance into this RAP, students undergo a formal training program in conjunction with their required high school courses. The program starts with the students learning about safety in a four-week training program. This training is followed by a four-week session at a local college, where students take the first half of their in-class apprenticeship training of the required eight-week technical portion of the apprenticeship. The second four-week session of technical training at the college occurs in Grade 12. Upon completion of this technical training, RAP students write the provincial exam for the first-year steamfitter-pipefitter apprenticeship. Students also work on construction sites under the careful supervision of site personnel during the summer months after they have completed Grade 11, and then again for four weeks at the end of their Grade 12 school year. A maximum of 40 credits is granted toward a high school diploma (100 credits required) through RAP, which equates to 1,000 hours worked (five credits for each 125 hours worked). Through this credentialing process, access to college apprenticeship training while in high school becomes a positional good for students. Positional goods offer students advantages "in the competition for jobs, income, social standing and prestige" (Marginson, 1997, p. 38).

Discussions to develop this program began in the late 1990s. Contractor and owner representatives recognized that a shortage of skilled labour was imminent because

of proposed construction projects. The continuation of economic growth combined with more retirees has created a situation where qualified steamfitter-pipefitters are scarce. One contractor representative stated that “the average age of a pipefitter right now in Canada is 55 to 56” (I-7). For many construction employers, it was evident that skilled labour was going to be an issue. Another contractor representative commented that “in the late ’90s you didn’t have to look too hard to see that we were in trouble demographically . . . things were picking up” (I-4). Some companies responded by participating in high school programs such as RAP to purchase training goods. The RAP program extends the traditional role played by schools in distributing positional goods among youth.

High school apprenticeship programs ideally offer students opportunities to explore and possibly gain access to a particular workforce because they have acquired specific occupational skills and knowledge. In 2005, there were 1,461 new RAP registrants. Popular apprenticeship trades according to student enrolment were automotive service technician (10%), carpenter (10%), electrician (9%), hairstylist (8%), heavy equipment technician (13%), and welder (17%). In contrast, students enrolled in a steamfitter-pipefitter RAP made up only 1% of all registrants (Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, 2006).

Economic conditions have greatly affected graduates’ employment opportunities historically. Alberta’s provincial economy has grown significantly in the past few years; the provincial unemployment rate was 3.5% in August 2007, compared to Canada’s 6.0%. From January through August, 2007, 60,000 new jobs were created in health care, information, construction, trade, and other services (Alberta Employment, Immigration, and Industry, 2007). According to the same source, the number of new jobs sets Alberta’s average employment growth at 5.1%, whereas in Canada, employment grew 0.1% in this same timeframe. Given the projected work in Alberta over the next few years, Alberta Employment, Immigration, and Industry predicts that skilled trade workers will continue to be in demand.

The unprecedented growth of Alberta’s economy and labour market requirements, combined with the students’ safety, on-the-job, and technical training and high school diplomas, potentially places these RAP graduates in a highly favourable situation. This is an important consideration given that youth are often overlooked in the hiring process. The unemployment rate for youth is currently around double the adult rate (Alberta Employment, Immigration, and Industry, 2007).

The following section documents our findings from 28 interviews and focus groups conducted between 2005 and 2007 with 35 participants connected to the steamfitter-pipefitter RAP. These include government officials (N=2), instructors at schools and colleges (N=6), contractor and owner representatives (N=5), partnership brokers (N=3), Grade 11 and 12 RAP students (N=14), and RAP graduates (N=5).

### **Negotiations within a VET Partnership**

Interviews with participants involved in the steamfitter-pipefitter trade confirm the view of other writers (Seddon & Billett, 2004) that a great deal of work is required to establish and maintain VET partnerships. Furthermore, partners expect a return on that investment, as a government participant noted:

[RAP] wasn't intended as an exploratory, you know, a work experience [course] is to go out and try things. RAP is a commitment on many levels. And so when you take it that next step, further including technical training, it's another level of commitment by everybody. And you know, everything goes up and the costs go up. (I-25)

For RAP to work, government participants recognized that "somebody's got to organize it; somebody's got to believe in it." One of the obstacles to RAP is the coordination part: "You know, getting everybody on side and believing and also putting the young high school student into that adult world and at the college is another [step]" (I-25). Given this comment, it is clear that a critical issue in VET partnerships concerns which groups are responsible for apprenticeship training and who pays for it.

In the early 1990s, the provincial government put guidelines in place that allow high school apprenticeship to occur but, to date, has not provided incentives such as funding schools and colleges for dual credit apprenticeship courses earned while in high school. In fact, there may be disincentives to providing technical training, as a partnership broker participant acknowledged:

[When we started, the contractor] wanted these high school kids graduating with their first two years of technical training. And Apprenticeship and Industry Training said, "No, not two years. But we would be willing to be considering one." And so they said, "Okay, but you cannot get the transfer funding for these kids. You're going to have to pay [the college] on a cost recovery basis." So it's going to cost you more than a first-year apprentice, steamfitter, or pipefitter. . . . So it costs on average, with the salaries and the training at [the college] and the training that [the contractor] provides as part of all of this, they put them through their training programs as well. And that's all back charged to [the owner], okay. So it costs roughly \$5,000 [per student]. (I-26)

The contractor involved in the steamfitter-pipefitter RAP suggested that government could do more to sponsor training (I-4). Currently, the government pays Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) costs for RAP students and funds high schools for RAP credits. Despite this, a representative from the partnership broker foundation (funded by government as well as the private sector) felt that more resources could be provided for youth apprenticeship (I-26). He noted that "one of the first questions I usually get asked by an employer is, 'is there any government support for babysitting, is somebody else going to pay this kid?'"

However, a market approach to education and training is evident in Alberta and the apprenticeship system is seen as employer-driven. A college representative explained:

[Apprenticeship has] always been demand-driven. In certificate and diplomas, it fluctuates depending on how interested and how hard up that company is to come and start putting their names on buildings to get things happening faster. So you know \$25 million from [the owner] at [the college] is all about 'we want every student to see our logo because

we're short people.' When they've got a surplus those names won't go on the doors anymore. (I-24)

The main objective for the college is to use the worker shortage to put in place a "quality delivery method [for apprenticeship training] that will still be there even though the economy goes." A partnership broker also recognized that "we've got a window of opportunity for another 10, 15 years in this province where employers are actively looking for workers and are willing to sponsor training" (I-26). However, it is interesting that, even in boom times, investments in training are scrutinized by employers. In the steamfitter-pipefitter program, a contractor representative commented that they continually had to convince the owner of the program's value:

And it's always been a bit of frustration on that site prior to this program where you know that client [i.e., the owner] was, 'this isn't a training ground you know, we want journeymen. You supply qualified people, that's what we ask for.' And it's a bit of a conflict there where you're expected to provide qualified people but have no way to train them, you know. (I-4)

The sustainability of the program is also far from certain, as a representative from the owner corporation commented:

Interviewer: Does [the contractor] pay for the technical training of the students?

Participant: They do but we end up reimbursing them for it through an hourly salary or an hourly rate that we are charged for the students.

Interviewer: And so your main role then is providing some of the funding for the training and providing the positions for them to work as apprentices in?

Participant: That's correct. Now [the contractor] seeks approval for that every year because it is kind of a contentious issue whether we actually see value for that investment. And so we've just recently approved another six students for the upcoming 2007–2008 term.

Interviewer: You said it's a contentious issue. Do you foresee the possibility that the numbers would be reduced or the program just wouldn't be supported?

Participant: Well we've always suggested to [the contractor] that they need to get other companies involved because we feel that we pretty much support the program. They generally only have eight students and for us to take six, you know, we're taking on the largest slice of that cost. If they could broaden that to, you know, even a few more students at least the rate that we pay would be reduced enough. See, currently what it ends up being is that we pay the same rate for a RAP

student as we do for a first-year apprentice. And yet the student doesn't really see very much of that. (I-23)

The reason the student "doesn't see much of that" is that they are paid significantly less than the standard rate for a first-year apprentice, a practice permitted by government RAP guidelines. The employer pays part of the cost of training but students are also contributing indirectly by their acceptance of lower wages. As a result, it can be difficult to attract students into the program. RAP students involved in the steamfitter-pipefitter apprenticeship are aware of the short-term opportunity costs associated with the program, as these comments suggest:

Apprentice 1: We'll be spending just about as much on gas as what we'll be making, so.

Interviewer: Do you get a sense though that it's valuable to be doing that?

Apprentice 2: Yes.

Apprentice 1: Yes and no. Like if you . . . go into the other RAP programs, whereas, yeah, you get your technical training here, but at least there you'll get lots of hours and you'd be making your money and then go for technical training.

Interviewer: And do it after you finish high school.

Apprentice 1: Yep, so then you'd be making the wage.

Interviewer: In the other RAP programs, do they pay apprentice wages to students?

Apprentice 1: Most of them. (Grade 11 focus group, I-15)

And that's the only thing [wages] I found that is a setback in this program . . . I mean I don't think it would ever change my mind about doing it but I think that could be improved on, is the money you do make . . . I barely paid for my gas to drive out here . . . Like I continued having another part-time job with this one just to make any money this summer. (Grade 11 focus group, I-18)

Although there is a tendency to think about youth as vulnerable and lacking knowledge of their rights at work (which is no doubt true in many cases), the RAP apprentices in this program are also aware of their bargaining power with employers because of labour shortages. They appear to have developed "market subjectivity", described by Marginson (1997, p. 30) as encouraging "anonymity and mobility, the lack of fixed commitment, and indifference to others." Participants generally shared the view expressed by a Grade 11 student that "there's work all over the place" (I-19). They expected employers to treat them well in order to keep them:



- Apprentice: I think the demand for oil field pipefitting and welding and stuff that's out there is so high that you can find what you're looking for pretty easily.
- Interviewer: And if you don't you can move.
- Apprentice: Yeah they'll have to treat you pretty good to keep you around.
- Interviewer: That's what you're feeling?
- Apprentice: Yeah.
- Interviewer: Where are you getting that sense? Is it from instructors here or just everyone that you know in the trade?
- Apprentice: General knowledge.
- Interviewer: You hear about it from people you know in the trades. Yeah. So it's a good time to come out with this kind of certificate you think.
- Apprentice: Yeah right now it is. Maybe not in five years it wouldn't be as good as it is now, but.
- Interviewer: Well it'll probably keep up for a little while do you think?
- Apprentice: Yeah it's going to have its ups and downs just like everything else. (Grade 11 focus group, I-16)

Partnership broker participants also acknowledged that prospective students know their options and it is difficult to convince them to participate in the steamfitter-pipefitter RAP:

- Participant 1: I think we're going to be heading into a potential problem here shortly with, kids can get 12 to 13 dollars an hour working in the retail sector and they don't have to come into this. It's a very gruelling schedule. . . . And I think we're going to struggle attracting kids.
- Participant 2: Our average in the trades right now, some of my RAP students is 15 dollars an hour and [a steamfitter-pipefitter RAP] pays 8.
- Interviewer: Should they be paid more?
- Participant 2: Well.
- Participant 1: You're asking me?
- Interviewer: Yeah.
- Participant 1: Absolutely. (I-26)

From the owner representative’s perspective there may be a tension between building a workforce (that may be mobile) and maximizing profits. This participant added that the future sustainability of the program depends on company leadership and the economic climate.

Part of the cost-benefit calculation concerns the age of high school apprentices (16 to 19 years) compared to older first-year apprentices who are presumed to be more mature and experienced, and most importantly, safer workers. On the other hand, one of the contractor representatives noted that older apprentices often have bad habits; his company, therefore, prefers to “get them young and train them right”:

Provide significant numbers of future journeymen; whether we are the benefactor of that I don’t know, but industry is, we hope. Foster that culture of safety and trade competence . . . . And, I guess, actually give something back to the community and I think that that might be a moot point because it probably seems like we’re just trying to find workers. But the original intent of the program back in the late ’90s was, “I think this is good for the community.” (I-4)

The preceding comments suggest that there are negotiations between government, owners, contractors, colleges, and, to a lesser degree, students, over responsibility for in-class RAP training and how costs are shared. Interestingly, there appears to be less institutional negotiation over access to and delivery of training. Contractor, owner, and college and school representatives associated with this high school apprenticeship program appeared to agree that their initiative should be an elite program. A partnership broker spoke about how students are admitted as follows:

The way it starts is we go after Grade 11 students and we check their math, their English. Make sure they streaming in applied math, English 20 and they’re taking sciences, at least Science 10, 20 but preferably Physics 20 [university qualifying course streams] . . . and once we get all the applications I go through them and I distribute them equitably amongst the participating schools. (I-2)

Students then go through an interview process before they are selected. According to a partnership broker, few students are refused entry because the school personnel also do a “good job” of recognizing those students who might be interested in this program (I-1). School personnel no doubt also recommend students who meet the requirements of employers, reproducing the sorting and selection process of the labour market within schools.

In terms of the technical training schedule, the program requires that students take half of their first-year technical training over a period of four weeks in Grade 11 and the other half in Grade 12. However, the logistics of working through the program have proven difficult for some students and have hampered their learning experiences. A government representative suggested that the timing of the in-class training “splits up the welding quite a bit and I’m not sure how the apprentices are really receiving all of that” (I-25). A Grade 12 student confirmed that there is “too big of a gap” in the delivery of college training (focus group, I-27). Other comments from students also suggested that they were required to be flexible learners because high schools lack flexibility. Some

students had difficulties arranging their class schedules while doing RAP, hence they took their compulsory courses by correspondence. While recognizing the challenges for school personnel of accommodating RAP training because there are few students enrolled in this steamfitter-pipefitter program, some participants felt that the flexibility required of students may detract from their learning and, ultimately, from the goals of the program. Grade 11 students confirmed this situation:

Apprentice: It's just fitting courses in there. There used to be blocks but now there's not. It's working around courses and working, so.

Interviewer: But the school helps out with that, don't they, to make this RAP program possible?

Apprentice: Sure . . . . They didn't really help me though. (Focus group, I-5)

Apprentice: I had to get my courses all switched around . . . . Because I had to do some correspondence because they didn't offer Social in the morning and then Social 20. So I had to do it through correspondence. (Focus group, I-5)

Apprentice: Oh yeah, my schedule's real screwed up. I've got lots of classes left in six blocks . . . . I've already got four out of five correspondence. (Focus group, I-5)

We expected issues related to ensuring broad access to this RAP for students as well as negotiations over the most effective delivery of apprenticeship training to be more prominent in interviews. But it is apparent that participants, including students, generally felt that the program is beneficial and provides quality training leading to valuable work opportunities and careers. In support of our observations, a couple of Grade 12 students saw RAP as facilitating their transitions from high school into the workplace:

Apprentice 1: I think if they made more programs like this one more readily available in high school for different trades that would be great for a lot of students.

Apprentice 2: It's an awesome opportunity. Really thankful for it. (Focus group, I-12)

Perhaps this attitude is related to the understanding that youth and their parents have about the intensifying competition for positional goods, which, in turn, means individuals must "outlay more in fees or income forgone to achieve the same level of social advantage as before" (Marginson, 1997, p. 43). Certainly, the prerequisites for apprenticeship have increased over time to include a high school diploma in many trades, and, despite talk of shortages, employers will not take all apprenticeship applicants. That said, partners tend to construct the program as a win-win for all players. A college representative commented that the program is "highly regarded in the province, and the kids have done really well" (I-8). From a contractor representative's point of view, this RAP offers students an introduction

to the construction field and gives "them some life skills, teaching some good habits about working hard, showing up and appropriate breaks, and those kind of things" (I-4).

### **Discussion**

The preceding discussion suggests that this particular high school partnership reflects a broader market approach to VET in Canada. Such private-public partnerships highlight the struggles over what knowledge is useful and who will provide and pay for employment training in schools. In this case, the Alberta government coordinates and enables RAP by, for example, contributing to the positional goods of some students by means of funding high school credits for on-the-job apprenticeship training. The government also contributes to the training goods of employers by partially funding the provincial partnership broker who promotes and coordinates RAP in communities. However, unlike governments in Ontario and British Columbia, the Alberta government does not provide incentives for K to 14 partnerships through dual credit type initiatives. As a result, there are very few RAP programs that provide high school students with opportunities to take their first year of technical training as well as gain on-the-job experience.

A startling finding is that even in boom times, employer investment in training is limited and uncertain. In this RAP, despite the discourse of labour shortage, the owner evaluates the program annually and sponsors few students. The college representatives and partnership brokers are aware that the window of opportunity for attempting to institutionalize youth training initiatives is narrow and are using the labour shortage to try to leverage training investments from employers. But, on the whole, employers of small to mid-sized companies are disinclined to invest heavily in formal worker training for numerous reasons. They tend to believe that their return on investment in equipment or capital will be greater than money spent on employee training. As well, smaller organizations have greater difficulties in finding the time and money to train in comparison to larger companies. A related concern for small to mid-sized employers is the loss of their training dollars if their workers decide to work for another company (Goldenberg, 2006).

In the steamfitter-pipefitter RAP, the contractor and owner initiated the partnership with educators, but the number of students in the program each year is small. The contractor recoups much of the cost of training by paying wages that are substantially lower than those earned by other first-year apprentices. In using the services of a partnership broker, the company also reduces its recruitment costs. Schools, which are increasingly aware of the declining value of a high school diploma, welcome this kind of partnership as a way of adding value to the positional goods provided to select groups of students (cf. Marginson, 1997).

Since these youth are also agents who are seeking the best return on their education and training investments, it can be difficult to attract them into the program. Apprentices who were interviewed appear to have a good grasp of the labour market and a sense of their bargaining power with employers. Those who choose the program recognize the benefit of gaining credentialed knowledge while in high school and are willing to forgo earnings on the understanding that such knowledge increases their employability and mobility. These findings suggest that partnerships are sites of negotiation.

However, the outcomes of these bargaining processes (and the lack of bargaining processes in some areas) suggest power differences across players. The fact that the employer is able to pay approximately half of the first-year apprentice rate to students suggests that youth are not in the driver's seat despite their optimism about future work prospects. The failure of educators to problematize the exclusive nature of the program is also surprising. If we look at such partnerships as models of local governance, we observe that the instrumental values and technocratic practices of the private sector are creeping into schools. The partnership broker, high schools, and the college tend to be in service relationships with industry employers. In this particular RAP, students must negotiate individually with schools to complete high school requirements and are required to become flexible learners. They also conform to the training schedule of the college. Training focuses primarily on employer expectations and workplace socialization, while more progressive perspectives that focus on the integration of academic and vocational learning, as well as a deeper exploration of inequitable social relations at work, generally remain unexplored (cf. Lehmann & Taylor, 2003; Simon, Dippo, & Schenke, 1991).

These outcomes suggest that the employer-driven approach to RAP has consequences not only for the future sustainability of the program but also for the learning affordances provided to students (Billett, 2001). Findings suggest that while this program provides excellent training and employment opportunities for students, the current lack of government incentives for partnership work and the unwillingness of employers to invest in training, even in a boom time, make the sustainability and transferability of such programs questionable.

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